

Building Bridges

by Jeremy Lasek

Building relationships that are genuine and sustainable with Australian communities is the work of the AFP's Community Liaison Teams.

Ten years ago, Sergeant Sam Elmaghraby, now a Team Leader based in Darwin and believed to be the first Muslim AFP Federal Agent, had a vision for the establishment of the AFP's Community Liaison Teams.

"I put together a business case back in 2006 in response to a review I conducted of CT and Intelligence which showed an increasing gap between police and community, and in particular youth at risk," Sergeant Elmaghraby said.

Building upon the relationships the AFP had established over the years, especially with the Islamic community, the expansion of the AFP's engagement with all diverse communities in Australia was an important step that required support at all levels, from the Management Team in the Melbourne Office to the CT Executive in Canberra.

"It was important to let the community own the project. There was a lot of consultation with the community, and in particular grassroots and the perceived at risk groups," Sergeant Elmaghraby added.

Sam Elmaghraby received the Commissioner's Medal for Innovation for having structured and built the program, and getting it off and running from day one.

Constable Fady Taha was among the first recruits for the Sydney-based Community Engagement Team, as it was known at the beginning.

Constable Taha said the aim in the early days was to break down negative perceptions and a lack of trust with the AFP from the Muslim community.

One of many highlights was when then Commissioner Mick Keelty addressed a full house of over 450 people at the Bellevue Reception Lounge at Bankstown, where the majority of guests were meeting AFP members for the first time.

"Muslim communities struggle with perceptions that they are a counter terrorism or national security problem. We built confidence in our organisation by taking a proactive and inclusive approach to engagement by reaching out to CALD communities," Constable Taha said.

"The aspiration was to break down barriers with minority communities affected by police operations. We were able to open the lines of communication and give people access to the AFP's senior executive.

"That work was uplifting for me and it made a real impact in times of crisis."

From humble beginnings as the AFP's 'Islamic Liaison Team' in Melbourne, it expanded to Sydney as the 'Community Engagement Team' within 12 months of commencement, and now 10 years on there is a Community Liaison capability in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, with the CLTs becoming an important part of core business of the AFP.

AFP team member, Ms Anisa Sharif, is the longest-serving community liaison team member, having joined the Melbourne team seven years ago.

"Before joining the AFP, I was running art workshops at an Islamic school, which were designed to tackle Islamophobia," Ms Sharif said.

"I was very frustrated at the polarisation of the community that occurred after 9/11. The Muslim community had withdrawn and was not actively reaching out to tackle the growing problem with Islamophobia at that time.

"I was thrilled to be in a role which engaged the community at a much broader level whilst helping to support and inform the Muslim community about radicalisation – a topic which was abhorrent to most and not widely understood," Ms Sharif added.



“Our work is complex and challenging; but the work we do is highly valued and supported by not only the AFP’s Executive but also the communities in which we work. As a team, our strength is in our ability to build relationships that are genuine and sustainable”.

– Detective Sergeant Jeanette Boland, Team Leader Community Liaison Team (Sydney).



Ms Sharif said what she loves most about her job is her engagement primarily with insular groups.

“I love empowering women with confidence to try new things and one of the funniest moments was a group of Niqab-wearing women learning how to use power tools at a Bunnings workshop. They were covered in sawdust from head to toe but the excitement of learning a new skill meant so much to them.

“It was an awesome moment when they were not defined by their clothing, but felt accepted by the wider community.”



Community Liaison Team Melbourne
Anisa Sharif and friends take on the high challenge.



CLT member Ms Anisa Sharif with female members of Melbourne's diverse communities during the launch of the Women in White project.

Ms Sharif has received two Australia Day Achievement Medallions from the AFP for her work with community.

Since their establishment there are countless examples of CLT initiatives which have helped to strengthen the relationship between the AFP and CALD communities, and assist vulnerable youth within our communities.

These include the Unity Cup in Melbourne, The Bankstown Poetry Slam, Sydney Thunder Leadership Program in partnership with Cricket NSW, support of the Knights African Boys Basketball Team and Eid Festival One Day Soccer Tournament for Somali youth in Brisbane, Afghan Girls Volleyball Team in South Australia and the creation of the Islamic Leaders Advisory Forum in Adelaide.

AFP Coordinator Engagement and Diversion Dr Jenny Cartwright said these initiatives demonstrate that law enforcement is not all about arrest and prosecution.

“It is also lending a helping hand and working with all Australians,” Dr Cartwright said. “It is also about listening and understanding the concerns of the communities, having that open dialogue and the ability to discuss and hopefully resolve issues of concern.”

Although small in number, in many ways CLTs epitomise the broader AFP; those who punch above their weight and who go about their work efficiently and effectively but who are not afraid to challenge the status-quo and strive for change for the better.

So much of their success is a result of their strategic and sophisticated approach to community engagement. This is a genuine and highly effective team-based approach to some of the most sensitive and challenging work within policing.

“The flexibility of my role in the CLT means one day I can be presenting to school children about internet safety and the next day meeting community members at a mosque in the country or suburban Melbourne,” said Detective Sergeant Tim Jolly, Team Leader of Melbourne's CLT.

“When engaging with the community, a large part of our role is to explain the duties of the AFP and shed light on how the AFP conducts its investigation without identifying methodology. The biggest challenges are the misconceptions that the community has about the role and duties of the AFP, in particular how the AFP conducts an investigation and the justifications required to undertake search warrants.

“However, this is when the relationships we have nurtured and the trust we have built can be relied upon to ensure accurate information in times of a critical incident or looming crisis can be passed on and concerns allayed.

Federal Agent Shane Johnson chats to a community member in Brisbane.



“Having these conversations, building trust and rapport, as well as learning about another culture has its rewards,” said Detective Sergeant Jolly.

Detective Sergeant Jeanette Boland has headed up the Sydney-based CLT for four years and describes her role as “extremely challenging” but providing “a huge amount of satisfaction”.

“Our work isn’t always easy, especially after the execution of warrants, but we know we have an important role to play in raising awareness and informing our internal and external stakeholders so that the community has a greater understanding of some police processes and the reasons and justifications behind why we may do things a certain way,” said Detective Sergeant Boland.

Heading up the Community Liaison Team in Brisbane, Detective Acting Sergeant Shane Johnson is in his 10th year with the AFP having previously worked for many years with the NT Police in remote Aboriginal communities.

Detective Acting Sergeant Johnson says the whole focus of his work is about building and maintaining relationships.

“By the very nature of CLT work, relationships built on trust and reach are the cornerstones of understanding, cooperation and cohesion,” Detective Acting Sergeant Johnson said.

And thinking outside the square is Shane’s modus operandi.

“I enjoy considering alternative approaches to complex problems over traditional responses when appropriate, particularly in the area of youth related issues.

“Seeing success from an alternative approach and avoiding a potential prosecution is another great feeling, particularly when it is community led and AFP supported.”

“As highlighted in this article, the CLT’s will continue to work in partnership with all Australian communities and build upon the solid foundations laid ten years ago. Such partnerships built on trust and mutual respect ensures we can address whatever issues arise in united manner. After all, we all seek to live in a harmonious community.” Dr Jenny Cartwright said.

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