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Tabled 15/11/11.
WALKER

15Nov2011 HILLS CIRCLE of FRIENDS – REPRESENTED by LESLEY WALKER's WITNESS STATEMENT to the SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE on the IMMIGRATION DETENTION NETWORK.

This Witness Statement before the Select Committee is an opportunity to present perspectives on what members of the Hills' Circle of Friends think might be beneficial for families living in detention centres & in Community Detention. Having said I represent the Hills' Circle of Friends in SA, the observations & comments included here are based on my experiences of visiting & getting to know many families during my 40 weekly visits to Inverbrackie Detention Centre since January 2011, as well as my initial visit last Saturday (12/11/11) with a child living at Pt Augusta Detention Centre (Housing /APOD).

And as far as I can tell from attending meetings convened by -

- the (now defunct) Detention Liaison Information Officers
- the Red Cross Migrant Information Network
- the Combined Circles group

as well as

- informal contact with Catholic clergy
- contact with local church groups that seek out the Hills' Circle of Friends

the Hills Circle of Friends has perhaps had more frequent & consistent contact & experiences with the families living in Inverbrackie Detention Centre than many other groups.

Most importantly we are not paid to be there, & our interactions are based on the choice of the families to see us (or not). Only twice have people said that they do not need (more) visitors, or they said that they are ok. Perhaps some worry that we might interfere or have a hidden agenda.

- *The Hills' Circle is concerned that people in detention do not know/are not aware/do not understand/do not retain the information - even if they are advised through an interpreter - that they can request visitors.*

There needs to be a process for liaising with ARA or a Friends' organisations to facilitate links where people who are keen to visit can contact detainees or Friends' groups to set up an introduction & assist people with the formalities of visiting a detention centre.

Through the visits from the members (& members' friends) of the Hills' Circle of Friends, we aim, as friendly & respectful supporters, to assist people to maintain their dignity & sense of self-worth, & inform the families in detention that many ordinary Australians care abt their plight. In doing so we attend to the emotional/psychological needs of people who are estranged from any normal interactions with ordinary (unpaid) Australians & permanent residents.

In fact visitors from the Hills' Circle of Friends are often the first unpaid friendly people whom asylum seekers living at Inverbrackie Detention Centre have met in Australia.

But it is extremely difficult to visit people in detention if there is no 'register' of people who wish to advise (whomever) that they want (consent) to receive visitors.

Example: Since March 2010 I have enquired far & wide for a name of any person detained in the Immigration housing facility at Pt Augusta. Earlier this year the people detained there were Afghani Hazara boys. At present there are 2 adults and 37 Vietnamese children, aged from 6 years to 17 years.

Last Saturday (12 Nov 2011) I achieved my goal & visited a young woman who arrived at Christmas Island in May 2011, & was transferred to Pt Augusta in June 2011.

She had her first interview with a migration agent this week.

I am the first unpaid person that she has met in Australia.

Everyone else is employed as federal government staff member or subcontracted staff – DIAC, Serco, Life Without Barriers, IHMS etc.

A Catholic priest & nun are the only other people admitted into the detention centre visit the children.

Every Thursday there is a BBQ, every Sunday a service, but no visitors are allowed in to share with the children.

People in detention almost always express surprise & pleasure & gratitude when they find out that people will visit them if they wish. They are always gracious in their concern that visitors should not come unless they have time to do so. This observation is based upon my experiences in visiting an estimated 100 - 200 people in various places - Baxter (2005 - 2007), Pt Augusta Housing (2007), Villawood (2007 - 2008), Inverbrackie (ongoing visits every Sunday since Jan 2011) Detention Centres, as well as psychiatric wards in hospitals in Adelaide, Pt Augusta & Sydney.

- *Denial of visits to people admitted to hospital is another area of concern.*

It is curious that, at present, Serco/DIAC deny people the right to visit their asylum seeker friends who have been admitted to hospital. In the past I have visited many people in various public & private hospitals - Royal Adelaide Hospital (emergency & psychiatric wards), Pt Augusta Hospital, Margaret Tobin psychiatric ward at Flinders Medical Centre (SA), Brentwood locked facility at Glenside Psychiatric Hospital (SA), Parkside Private Hospital (SA), Banks House psychiatric ward at Bankstown Hospital (NSW), & supported people admitted to Toowong Private Hospital (Qld).

However earlier this year a member of the Hills' Circle of Friends was turned out of the hospital room by Serco/security staff when she visited an asylum seeker mother (from Inverbrackie Detention Centre) after she had given birth at Mt Barker Hospital (SA). At the same time a Catholic nun, who was already visiting the mother in her room, was ordered to leave.

- *Refusal by Serco & DIAC to respect a signed consent letter authorising an advocate or friend to share & receive personal information about a detainee.*

For the past 6 years I have advocated for dozens of detained people in order to sort out issues with detention management & health services, especially for those Indians, Chinese, & Afghani Hazaras whose English expression & comprehension was poor, & also Iranian & Iraqi people.

In 2007, in order to discuss private & personal issues with medical staff in detention centres & hospitals, I designed my own consent form/letter which asylum seekers could sign, allowing me to inquire & receive private information about individuals. Over that period about 30 people have signed this consent /letter & I have used it to advocate for many people.

Until this year such signed consent declarations were accepted & respected in all detention centres & medical clinics by Federal & State government departments & sub-contracted agencies.

Curiously, DIAC's Complex Case Resolution section in Canberra asked for & accepted the authority of a signed consent letter as recently as a month ago.

However this year DIAC in Adelaide has refused to acknowledge the authority given to me by asylum seekers in Inverbrackie Detention Centre who need someone to advocate for them.

DIAC advised me by letter that only registered migration agents can speak on behalf of asylum seekers.

This unacceptable since asylum seekers typically have little understanding of Australian government & detention structures & policies & protocols, & come from countries where they have good reasons to doubt the efficiencies & honesty of government representatives.

Moreover many asylum seekers have poor comprehension & may have little spoken English, express great appreciation for assistance given in speaking on their behalf with government departments & subcontracted agencies.

I hope this statement is useful in informing the Committee 'at a grass roots level' of a few of the problems & experiences endured by families & others people living in Australian detention centres.

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