

12 August 2011

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network

1. Introduction

The issue of detention has been a key concern for Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia for many years, both within Australia and globally. JRS thanks the Committee for this opportunity to contribute to its work. This submission is informed by the reported experiences of JRS staff and volunteers who provide pastoral care for asylum seekers held at Villawood Immigration Detention Facility and by JRS pastoral care workers who deliver pastoral care services at the Christmas Island, Curtin and Inverbrackie detention facilities. The submission will address **the impact of length of detention and the appropriateness of facilities and services for asylum seekers**, and will highlight our significant concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers who are held in detention for protracted periods.

2. The impact of length of detention

2.1 There is significant and compelling research-based evidence that the experience of detention impacts deleteriously on mental health and wellbeing across all asylum seeker cohorts including adults, children, family groups and unaccompanied minors. There is significant and compelling research-based evidence that the length of the detention period is a significant factor both in how mental health and wellbeing is impacted during the detention period and how these negative effects continue to impact on an individual post-release.

Examples of adverse effects of detention on the mental health and wellbeing of people who seek asylum:

- during the period of detention:

- negative impacts of previously experienced traumatic events are compounded and exacerbated;
- new exposures to potentially traumatising events;
- protracted separation from family, friends and support networks;
- loss of meaningful activity including education and employment;
- remote locations of detention facilities inhibit connectivity with service providers;
- losses of dignity and sense of wellbeing experienced by asylum seekers who perceive they have been incarcerated as if they were criminals; and
- significant, disproportionate and increasing manifestations of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicide ideation, attempted suicides, completed suicides.

- after release from detention:

- deleterious and potentially irreparable impacts on family and social bonds resulting from protracted periods of separation and associated mental health issues; and
- ongoing impacts on mental health and wellbeing reduce capacity to settle.

3. The appropriateness of facilities and services for asylum seekers

Examples of inappropriate or inadequate facilities and services:

- lack of suitably qualified and experienced mental health professionals;
- lack of cross-cultural mental health training for facility staff;
- lack of information about processing criteria and systems including waiting times exacerbates sense of powerlessness and imprisonment;
- potential risks associated with facility staff working extended shifts;
- inappropriate and overcrowded accommodations e.g. 30 men sharing a dormitory for several months;
- restrictions on constructive and meaningful activities e.g. Open University and other accredited courses;
- limited English language teaching facilities e.g. 3 teachers for 1,400 detainees;

- restrictions placed on social communications inhibit access to vital support networks e.g. slow or no internet access, limited telephone access;
- unsafe health practices e.g. returning a detainee to an open dormitory on the same day of an incident of self-harm and subsequent lack of recovery care, supervision and monitoring; and
- lack of independent body to monitor and address instances of systemic inadequacy, abuse and neglect e.g. no mechanism by which asylum seekers may report intimidation, bullying and harassment by facility and contract staff.

4. Concluding statement

JRS Australia advocates for an end to mandatory detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat, and time-limited and reviewed detention for those whom the Australian Government finds necessary to detain.