

The Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association



Artwork by Dustin Liebelt

**SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY
ENQUIRY INTO THE PROPOSED MELBOURNE
IMMIGRATION AND TRANSIT
ACCOMMODATION PROJECT**

The Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association is a
communitygroup based in the southern suburbs of Melbourne.

www.baysiderefugeesupport.com

Submission prepared by Geraldine Moore
President of the Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association
6 February 2017

To the Parliamentary Committee Enquiring Into the Proposed Building Project at
Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA).

Dear Committee members,

Over the past 3-4 years I have visited some of the immigration detainees at MITA on a six-weekly basis. I have seen that, over the past eighteen months, conditions for the detainees have become increasingly harsh. Considering that these people have committed no crime I think that this is wrong. They are supposedly in detention awaiting the outcome of their applications for refugee status. They ought not to be punished for the fact that they have sought refugee status. Therefore they should be segregated from other prisoners who are law-breakers and some of whom may have criminal proclivities.

For the last 3 years I have co-operated with Sister Brigid Arthur and others in putting together a party at Christmas time for the detainees. In the past these have worked well and there has been a pleasant atmosphere and the detainees have expressed deep gratitude for our efforts. But the party for Christmas 2016 party was a great disappointment because, although we had been informed by staff that we needed to cater for about 120 people, in fact only about half of that number were admitted. Those who came were all male except for one.

Apparently the problem began when the food caterers were late delivering the hot food. They explained that they had got lost. This may have been because there is no signage from the road indicating where the MITA facility is located.

Citing security reasons, the management has recently limited the capacity of the visitors' reception hall at MITA to 60 people, (detainees and visitors) although the hall would otherwise be capable of taking two or three times that number. The detainees are housed in different compounds that are kept separate. On the day of the Christmas party (20 December) the women who were from compounds Avon and Calder were kept waiting in line outside for some considerable time while the men from Bass compounds 1& 2 were allowed in to the visitors' hall. At one stage the women were sent back to their rooms because of the delay, then they were called to line up again. Disliking what they felt was

the peremptory tone of the guards, and the lack of explanation about the cause of the delay, the women decided to return to their rooms and remain there.

This Christmas party was organised by two community groups and assisted by some volunteer musicians, yet with no consultation, the staff of MITA had announced to the detainees that they would award points for attendance at the party. These points, when accumulated, are used to obtain privileges e.g. to buy items from the kiosk. This made the Christmas party appear to be a staff – sponsored initiative in the eyes of the detainees. The association of the Christmas Party with the demeaning points system dispersed the good will that the organisers intended to communicate. The efforts and outlay by community groups and musicians were undermined by the attitudes of the staff.

This was not an isolated incident. It is the product of disrespectful, even hostile attitudes to the asylum-seekers that are embedded ever more deeply in the culture of MITA as each year goes by. These attitudes pose a greater threat to security at the facility than other factors that are more commonly recognised.

Regarding the proposed building program at MITA, I would point out the following:

1. The excessive emphasis on security at the expense of the amenity of the asylum-seeker detainees is most regrettable.
2. The building program ought to reflect the fact that the asylum-seekers are not there to be punished. Their stay should be made as comfortable as is practicable.
3. The mixing of asylum-seekers with cohorts of offenders is wrong and the practice should be stopped. It leads to intimidation of the asylum-seekers. It is unfair to subject asylum-seekers to the tight security arrangements that are needed for law-breakers.
4. The facility in which the asylum-seekers are housed should be welcoming to visitors and open to the community. Signage, parking spaces and flexible arrangements for visiting should reflect this. It should be possible

for visitors to leave gifts at reception designated for specific detainees subject to inspection. Currently this cannot be done during visiting hours, and a detainee is now required to obtain written permission from both Serco and Border Force prior to receiving a gift. These new measures effectively discourage the giving of gifts to detainees.

5. The facility should be designed to support initiatives that improve the living conditions and health of asylum-seeker detainees and to reduce boredom. Sporting and gym opportunities need to be enhanced. (detainees currently complain that they are being reduced.) Food choices are a constant source of complaint. Apparently only two varieties of fruit are offered: apples and kiwifruit. Yet when visitors bring in gifts of fruit and other foods, the detainees are no longer permitted to take these gifts to their rooms.
6. The provision of internet access and telephone access should also be high priorities so that detainees (some of whom have been incarcerated for periods as long as 5- 7 years) can have the support of their families and friends. The need is particularly acute now that detainees are to be banned from possessing and using mobile phones.
7. Toilets for the use of detainees should be available in the visitors' hall. Currently any detainee who needs to go to the toilet during visiting times must leave the hall and is forbidden to return.

The purpose and design of the facility, as well as the type of inmates housed in it largely determines the attitudes of those who work there as well as those who have to live there. Measures (including building design) that make life bearable for asylum-seeker detainees are more likely to reduce the risk of self-harm and rioting and are therefore a better use of taxpayers' money than the current plan.

Geraldine Moore
President: The Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association
6 February 2017