



**the  
better  
way**

**refugees, detention  
and australians**

# the better way

## refugees, detention and australians

There is *a better way* of dealing with the needs of refugees arriving in Australia – whether with or without a visa, by boat or by plane.

The Better Way will not compromise Australia’s security, health or community values, and will actually be cheaper.

### What happens now?

#### Same people, different treatment

Every year several thousand people fleeing persecution make their way to Australia, travelling on different visas issued by the Australian embassy in other countries. When they arrive, they lodge a claim for protection. They are seeking asylum. The Government allows them to live in the community whilst their claims are being processed. Some are eligible to work and receive Medicare, and may pay to receive education. Over two and a half thousand of these people (including 1600 East Timorese) were receiving government support via the Red Cross in 2002. The majority however, do not have these rights and have to rely on charity from friends and church and welfare groups for medical care, food, housing, and clothing.

In 2001, over 4000 people arrived by boat from countries with oppressive governments such as Afghanistan and Iraq. These people almost always arrive without visas. This is the extent of their illegal activity; they just do not hold a valid visa. Unlike other asylum seekers, these people are always taken to detention centres and there is no time limit on how long they stay there. There is nothing barring children and young people without families from being detained – and they are. There is nothing barring pregnant women from being detained – and they are.

The only thing that distinguishes these two groups is their method of transport to Australia and the possession of a visa, but they are treated very differently once they arrive.

| Asylum Seekers in Detention v the Community* |                     |   |       |                             |
|--|---------------------|---|-------|-----------------------------|
| Financial Year                               | Living in Detention | Living in the Community (by lodgment of claim at 31 May 2002) | Other | Total number asylum seekers |
| 1998/1999                                    | 1098                | 7247  | 45    | <b>8390</b>                 |
| 1999/2000                                    | 4371                | 7904  | 438   | <b>12713</b>                |
| 2000/2001                                    | 4911                | 8110  | 108   | <b>13129</b>                |
| 2001/2002                                    | 1942                | 5942  | 238   | <b>8122</b>                 |

\* Source: Department of Immigration 9 June 2002.

#### The refugee process

The process for ensuring a person is a genuine refugee can take many months, and sometimes years. It can involve a series of steps including assessments by the Department of Immigration, a hearing at the Refugee Review Tribunal, possibly a hearing by the Federal Court and sometimes an appeal to the Minister for Immigration. These stages are similar to those in other countries. They involve deciding what is just according to Australian law.

**We do not need to lock everybody up in detention while this occurs.**

# the better way

– an alternative to mandatory detention



PHOTO: AARON MILLS | IWARCERY

There are alternatives to detention that do not compromise Australia's security, are cheaper, more humane and which strengthen our sense of community.

So what is a *better way*?

Rather than being classified by how they arrived here, asylum seekers should be classified by their care needs and likely security risk. This would allow more refugees to be housed more cheaply in the community.

The Better Way is a combination of three approaches:

- Early evaluation of refugees to work out whether anyone poses a security risk, and whether there is a risk of absconding if they are placed in low-security housing
- Case management by a social worker from a national welfare agency to work with people and families to ensure they understand Australia's refugee system, and counsel people as they move through the legal process
- Three accommodation options that house people according to a security assessment and care needs.

Security is a feature. For example:

- Community management for those considered at low risk, or no risk to the community or unlikely to abscond (this may include women and children, families and young people)
- Medium security hostel accommodation for those considered medium risk or requiring intensive services
- Continued detention for those considered high risk.

The Better Way reduces the cost to the taxpayer.

The costs of housing refugees depend on the level of security required:

- Community-based accommodation is the cheapest option when low levels of security are required. It is better for children, families and people with disabilities (often caused by war or torture)
- Hostel accommodation is the cheapest option for medium levels of security and is good for centralising services
- Full detention is the option for those people who pose a security risk.

According to the Department of Immigration, the cost of keeping people in detention is an average \$160 per person per day<sup>1</sup>. This is because we currently have a 'one size fits all' approach to refugees for the entire process, regardless of whether they are children or adults – and regardless of whether they pose a risk of absconding – or no risk at all. Importantly, it costs a lot to keep everyone in maximum security detention. **But do all people need to be detained in maximum security, regardless of their risk?**

Several thousand asylum seekers live in the community and are supported by agencies like the Australian Red Cross or Melbourne's Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project that provide basic living allowances and in some cases rented accommodation. With added care and security costs under The Better Way, the average cost of community placement of asylum seekers out of detention is \$60 per person per day.<sup>2</sup> Other data (based on analysing costs of caring for older people in aged care homes that have a similar level of security and services) show that the cost of hostel accommodation is \$110 per day. The Commonwealth Government has used hostel accommodation to house the Kosovars from the war-torn former Yugoslavia in 1999. Many of these ideas have already been successfully trialled and there is nothing new for Australia to take a positive approach.

<sup>1</sup> For full description and analysis of the economic costs see our report on the website: Dr Tony Ward, *Improving Outcomes and Reducing Costs for Asylum Seekers*, Milbur Consulting, 2003. <http://www.thebetterway.info>

<sup>2</sup> Hotham Asylum Seeker Project, *Welfare Issues and Immigration Outcomes for Asylum Seekers on Bridging Visa E – Research and Evaluation*, Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, 2003. <http://www.thebetterway.info>

By comparing residential and community-based corrections and aged care services with the cost of detention of all refugees in the current system, The Better Way is found to be cheaper. In fact, it can house people in a range of accommodation, according to their care needs and security risk, for 18% cheaper than the current cost of keeping everybody in detention centres. What's more, The Better Way includes the cost of employing a caseworker to help people who have been tortured or suffer other trauma.

| Accommodating Refugees: Comparative Costs to the Taxpayer  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Low Security   | Medium Security  | Maximum Security  |
| Community Housing<br>\$60 per day  | Hostels<br>\$110 per day   | Maximum Security Detention<br>\$160 per person per day  |
| This cost comprises \$20 (food and accommodation); \$15 (security) and \$25 (case management and other assistance services). It is based on existing services provided to asylum seekers by the Hotham Mission and Australian Red Cross. | This costing includes accommodation, food assistance and security. It is based on comparative costs from aged care homes and the NSW parole system which have similar levels of security and services. | In December 2002 the Government told the Senate that it cost the Federal Government \$2 million per week to hold 1326 asylum seekers in detention. Daily costs per person at individual centres ranged from \$67 to \$533. The average cost in 2001-2 was \$160 per person, per day.<br><br><b>Detention in the Pacific</b><br>Estimated at \$140 million<br>Approximately \$97,000 per refugee per year. |
| For full costs see: <a href="http://www.thebetterway.info">http://www.thebetterway.info</a>  |  | For Pacific costs see: <a href="http://www.thebetterway.info">http://www.thebetterway.info</a>  |

There are health costs associated with keeping children and families in maximum security detention centres. The mental health effects of detention on women, children and families who are a low security risk are now well known. The current system does not consider the expense of future psychiatric treatment if these families are found to be genuine refugees and are released into the Australian community after prolonged periods of detention.

**The Better Way shows that there are alternatives to detention that don't compromise our security and our humanity, and are cheaper than holding everybody in maximum security detention centres. These savings can then be used for schools and hospitals.**

### Managing people better

The Better Way can be implemented immediately without changes to Australia's border protection policy.

Under The Better Way, a risk assessment is undertaken immediately, not at the end of the process as currently happens. A caseworker then prepares people for all possible outcomes of their visa application.

Hotham Mission's system for asylum seekers living in the community already provides caseworkers to enable individuals and families to adjust to Australia. They help find housing, deal with daily living needs, and orient them to an Australian way of life.

Case workers can also identify people who have been tortured or traumatised and help them find specialist counselling services. This is vital for women who have been raped and for children who have seen terrible things or have special medical needs.

Where people have been found not to be refugees, the caseworker helps them to accept the decision, actively plan for their future and assists them to farewell people they know in the community as they prepare to leave Australia.



## The Better Way works

Hotham Mission has housed hundreds of asylum seekers in the community, some released from detention into their care. No asylum seeker absconded. Just under half were found to need Australia's protection and were granted visas and are settling into life here. More than half were refused and made plans to leave the country and left. 85% departed voluntarily. A couple were returned to detention and then left.<sup>3</sup>

The psychological damage caused by prolonged detention is profound. Many refugees, particularly children, suffer severe depression. Overwhelming evidence of these effects has been collected by government bodies, welfare agencies, human rights organisations and psychiatric specialists.

The evidence that supports a different approach is now mounting. In fact, the Minister for Immigration issued regulations on 2 December, 2002 which allow people to be placed in 'alternate forms of detention', such as community care facilities, foster homes, schools and hospitals.

A recent step towards a more humane approach was initiated by the Federal Government in August 2001 – the 'Woomera Alternative Detention Pilot'. The project enabled up to 25 women and children previously held in the Woomera Detention Centre to live in family-style suburban houses. However, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) two year Inquiry<sup>4</sup> found that the housing project maintained the detrimental effects of detention by separating families and continuing to deprive people of their liberties.

People cleared by an intense security check do not need to be kept in high cost, maximum security detention centres or housing projects while their refugee claim is assessed.

**There are varied views about mandatory detention but all the experts agree: it is not a humane or efficient way of dealing with traumatised people.**



PHOTO: LIZ GILLIAM | EMC

<sup>3</sup> Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, Welfare Issues and Immigration Outcomes for Asylum Seekers on Bridging Visa E – Research and Evaluation, Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, 2003. <http://www.thebetterway.info>

<sup>4</sup> HREOC, A Last Resort – National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention, 2004 [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human\\_rights/children\\_detention\\_report](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention_report)

## Detention, Children and Mental Health – the evidence

- The Commonwealth Ombudsman initiated an inquiry into detention centres (2001) and found that 'long-term detention is a source of frustration, despondency and depression often resulting in drastic action being taken by the detainees'.
- HREOC has found that there is a pattern of psychological reactions among people detained for long periods of time (Media Release 6.2.02). Each successive stage was found to be associated with increasing distress such as severe depression, despair, hopelessness, paranoia, chronic rage, persecutory delusions and persistent self-harming behaviour.
- A study of refugee health in detention found that some people displayed symptoms of distress at some time during their period of detention: 85% had chronic depressive symptoms and 65% had pronounced ongoing suicidal thoughts.<sup>5</sup>
- Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs statistics reveal that in an eight-month period, 264 depressed people (including 29 children) attempted to hurt themselves in Detention Centres: 238 males and 26 females. <http://www.thebetterway.info>
- The Department of Immigration told the Australian Parliament that five children had sewn their lips together (one 14-year-old twice); three children had slashed their arms; two children had ingested shampoo; one child tried to hang himself and 13 children had threatened to hurt themselves over a two-week period. There was no evidence of parents encouraging children to self-harm. (Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 11 February 2003, p.146.)
- The 2004 HREOC Inquiry found that children detained for long periods are at high risk of serious mental harm and failure to remove children from the detention environment with their parents amounts to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of those children. [www.humanrights.gov.au/human\\_rights/children\\_detention\\_report](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention_report)

<sup>5</sup> Sultan A, O'Sullivan K, "Psychological disturbances in asylum seekers held in long term detention: a participant – observer account", Medical Journal of Australia, 2001; 175.

# the better way – your questions answered

## Will refugees abscond if they are allowed to live outside detention centres?

The Minister for Immigration informed the Senate in October, 1997 that over the previous 15 months not one person released into the community on a bridging visa had failed to meet their reporting requirements. More recently, from 2000-2003, the Hotham Asylum Seeker Project in Melbourne has been providing assistance to asylum seekers who are living in the community, including some who were released from detention. None has absconded.

Why? This is explained partly by the provision of support services that encourage people to remain in the system. Further, people want to be accepted to become Australian citizens so they want to comply.

No system of release into the community is perfect. However, experience in both the Australian parole system and internationally with asylum seekers suggests low levels of absconding. The likelihood can be diminished further through both effective case management and risk assessment as is proposed in The Better Way.

The proposed Better Way relies on the establishment of a reception centre run by the Government, where people would be detained upon arrival for a short time for security, health and identity checks. Based on this risk assessment, people who are no risk could be released into community hostels or other housing which would be managed by welfare agencies. Such welfare agencies have a lot of experience in working with security personnel because of their work with prisoners on parole. Therefore, they have the capacity to cooperate with Immigration authorities.

Upon arrival in Australia, people would be introduced to a caseworker, provided by a national welfare agency like the Australian Red Cross, who would support them until their immigration applications have been resolved. The caseworker can help them to make plans to return to their country of origin, or help them settle into the Australian community. Australians assisted people from Kosovo in this way just a few years ago – this was very successful and gained widespread community support.

An independent case assessment panel would be appointed to continuously assess any security risk or risk of absconding. As is currently the case, the Commonwealth Government would continue to cover the costs of health care and services.



PHOTO: LARA MCKINLEY

## Are there terrorists amongst refugees?

Many Australians fear refugees arriving from the Middle East may threaten Australia's security. However, all refugees arriving by boat are screened by ASIO. In fact, in August 2002, the Director-General of ASIO told Parliament that of the 5986 new arrivals, not one was found to be a security risk.

The Better Way does not undermine Australia's security. It proposes that thorough security checks be conducted upon arrival. Anyone assessed as a security risk would be detained in an immigration detention centre.

Anyone assessed as a low security risk could then be placed in the community or in a hostel. Australia does not ordinarily imprison children, nor do we imprison people just because they are poor or from a different culture.

# If we let people out of detention, won't it encourage more people to come?

## Refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan

The rates of successful applications for asylum by people who arrive by boat are very high. The former Minister for Immigration, Mr Ruddock, told Parliament on 1 November 2000 that an average of 90% of Afghans and Iraqis seeking asylum were granted protection because they were found to be genuine refugees. Because they arrived by boat, they are only granted a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), which means they must prove their case all over again after 30 months.

Refugees have always come to Australia. A Commonwealth Joint Parliamentary Committee on Migration accepted in 2000 that refugees would always come to Australia, despite new and stricter border controls. The Committee agreed that there is strong evidence that as long as there are wars, persecution and other global problems, people will continue to go to other countries to find peaceful ways to raise their families, work and contribute to their communities.

Australia is no different from other developed countries and people from war-torn countries will always want to come here.

Over the last few years, refugees have come to Australia to escape from the terrible persecution they have suffered under the regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. These people have come to Australia despite Australia having had maximum security detention centres since 1990. They are seeking refuge because the prospect of detention in Australia is less frightening than the prospect of living under a terrifying government. Detention centres are not an effective tool in preventing refugees from coming.

It is expected that now that these regimes are gone, people from this part of the world will stay in their communities and re-build them. However, if there are terrible wars or violent governments in other areas of the world, people will probably try to escape to Australia again, rather than stay in their country and risk their life. This is part of being in a global community.

## Your opinion counts

Several hundred people seeking asylum are still detained in Australian detention centres. The Better Way has been developed to manage these people and any future arrivals in a way that is fair and consistent with international best practice.

The Better Way seeks to change the current policy of high cost maximum security detention. What we propose is more humane, more efficient and cheaper to run. This policy has been fully costed and developed by respected welfare agencies.

We have been working with all political parties, calling on them to give serious consideration to The Better Way.

You can support this call for a better way. Policy change needs community support and action.

Here are some ideas of what you can do.

Bring this brochure to the attention of your Federal MP and candidate and ask them to respond to you about its contents.

Add your voice to the thousands of ordinary Australians who are seeking a return to just refugee policies. You can join a local group or respond to media stories about detention with the message there is a better way. You can join the national campaign group, A Just Australia and be kept informed about what is being done and what you can do.

Talk about this brochure with family and friends. You can take it one step further and host a Better Way breakfast or even hold a community forum. Experts from the Justice for Asylum Seekers network are available to speak about The Better Way and refugee issues in general.

Wider public opinion is changing as awareness of the issues in Australia's treatment of asylum seekers is matched with workable solutions like The Better Way.

**By making your voice heard you can make a difference.**

For further information about any of these simple steps go to: [www.thebetterway.info](http://www.thebetterway.info)





Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS) is an alliance of over thirty national church, welfare and community organisations, founded in Melbourne in 1999 to achieve just treatment of people claiming asylum in Australia while acknowledging the need for border management and sound migration processes. This booklet is based on the JAS proposed alternative approaches to asylum seekers: Reception and Transitional Processing System (JAS, June 2002).

**The Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS) network comprises:**

Afghan Support Group  
Amnesty International (Victoria)  
Anglican Church  
Anglicare Victoria  
Austcare  
Australian Iraqi Association  
Baptist Union  
Brotherhood of St Laurence, Ecumenical Migration Centre  
Caritas Australia  
Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues  
Churches of Christ  
Council of Vietnamese Supporting Organisations in Australia  
Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria  
Good Shepherd Social Justice Network  
Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project  
Indo Chinese Refugee Association  
Jesuit Refugee Service  
Liberty Victoria  
Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace  
Melbourne Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office  
Mercy Refugee Service  
National Council of Churches in Australia (Victoria)  
National League for Democracy (Burma Liberated Area)  
Oxfam Community Aid Abroad  
Refugee Council of Australia  
Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre  
Springvale Community Aid And Advice Bureau  
St Vincent De Paul Society (Victoria)  
Tear Fund Australia  
The Salvation Army  
Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania  
Vietnamese Community in Australia

**For further information or to order more copies:  
[www.thebetterway.info](http://www.thebetterway.info)**

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