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BY: M/G

Dear Secretariat,

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on Immigration Detention. I visit weekly at the Villawood Centre, and I have noticed some real improvements in the last six months or so.

First of all, could I suggest that there be a Royal Commission into the Immigration Department.... The present Minister himself called for this back in May 2005- in the debacle surrounding the sad story of Ms Cornelia Rau. To quote Senator Evans.. he said " It's clear a Royal Commission is needed. Anything less will leave the Australian public dissatisfied with the result." We, the Australian public have never dealt with the SIEV X matter, or the Tampa incident, or the "children overboard" slur. So, I am suggesting that this now happen, and we can look ourselves in the mirror, and see ourselves as people of integrity.

My other comments are as follows:-

I think that the Department should improve the process for assessing "unannounced asylum seekers." No person should be held in any detention centre longer than the 90 days that Mr Palmer stated in his Report. I have heard of Open Houses in the UK. At present after people are released (some of them have been in Villawood for 4or more years,) they are established in community care, while attending to their various medical needs. The Red Cross does a fine job with this, but much more could be done by NGO's or the Churches. Volunteers from Churches should be encouraged to give their time, and their housing, and provide other support. People in detention should be able to work and learn a wide variety of skills. The programmes should be systematic, and not peicemeal as it is with English classes at present. Community development should be the hallmark, so that folk even in a 90 day stay could learn a skill to be employable when released.

Persons in detention should always be spoken to calmly, and not tricked into going from Stage 2 or 3 to Stage 1- when they are being readied for deportation. The present method is extremely inhuman.

The lengthy waiting period for detainees to hear about their cases causes untold mental anguish. Many detainees exist on antidepressant medication, as well as very strong sleeping tablets. This means that often they sleep in the daytime; because they are up at night, trying to use the few computers available to work on their cases.

In summary, there is a need for a wholesale change of policy- with proper acts of justice to be seen to be transparent. At present the process is NOT working at all. (I think that the staff who work within DIAC would also like to see some benefit for their good and fair and just efforts at their workplace, too.)

With regard to the Christmas Island Centre, let us use it for a Tourist facility, and some way to benefit the local Islanders.

The Residential Housing at Villawood is a good step, but there is not enough to make life bearable for the waiting detainees. Sometimes they go swimming, and shopping, but time hangs heavily. Again, developing their skills is a MUST.

The grounds at Villawood in the main compound have been spruced up, but we sit in the summer when it is blazing hot, with a small roof over our heads, and in winter the winds are freezing, and the detainees are often very cold. When the Government takes some good steps forward; we will all see the difference in our selves, and we will not be paying huge taxes in the next 30 years to support the mentally ill people who were traumatised by staying locked up in one of our Detention Centres. We will be proud of our compassionate stance, and a model for other countries to follow.

I am,
yours sincerely,
Isobel Bishop (The Rev.) retired..Minister of the Uniting Church in
Australia.