

**Submission to the Parliamentary Enquiry into the Proposed Melbourne
Immigration Transit Accommodation Project-
Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Works**

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Submitted by: Lydia Sherren

1. I am writing this submission as a member of the Australian community who has been visiting the facility at the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) on a monthly basis for the past year. I am also a committee member of the Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association (BRASA). This submission discusses several concerns with the proposed public works at MITA.
2. In just one year of visiting detainees at MITA, I have observed a serious and concerning decline in the wellbeing and mental condition of many of the detainees. Upon my first visit, I was struck by the optimism and positivity of many of the detainees. The visiting hall was busy and full of smiles as food was shared and board games were played. It is worth noting that I am still visiting the same core group of detainees a year on but the atmosphere in the visiting hall, and the mental state of those same detainees is very different. Some key differences are:
 - a. Many detainees no longer come to the hall when being visited as they are too depressed to leave their rooms and not up to seeing visitors.
 - b. We used to bring a box of fruit for each detainee that we visited to take back to their room and enjoy at their leisure (the detainees often state that they do not enjoy the food served at MITA and individual dietary requirements such as

vegetarianism are not catered for). Detainees are no longer allowed to take food with them from the visitor's hall.

- c. The morale of the detainees has declined drastically with many feeling an increasing sense of hopelessness and despair as a result of the indefinite nature of their detention. The constant threat of being returned to Nauru or Manus, which is often used to ensure behavioural compliance, has resulted in a heightened and ongoing sense of anxiety and fear among the detainees.
 - d. Educational and artistic programs have been reduced as have detainee's access to time outside, mobile phones, computers and material resources such as books. This has resulted in an increased sense of boredom, unrest and monotony.
3. The punitive nature of the proposed works is particularly concerning. There are regular references to the detainees being higher risk and yet most detainees have not committed a crime. For those that have, their detention and punishment is not in line with Australian standards for citizens who commit an offence of a similar nature.
 4. As the regulations at MITA have become tighter and more arbitrarily cruel, the mental wellbeing of detainees has declined drastically. Surely it is in the interests of the Australian public as well as of those detained to create a program that will assist people seeking asylum to become happy, contributing members of the community. The proposed changes can only serve to further damage the mental and physical wellbeing of detainees, increasing the perceived need to detain them for prolonged periods. These changes will serve to further strip detained people seeking asylum of their humanity and of their basic human rights.
 5. This submission urges committee members to question the punitive approach to detainees. It reframes the primary concern from being 'in what ways can we increase

the security at MITA?’ to ‘in what ways can we care for and assist those that are in the care of the Australian government?’. The focus needs to be shifted to improving mental health and alleviating suffering with the ultimate goal of enabling those detained within Australia to become contributing members of the community.