

**OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE
ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE**

Organisation: Asylum Seekers Centre

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NSW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

INQUIRY INTO OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE



ASYLUM SEEKERS CENTRE SUBMISSION 13 AUGUST 2021

The Asylum Seekers Centre is a place of welcome and provides practical and personal support for people living in the community who are seeking asylum. The Asylum Seekers Centre was established in 1993 and currently supports more than 4000 people in NSW. Our services include housing, health, casework, nutrition, employment support, digital connectivity, recreation, education and crisis financial assistance.

Context

People seeking asylum are ineligible for social housing and are generally ineligible for most transitional, subsidised or supported housing programs due to their temporary visa status. Finding affordable and secure housing options is extremely difficult for people seeking asylum, particularly for those who are on low incomes and often cannot afford to enter the rental market. This increases the risk of homelessness and reliance on non-governmental organisations for financial assistance.

Many of the barriers to stable housing are to do with insecure visa status, casualised work, mental and physical health challenges that come from a history of displacement and the challenges of finding work in a new country. However, these barriers intensified for people seeking asylum in March 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic shut down the economy and many people lost work with no Federal Government safety net to protect them.

Since the beginning of the 2021 lockdown which started in Greater Sydney on 26th of June 2021, ASC has received calls from over 200 individuals under financial distress due to job-loss or reduction of hours. Of the 200 individuals at risk of homelessness, 55 of these are children under 18.



Barriers to access stable housing for people seeking asylum

Lack of income support for people who have no source of income if they are not working. Barriers to work can include disability and chronic health conditions and there is no source of income support even in these circumstances.

Long-term unemployed people who are unable to access social services are often unable to be active in the job market because they have no stable housing.

For some people seeking asylum without the right to work there is no possible source of income beside financial assistance from not-for-profit organisations. They are unable to work or access social services. This is not the majority of people seeking asylum but are those in the most vulnerable situation.

Long periods of uncertainty while their visa status is being assessed makes it difficult to plan for stability and to transition from housing support to independence.

A snapshot of housing assistance provided by the ASC

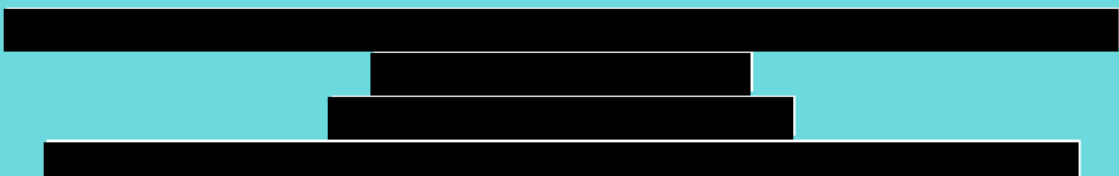
Providence House

Providence House is a property provided by the Sisters of Charity Foundation in the inner west of Sydney. The house accommodates people seeking asylum and is managed by the ASC; single women and families in shared apartments and a family unit. In the 2019/2020 financial year, 29 people lived in Providence House.

Providence House works on a short to mid-term transitional housing model where the occupants do not pay rent and they are supported to find employment, study, restore their health and move to independent stable housing. The Covid-19 pandemic has lengthened the period of time people are staying at Providence House with employment options reduced in the 2020 and 2021 years.

Financial assistance for housing

Due to the barriers listed above, there is a high demand for assistance to people who are at risk of homelessness and who have no access to social housing or any other welfare safety net.





During the 2020-2021 financial year, ASC assisted 582 individuals with payments for essential housing. These payments included: ongoing rental assistance, hostel bookings, and emergency relief for those facing destitution.

Every person on ASC ongoing rental assistance is considered to be receiving 'homelessness' support, because if they were not supported, they would otherwise become homeless or evicted. This means that 582 individuals have been supported in the last financial year to avoid becoming homeless.

This level of housing support was only made possible through a Crisis and Essential Services Support for Asylum Seekers Grant Program from Multicultural NSW. This is a much higher level of support than the ASC can usually provide, though the need for housing support always exceeds the organisation's resources.

In 2020, 126 individuals were homeless at the time they presented to ASC, or they were at risk of immediate eviction within 5 days. 37 of the 126 individuals were under 18.

ASC client needs remained significant at the end of 2020-21, despite the positive impact of the financial relief supports. In a regular welfare check 30% of clients reported "unstable or at risk" housing situations when last surveyed, with a further 3% "homeless, evicted or in other crisis."

Currently, in August 2021, ASC is spending \$50,000 per month on emergency essential housing assistance alone. At times in 2020 when funding allowed, the ASC was spending \$147,508 per month.

Temporary housing in private housing stock

During 2020 the ASC was approached by a private landlord who offered to provide short-term access to un-rented housing stock at a reduced rental. The project provided short-term housing for 10 households. The households were mostly single people but in two homes there were single parents with a baby or children.

Participants were selected who were expected to be able to gain some more independence after a short period of time with stable housing. Six months later, three participants moved on to work or independent living and new participants were selected for a short-term stay in the units.

In the time that people spend in these units, their rent and utilities are paid by the ASC through grants and donations directed to housing support. Their furnishings and all household goods are provided through a partnership with a community group called Run for Good Project.

During their time in the units, people are supported by our employment team and caseworkers to look for work, complete qualifications and plan for independence.





Recommendations

1. That further investigations be made about the feasibility of vacant rental properties being offered for short-term social housing through a central portal at a reduced rent.
2. That the bar is lifted for people who are not citizens or permanent residents to have access to social housing initiatives.
3. That some social housing initiatives are designed for people with long-term vulnerabilities such as disability including mental health issues, inability to work due to visa restrictions or no access to welfare support.

