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Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project

Supplementary submission to the:

Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Inquiry into immigration detention in Australia

March 2009

*Community alternatives to detention.
Housing asylum seekers in the community.*

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1. Introduction

For over eleven years, the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project (ASP) has provided housing and support to homeless asylum seekers. The ASP is the largest housing provider in Australia for asylum seekers and has housed many individuals released from detention over the past eleven years.

The ASP has an extensive background in working collaboratively with Government and the Department of Immigration to secure a more just and fair process of receiving asylum seekers in the community and has participated in national and international forums on the issue of asylum reception.

2. Sanctuary

In May 2008 the first community based housing facility for asylum seekers opened through a unique partnership between three organisations. Named 'Sanctuary' the twenty bed facility houses single male asylum seekers and has just completed one year of operation. The facility is designed to be a three year project and is focused on providing a safe and secure alternative to detaining asylum seekers through the provision of supported accommodation in the community.

Sanctuary is a partnership with Baptcare the Brunswick Baptist Church (BBC), and Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project (ASP). Baptcare is the owner of the facility, funds the operational costs and employs one full time caseworker/building manager. Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project refers clients to Sanctuary, manages the casework model including the onsite caseworker, funds a monthly financial grant, provides oncall assistance and participates in the management committee of the facility. Brunswick Baptist employs the pastoral care and community development workers.

Priority accommodation for asylum seekers is available for single male asylum seekers on bridging visas who have no right to work, Medicare or income support. The partnership proposed between Hotham Mission, Baptcare and the Brunswick Baptist Church is an exciting opportunity to provide essential supported housing to some of the most marginalised and destitute group in the Australian community.

There is no other housing arrangement of this type and size in Australia for asylum seekers.

2.1 Target group

There are approximately 8000 asylum seekers living lawfully in the community on bridging visas.

Some asylum seekers are entitled to work and Medicare (if they lodge within 45 days and have not appealed beyond the Refugee Review Tribunal) and some asylum seekers receive a federally funded Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme payment through the Red Cross (if they have not had a first decision within 6 months and have not been rejected by the Refugee Review Tribunal).

However a significant number of asylum seekers have no right to work, Medicare or any welfare payment.

This includes all asylum seekers awaiting a humanitarian decision from the Immigration Minister and all asylum seekers released from detention on a Bridging Visa E, including those released for psychological or medical grounds. Asylum seekers on Bridging Visa E are forced into severe poverty, lack housing security, have no access to health care and are totally reliant on 'charitable' support given they do not have the right to earn an income.

As well as homelessness and a lack of income, there are a range of complex situations that these asylum seekers continue to require assistance with, including advocating to the Immigration Department for extending their visas, facing departure from Australia, severe health problems, trauma and torture experiences, and displaced family members in the country of origin.

Some asylum seekers have relatives or friends to support them, but a significant number (in Melbourne approximately 500) have no supports at all. They cannot access any government funded welfare agency, such as Centrelink, or a Migrant Resource Centre. They rely on the good will of

churches and the community for their housing, food and medical costs. Homelessness, health, nutrition, isolation and depression are all major concerns for this group.

Eligibility criteria

Those eligible to become residents of Sanctuary must;

- 1.1. Be an asylum seeker;
- 1.2. Hold an appropriate Bridging Visa;
- 1.3. Be earning less, on average, than \$145 per month (the financial relief amount paid by Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project).

Note that clients who have work rights but who choose not to work (eg. study full time) are not eligible.

- 1.4. Not have access to any other sources of funding, such as through a government funded program;
- 1.5. Not have access to the support of family members who are eligible for government funding or any other form of income;
- 1.6. Have no significant savings (in excess of \$2,000)

If a resident gains work rights or an income whilst living at Sanctuary a transitional period will apply during which the client circumstances will be monitored. At this stage a resident must begin to pay 25% of their income in rent. Where a client becomes eligible for ASAS or CCP assessments for exiting Sanctuary are made on a case by case basis.

Profile of residents to date

There are 19 current residents living at Sanctuary. Over the past year 26 residents have lived at Sanctuary with an average stay of 8 months. Countries represented have included; West Papua, Pakistan, China, Vietnam, Israel, Burma, Ethiopia, PNG, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Iran, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, PR Congo, Sudan, Morocco Burma, Angola, India, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Cyprus, China.

2.2. Facility Resources

Personnel resources

Sanctuary has been intentionally designed to provide a range of support services such as case management, pastoral care and community development support to residents. Sanctuary is not staffed 24 hours but an oncall phone service provides an emergency contact for after hours crisis.

Residents are encouraged to live independently at Sanctuary with support from the various care workers available to them. Residents are required to engage with a caseworker a minimum of once per month to secure ongoing eligibility for the house.

Caseworker

An onsite caseworker 5 days per week provides important support for housing establishment, ongoing housing support, casework coordination and development of Men's Group social and training support network. The caseworker administers a monthly financial relief grant in co-operation with

the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project of \$33 per person per week, a total of \$145 per month. Emergency relief is also available from the caseworker and a caseplan is developed with each resident in relation to health, welfare and immigration concerns.

Monthly house meetings are facilitated to address safety issues within the facility and to foster social connections and co-operation. A dinner is provided at these meetings.

Regular food parcels are organised through the caseworker in co-operation with Baptcare and other volunteers working at the facility.

The caseworker also manages the facility in co-operation with Baptcare. This includes building maintenance and co-ordinating all contractors working onsite including cleaners, gardeners, electricians, pest controller and fire safety operators.

Pastoral Care

This position is designed to support the personal, spiritual and social wellbeing of residents. A pastoral care office provides space for counselling and reflection within an inter-faith setting.

Community Development

This position focuses on social support for the residents, including orientation to local area, promoting harmonious communal environment and supporting relationships between tenants. Engagement with the broader community, businesses and the Brunswick Baptist Church congregation also provides resources to the house such as food and volunteer support.

Building resources

Each resident is provided with their own room, a room key and a building key. Each room has an en suite attached. Each room has a single bed, bedside table, kettle and refrigerator. A chair and desk are also supplied on request. Sheets, blankets and pillows for the bed, a towel, toilet paper and soap in the bathrooms are also provided on an ongoing basis.

Other facilities available to residents include;

Two kitchens that each have;

- A large fridge
- A large freezer
- Oven/stove
- Microwave

Laundry with;

- 2 driers
- 3 washing machines

Two dining Rooms and two common Lounge Rooms with couches and televisions. Two telephones with free call access to Hotham Mission ASP and emergency services. Limited storage space is available and all electronic

equipment in the facility needs to be approved for operation. Three computers with internet access were planned to be installed from the outset but have been delayed.

2.3 Finances

Sanctuary is a partnership between three agencies. Each agency brings resources and financial supports the work they do. The bulk of the cost for the running of Sanctuary falls with Baptcare, the owner of the facility.

The following is a summary of set up costs and running costs to date.

Baptcare contribution

Capital costs \$200,000

Running costs \$250,000 per annum

Total contribution \$250,000 per annum

Hotham Mission ASP contribution

Basic Living Assistance for 20 clients \$145 per month per person

\$34,800

Oncall out of hours services

\$20,000

Supervision of case management staff, support work and management committee participation.

\$20,000

Total contribution \$74,000 per annum

Brunswick Baptist contribution

Staff management and management committee engagement

\$5,000

Total contribution \$5,000 per annum

2.4 Evaluation and Learnings

Evaluation

A longitudinal study is to be commissioned as part of the evaluation process regarding the social impact and outcomes for asylum seekers in care 'in the community'. The outcomes of this evaluation will provide significant documentation for ongoing legislative reform regarding the detention of asylum seekers.

The longitudinal study will aim to provide an evidence base regarding;

- the effectiveness of the provision of care in community
- the effectiveness of community care as a viable alternative to detention

The study will culminate in the production of a report after three years of operation documenting the following:

- an assessment of the impact of supported housing on health and wellbeing.
- an assessment of impact of onsite casework in a housing model
- an assessment of impact of cluster housing/shared housing in comparison to individual housing in the community.
- an examination of the correlation between supported housing and 'end of line' emotional wellbeing.
- an examination of the impact of pastoral care in a supported housing model

Learnings

Over the course of a year Sanctuary has been very successful in providing safe and secure housing for asylum seekers with no access to any other form of safe housing. Not unlike many new projects of this size there are always learnings.

There have been operational learnings that have involved fire alarm systems, client storage systems, type of telephone access, building access systems, community education with sub-contractors and emergency services staff.

One of the greatest challenges for Sanctuary is in supporting twenty men from many different cultures who may not speak the same language and who generally do not like the circumstances that find them sharing a house with nineteen other men. Developing community within the house is an important part of the work of all staff at Sanctuary. The multi-professional setting is a helpful model where residents develop relationships in different ways with support staff. This is helpful for mediating conflict or misunderstanding with staff but more importantly between residents themselves.

Developing relationships and educating the community has been another important part of the role of staff at Sanctuary. Emergency services have been called to Sanctuary on a number of occasions and the need for emergency staff to understand the context of Sanctuary and the status of asylum seekers in the community has been essential.

A significant learning has involved seeking clarity on the way the Residential Tenancy Act Victoria applies to residents who do not pay rent as a result of not having an income. All three partners involved in Sanctuary are very aware that if residents are evicted from Sanctuary there are very few other options for housing. To date there have been a small number of evictions and finding alternative pathways for housing without an income is extremely problematic. However, Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project who manages the Sanctuary casework model, advocates that staff and other residents of Sanctuary cannot suffer violence or other forms of inappropriate behaviour simply because there is no where else for a resident to live.

Clear house guidelines are implemented in the house, covering individual behaviour and the requirement to engage with the caseworker on a regular basis. Breaches of these guidelines do result in written warnings and evictions where necessary. These decisions are never taken lightly

particularly given the lack of housing alternatives for residents, however, the integrity of Sanctuary as a safe housing option with supported caseworker remains primary.

3. International Models for Housing

Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project is the largest agency at a state and national level that provides rent free or low rental accommodation to approximately 80 asylum seekers per year.

The ASP recognises that whilst a successful service, this model of housing provision relies on donors in the community entrusting the management of property to the ASP to address potential homelessness. We recognise that this model is neither sustainable long term, nor practicable for national expansion into the future. Reception housing for asylum seekers at both a state and a national level, must be addressed within the broader context of housing shortages locally and nationally as the Federal and State Governments begins to plan for the future.

However, in the 2008 Green Paper on homelessness the Federal Government failed to include asylum seekers in the terms of reference for assessing critical housing shortages in the community. As a consequence, the White paper released in December 2008 excluded asylum seekers from its scope. It is of great concern to asylum seeker agencies that this group has been ignored in discussions about critical housing issues. Furthermore, the current Community Care Pilot, funded by government, does not include funding for housing support or a vision for the future provision of safe and secure housing for vulnerable asylum seekers if the pilot is expanded into a program.

3.1 Asylum Housing Project developing housing standards

As a result of the lack of safe and secure housing options for asylum seekers engaged in the Protection application process, Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project will undertake a year long project, funded by the ANZ bank, with three other partners to address housing issues for asylum seekers in Victoria and with a model that may apply to the national context.

The project will be lead by the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project in collaboration with The Host Consulting Group, The Victorian Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) and Dr. Dave Corlett.

The aims of the project are as follows:

- To survey **domestic models** of housing reception for asylum seekers by investigating:
 - housing pathways for newly arrived asylum seekers
 - ways in which the resources, priorities, experiences and identities of asylum seekers shape these pathways

- difficulties asylum seekers encounter in meeting their housing requirements

This aim will be achieved by conducting a series of interviews with asylum seeker agencies in Victoria to identify current housing options. Agencies, organisations and individuals will also be consulted in other states.

- To survey **international models** of housing reception for asylum seekers by investigating:
 - Housing reception models in different countries (eg cluster, hostel, individual housing, shared etc)
 - Sources of funding for reception housing for asylum seekers
 - Standards of care and models of best practise in asylum seeker housing
 - Management/tendering agreements for asylum seeker housing
 - Geographic influence of asylum seeker housing placement
 - Role of government and community in asylum seeker reception housing
 - Statistical data on length of stay, demographics, place in visa process
 - Health and wellbeing assessment in the provision of safe and secure housing for asylum seekers

This aim will be achieved by undertaking a comprehensive literature review focussing on reception housing models around the world. A matrix of key literature search terms will be applied to library catalogues, electronic bibliographic databases, media databases and the internet:

The project team will visit a number of countries identified in the literature review as having robust asylum seeker housing reception models. Travel to these countries will enable consultation with agencies and government departments involved in the delivery of reception housing for asylum seekers. The project team will observe how different systems operate, and will have an opportunity to view or collate procedure information and case histories unavailable in the public arena. Client engagement will also be pursued where possible.

- To develop **best practice housing reception standards** through reference to existing domestic and international housing reception standards

This aim will be achieved by the Project team consolidating and synthesising data obtained from the national and international scoping stage of the project and writing a report documenting the research methodology and findings. Using this documentation, best practice housing reception standards for asylum seeker housing in Victoria will be drafted and a selection of government funded housing providers and community housing associations consulted for feedback. The development of a report will include recommendations relating to:

- The development of a reception housing model including type and location of housing, management and partnership options, length of stay options, mainstream transition options.
 - The development of a set of housing reception standards based on health and wellbeing indicators aligned with existing community care programs available in Victoria.
 - Costing of the provision of reception housing and casework support for asylum seekers in Victoria.
- **To inform future policy and implementation of housing provision** and housing support for asylum seekers.

This aim will be achieved by involving key government stakeholders in the national scoping stage of the research, as well as by presenting the final research report and recommendations to the Federal Government.

The wide dissemination of the results of this research (see qu 10) will be a key strategy in affecting government policy in the area of accommodation options for asylum seekers.

5. To **apply the research, standards and costings** to explore additional community based options for addressing the housing shortage for asylum seekers living in the community.

This aim will be achieved through the development of a prospectus for community agencies and housing donors interested in providing housing or housing support to asylum seekers living in the community. The prospectus will summarise the research undertaken, the required standards, the cost to an agency or donor in providing housing to this group and highlight the need for expansion in this area. Dissemination of the prospectus will be followed up by targeted approaches to agencies and donors.

It is the hope that this project will contribute to further strategies that will make safe and secure housing available to vulnerable asylum seekers engaged in the Protection application process.

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