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Building Quality Justice Services for Newcomers

Complaints and Feedback: Guidelines

This document has been developed as part of the CCR's Quality of Services project which aims to support NGOs serving immigrant and refugee communities to provide high-quality services in areas related to immigration and refugee legal processes. For more information, please see the [Project Framework](#).

Organizations are encouraged to use this document when reviewing existing policies or developing new ones. These guidelines may also apply to organizational processes or practices, particularly if written down (even if not in the form of a “policy”).

Organizations need complaints and feedback mechanisms in all areas of their services. This project, and these guidelines, are designed to focus on **services related to immigration and refugee law, such as helping people with immigration applications**. The guidelines can be used to help assess whether existing mechanisms are appropriate to this service area or to develop new mechanisms.

The ultimate goal of the CCR project is to elevate the quality of services provided by organizations to clients within the immigration and refugee processes.

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Objectives

These guidelines are designed to help the organization meet the following objectives taken from the [Proposed framework for high quality immigration and refugee services](#).

- **Ethical principles:** The organization has an accessible and effective complaints mechanism for clients who are dissatisfied with the services, and a robust process to review and take action on any complaints.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The organization conducts periodic reviews of its services and responds promptly and effectively when there is evidence that the organization has fallen short.

Please note

- Some of the suggestions below might not reflect the reality in all organizations. We recognize that each organization's realities are different. Organizations should choose, modify or add elements that reflect their circumstances.
- In working through the points below, consider whether the organization's complaints and feedback mechanisms respond specifically to **services assisting people with immigration and refugee legal processes**.

Definitions

- **Complaint:** A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction related to an organization's services, staff or actions, where a response or resolution is expected.
- **Feedback:** Feedback is any reaction to an organization's services or conduct in providing them, both positive and negative. Feedback may be communicated spontaneously or in response to an invitation to provide comment.

Notes on terms

- Some organizations regularly use the term "clients" while others prefer to use different language. To reflect this diversity, we refer sometimes to "clients" and sometimes to "service users".
- In some places we refer to "people" making complaints or feedback, since organizations should also be open to input not only from the direct users of services, but also their advocates, as well as from staff, interns and volunteers, and other organizations.

A. Complaints

Objective: The organization has an accessible and effective complaints mechanism for clients and others who are dissatisfied with the services, and a robust process to review and take action on any complaints.

1. Accessible mechanism for making complaints

a. There is a clear process for making complaints

- Is there a written explanation of the process for making a complaint? Is it easy to follow and written in plain language and available in an accessible format? Is it available in multiple relevant languages? Is there a simple form available on the organization's website (for example, [MOSAIC's complaint page](#))
- How and to whom should complaints be made? (orally or only in writing?) Do you offer options that would work for people not literate in their own language (for example, a voicemail option, explained in a short video)
- Is it clear what can be the subject of complaints? For example, service by staff, interns or volunteers. If not, have you deliberately left it open?
- Is there clear and accessible information for people considering making a complaint about how the complaint will be reviewed and investigated, and when and how they can expect to hear back?

b. The process is accessible

- Is the process simple enough to encourage people to make a complaint, when they think it is warranted?
- How does the organization support people who don't speak English/French or lack computer access or skills to make a complaint? (for example, interpretation, translation, access to first language, etc.) Do service users know how to ask for help if they need it? Can they be confident they can receive assistance from someone other than the person they are complaining about and from someone who does not have a conflict of interest?
- Do you follow up with people who make an informal complaint (for example through social media)?
- How do you overcome fears that there might be negative repercussions for the service users or their immigration case if they make a complaint?

- Have you addressed other barriers that might discourage people from making a complaint?

c. The process is clearly communicated and promoted

- How do you communicate to clients about the opportunity to make a complaint? (For example, website, posters, oral communication, emails)
- Are service users encouraged to use the complaint mechanism if they express a concern?
- Do you have measures in place to ensure staff, interns and volunteers are committed to promoting the complaints mechanism (as an element of a healthy organization)?

2. There is an effective process for reviewing complaints

- Do you have a clear written procedure for reviewing complaints submitted?
- Who within the organization is responsible for overseeing the review of complaints? How do you ensure that those reviewing the complaints are as neutral as possible (for example, not from the department against whom the complaint is made)?
- Do you follow the same review process for all complaints? Or do you have different procedures depending on the nature of the complaint or the seriousness of the allegations? Is there a process for informal resolution?
- What communications do you have with the complainant during the review process? (To acknowledge the complaint, to seek more information).
- Who has responsibility for reviewing and investigating complaints? How do you take into consideration possible conflicts of interest? Do you have a conflict of interest policy?
- What investigatory methods are recommended (for example, interviews with complainant, persons complained against, witnesses; written queries; review of documentary evidence)?
- What kind of report is prepared by the investigator at the conclusion of the investigation? (For example, a written report summarizing the allegations and the investigation results? With recommendations for action?)
- Who is this report forwarded to within the organization? Do they review the report and provide comments before it is finalized?

- Do you have timelines for following up on complaints (acknowledging them, investigating them and communicating findings to the complainant)? What are the timelines? Are they realistic? Are they respected?

3. Complaints are treated confidentially

- Do you have a confidentiality policy? Do you have a statement about the confidentiality of complaints?
- Do you have procedures to ensure the confidentiality is safeguarded during processing of the complaint? (For example, only authorized persons have access to the data; those involved in processing the complaint understand the need for confidentiality)
- Do you have procedures to allow you to conduct investigations of complaints while minimizing the sharing of information?
- How do you reassure complainants about the confidentiality of the data or get their permission if you need to share data as part of the investigation of the complaint?
- When identifying information that needs to be shared with the person complained against or witnesses as part of the investigation, how do you protect against reprisals against the person making the complaint?
- How are records of complaints, investigations and concluding reports kept securely? Is there a process for destroying them after a set period of time?

4. Appropriate action is taken based on the review of the complaint

- Following the investigation of a complaint, who makes the decision on whether the complaint is well-founded and any follow up action?
- What follow up actions are considered? For example, apology, education, counseling, warning, suspension, transfer, termination, contacting the police. Do you consider action even if the complaint is not well-founded?
- Who communicates the results to the complainant and how? How do you ensure it is done in a sensitive manner?
- If the complaint is deemed not well-founded, how is the complainant informed of the reasons? Is there a right to appeal?

- Who is responsible for ensuring that follow up action is taken by the organization?
- Is there a process to communicate relevant elements from complaints within the organization, while maintaining confidentiality, to prevent similar issues from happening in the future and to improve the quality of services.

5. The complaints process is regularly reviewed

- Do you survey complainants at some point after the finalization of the complaint, as part of ongoing review of the complaints process? (How? By whom?) Does the organization regularly review the complaints process? How often?

B. Feedback mechanisms

Objective: The organization systematically uses feedback on services to monitor and evaluate its services and make improvements.

1. Feedback on services is encouraged and easy to make

- What mechanisms do you use to invite feedback on services? (For example, as part of service delivery, surveys or phone calls, focus group discussions, suggestion box)
- How do you make the feedback mechanism accessible to service users? (For example, options of oral or written comments, invitation to make comments in multiple languages)
- Are there both qualitative and quantitative questions to cater to service users' preferences? Is it easy for people to simply give a comment if they have a single piece of feedback they want to give?
- Do you encourage and facilitate service users giving feedback spontaneously (for example, through a form on the website or a suggestion box)? Do you consistently ask some or all users for feedback (for example, an email sent after conclusion of service encouraging them to complete an online survey?)
- Do you have periodic initiatives to request feedback? (For example, an annual drive to call service users or invite them to provide written feedback).

2. There are measures in place to make clients feel safe giving feedback

- How do you communicate to service users that comments will be confidential and will not lead to any negative repercussions on services they receive?

- Have you considered the pros and cons of having service users provide feedback to the person with whom they have dealt (with whom they may have a relationship of trust) versus someone else (with whom they may feel more free to give honest feedback)? Do you offer them an option of whom to provide feedback to?
- Do you seek input from former service users once they have secure status?

3. The organization receives feedback from people within the organization and from partners

- Do you have clear processes for staff, interns and volunteers to give feedback on services (including incidents they have observed or comments they have heard from service users or others)?
- Do you use “incident reports” for situations where something may have gone wrong or where there were particular challenges? If so, are there clear procedures and definitions of when they should be used? Is the process working well?
- Do you seek feedback from partners, either formally or informally? (for example, other organizations may have service users, including referrals, who comment on the services they received from the organization)
- Do you seek an external evaluation of the organization’s services? (For example, some organizations make an agreement to evaluate each other, in order to have a peer review)

4. The organization has effective processes for reviewing and acting on feedback

- Is there a clear process for analyzing the feedback received? (How? By whom? How often?)
- How is the summary of the feedback communicated to relevant people within the organization? Are there procedures to ensure confidentiality is not breached?
- What is the process for following up on feedback that suggests improvements are needed? (For example, point on staff meeting agenda to review feedback and decide on appropriate changes)
- When you make changes based on feedback, do you inform the person who gave the feedback (if not anonymous)?

C. The organization fosters a culture where complaints and feedback are seen as an opportunity to improve services

- How does the organization ensure that complaints and feedback are seen as a safeguard against abuse or poor quality work and an opportunity to improve services? (for example, public messaging, staff training)
- How do you encourage staff to see feedback as a collective effort for the good of the organization (rather than a threat to themselves or a breach of loyalty towards a colleague)? Do you circulate suggestions for improvement with staff, interns and volunteers for comment before implementation?
- Do you share examples of improvements made as a result of complaints/feedback to demonstrate the positive value of complaints and feedback?
- How often do you review the complaints and review processes to ensure they are effective?