



Asylum-seekers finally get help

By Louise Flanagan

Asylum-seekers still queue endlessly outside the department of home affairs office in Crown Mines, Johannesburg - but many now queue only once. Usually, getting refugee status takes years of repeatedly returning to Home Affairs to extend asylum-seeker permits while waiting for a decision.

This is the innovation now possible at the department's refugee reception office in Crown Mines: new asylum-seekers walk in the door in the morning, and by the end of the day, they leave not with temporary asylum-seeker permits but with decisions on their refugee status.

Output at Crown Mines has doubled since June. In September, nearly 3 700 decisions were made on refugee status - more than half the number of decisions made by the entire department during 2007.

"People now move, they don't just stay stuck," says Crown Mines centre manager Florencia Belvedere. "The crux of the thing here is that you are being interviewed and your decision is being typed up and issued the same day."

It's an unheard-of level of efficiency at Home Affairs, a department renowned for its bungles. And it's the result of an R800-million change moving across the department, a fundamental shake-up called Project Turnaround. This involves 55 projects across the department and is expected to last until June 2010, says department spokesperson Siobhan McCarthy.

Project Turnaround project manager Jacob Mamabolo calls the turnaround a "complex, massive, difficult task" without a blueprint, because it's the biggest change a government department has ever attempted. "We're looking at a turnaround of the department from its architecture, its foundations."

Mamabolo hopes the strategy will be copied.

"Probably this will come out as a service delivery model for other departments as well."

The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (CoRMSA) said in a June report it hoped the turnaround would address the many challenges the department and asylum-seekers face.

CoRMSA urged a review of immigration policies to move from migration control to migration management, and to legalise economic migrants.

Crown Mines is pioneering the turnaround for the six refugee reception offices. This month the turnaround's business process team started in Cape Town, after finishing Crown Mines and Marabastad, and the filing teams left Crown Mines for Marabastad.

The refugee offices had backlogs of thousands of cases. A Home Affairs report in January noted that last year there were almost 46 000 new asylum applications

from 54 nationalities, nearly 40 percent of them Zimbabweans. Decisions were made on just 13 percent of the new cases, and more than two-thirds of those were rejected. The leftover undecided cases nearly doubled the backlog to 89 000.

Staff were overwhelmed. They issued new asylum-seeker permits to anyone who turned up, and instead of looking for case files when applicants returned with expiring permits, they restamped tatty permits with endless extensions.

Asylum-seekers moved from office to office, desperate for a decision, and reapplying elsewhere if one office refused them. It was easier to get temporary asylum-seeker permits extended for years than to get work or study permits.

An effective turnaround needs a good chunk of money, some useful technology, a sprinkling of common sense and a large dose of plain hard work. But most of all it needs a core of officials who believe, against the odds, that change is possible, and an army of staff willing to embrace a complete change in organisational culture.

The big changes at Crown Mines are a cleaned-up filing system, a new computer system and a doubling of staff.

The crux of the turnaround is getting the filing system working, says Belvedere, who joined Home Affairs in May.

More than 100 000 files have been sorted at Crown Mines and now the information they contain can be added to the new computer system being piloted at Crown Mines. Ultimately, this system will link all the refugee offices. It provides a one-stop solution for applicants and an anti-fraud system for officials.

At Crown Mines currently, asylum-seekers meet one of 36 refugee reception officers (RROs) who help them apply for asylum, and their details are captured immediately onto the system.

A double-screen system allows the official to capture information while the applicant reads what's being done on the second screen, making it easier to spot errors. Photos are taken and fed into the system on the spot, while fingerprints, signatures and documents are scanned in.

Officials sit in rows of cubicles, linked by windows, each official with computer, scanner, camera and ePad for signatures. Space is at a premium, but the cubicles give asylum-seekers some privacy.

RRO Vuyani Vusani says his target is 40 applications a day. "It's manageable," he says.

Vusani calls the turnaround "a developmental shift". He says the change was tough, both for staff and for clients, who initially saw it as more delays, but he says staff are now keen to achieve excellence. "This is part of transformation."

After applying, the asylum-seekers - now called "clients", in an indication of the attitude change - move on to interviews with one of 52 refugee status determination officers (RSDOs), who decide whether to grant asylum.

RSDO Thabo Mabasa helps about seven clients a day, calling up the applications on the computer system, interviewing the clients, and then searching the system for background on their countries.

He has a law degree, like most other RSDOs, and deals with traumatised, distressed and sometimes angry clients while trying to move people through the system as fast as possible.

"I feel affected as a person but I encourage myself to get used to those stories," says Mabasa after listening to a Zimbabwean explaining quietly that he moved when his family's fights over politics ended with his home destroyed and his son killed.

"It has developed me as a person. The people we see are our brothers," says RRO Ezekiel Matjake.

"I am here to help them."

The combination of accessible files and the new computer system cuts down the time between application and decision.

But the production-line speed can be a problem.

Mulugeta Feleke, an interpreter for Ethiopians, says there isn't enough time to corroborate the applications properly. This means many - even some with valid reasons for being refugees - are refused asylum, "but most of the officers didn't know what was a good reason and what was not".

Belvedere says it's often more about establishing the client's credibility than the political details.

The Somali Community Board of SA spends Tuesdays at Home Affairs, helping to translate and ease applicants through the process.

Board chairperson Abdul Hakim Mohamed praises Belvedere's push for efficiency. "It's a much, much better service compared to before."

He says that of the 167 Somalis at Crown Mines the week before (98 of them new asylum-seekers), 102 were granted refugee status, 19 were rejected, 15 got temporary asylum-seeker permits and the rest were applications by refugees for identity documents. This means 72 percent of the applications were finalised.

Officials deal with clients from all countries, but specifying days for different countries lets staff focus on those. Monday is Central Africa, Tuesday is East Africa, Thursdays and Fridays are Zimbabweans, and Wednesday is for the rest of the world.

The new computer system also improves security. Including fingerprints makes it easier to pick up duplicate applications. "The other day we had someone who had applied six times," Matjake notes.

Accountability is part of the culture change. Visible performance management - with daily work targets and actual figures achieved posted on officials' cubicle doors - embeds a work ethic. Statistics are compared within the office and with other offices.

Outside, at the end of the day, a Zimbabwean leaves with an asylum-seeker permit. "This is my third appearance to get this," he says.

He has been trying for asylum for three years and finally got an appointment for a decision.

Most Zimbabweans are refused asylum and the turnaround won't change this, as they are regarded as economic migrants, fleeing Zimbabwe's economic collapse and trying to get a job in SA.

CoRMSA says the asylum-seeker system is "effectively closed" to those fleeing violence in Zimbabwe, as many can't even get to Home Affairs.

Applications ruled "manifestly unfounded" are reviewed by the Standing Committee on Refugee Affairs, but may not be appealed by the asylum-seeker. Plain "unfounded" decisions may be challenged at the Refugee Appeal Board.

Acting board chairperson Tjerk Damstra says he can see the effects of the turnaround at Crown Mines. "The numbers are increasing and they're coming through more steadily", with hundreds of refused applications pouring in. The board confirms most refusals as they aren't political, says Damstra. "I'd say 60 percent to 80 percent are probably economic migrants."

Quick fixes haven't worked in the past, so the complete turnaround is the only way to clean up, said Belvedere. "We're all in this together and we've got to make it work."

- Read more on Project Turnaround on Tuesday.
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