

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST RENTAL ACCOMMODATION

Organisation: Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in New South
Wales

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**CONFERENCE OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES
IN NEW SOUTH WALES
CLRI (NSW)**

ABN: 52 476 362 010
Member of Catholic Church Religious Group

19th February, 2009.

The Director,
Standing Committee on Social Issues,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr West,

Please accept the attached as our Submission into the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues – Inquiry into Homeless and Low Cost Rental Accommodation.

I write on behalf of the Social Justice committee within the NSW Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes. CLRI(NSW) represents approximately 3,500 Catholic religious, men and women, throughout the state, as well as many people working in organisations run by religious institutes.

We welcome your invitation to make submissions with regard to the impact of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing.

In response to the Federal Government's call for submissions on the Green Paper on homelessness, CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee presented a submission which focuses on difficulties faced by refugees and asylum seekers. We would like to present this submission for consideration by the Standing Committee on Social Issues. Points raised continue to be relevant and we hope that our reflections, based on very concrete experience, will help the Committee in its deliberations.

There is concern among the Australian public with regard to this issue and we hope that your Committee will be able to address the issue of homelessness in an effective way.

Yours faithfully,

Grace Ellul sm

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Submission to
GREEN PAPER ON HOMELESSNESS

**'Which Way Home?
A New Approach to Homelessness'**

Submitted by
Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in New South Wales
PO Box 259
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27 June, 2008

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Submission to
GREEN PAPER ON HOMELESSNESS
'Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness'

INTRODUCTION

This submission is presented on behalf of the Social Justice Committee of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes [CLRI(NSW)]. CLRI(NSW) represents approximately 3,500 Catholic Religious and their associates in NSW. The Social Justice Committee is responsible for research, advocacy and action in many areas concerning social justice and peace, and is accountable to CLRI(NSW) through its executive members.

Religious congregations in Australia have a long history of involvement with those in the community who suffer from disadvantage and exclusion. Thus, CLRI(NSW) feels that it has a unique responsibility in contributing to the progress of the Government's social inclusion agenda. Members of the Social Justice Committee bring with them years of personal experience as advocates for disadvantaged members of society, including those who have experienced homelessness.

CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee on May 21 2008 organised a Housing Affordability Seminar at which the Hon. Tanya Plibersek addressed a gathering of religious and their colleagues from a diverse range of housing-related organisations within NSW. This meeting provided an excellent opportunity to foster dialogue between the Minister for Housing and those working at the frontline of housing and homelessness groups. Ms Plibersek, the Seminar's attendees and the Social Justice Committee shared insights into the most pressing issues regarding homelessness and housing in Australia. Due to the breadth and complexity of the problems of homelessness, a response to the Green Paper on Homelessness that attempted to address all of these crucial areas could have become so broad that its impact would be diminished. For this reason, the Committee has chosen to select a single focus in response to the Green Paper, and thus speak loudly and clearly about one very important issue within the wider problem of homelessness in Australia.

In the Green Paper, it stated that “being a refugee on a Temporary Protection Visa” was one of the risk factors that could expose a person to homelessness.¹ The Government has now abolished Temporary Protection Visas, but the risk of homelessness for refugees and non-English-speaking immigrants remains.

In this submission we will address the areas our members have found to be of the greatest concern regarding refugees' experience of homelessness and housing difficulties. Included in this submission are personal accounts experienced or witnessed by members of the CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee. As was discovered at the Housing Seminar in May, personal dialogue and the sharing of stories can be some of the most powerful ways to inspire action and change. With this in mind, we hope that this submission inspires those producing the White Paper on Homelessness to consider the special needs and vulnerability of refugees and immigrants within the broader problem of homelessness in Australia.

HOMELAND TO HOMELESS

There are many human rights that relate specifically to refugees and asylum seekers as they arrive in their place of asylum. But once protection in a country is granted, the importance of remembering and upholding human rights for refugees does not end. This year, the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) produced a report about homelessness entitled 'Homelessness is a Human Rights Issue' in which the unique position of refugees was highlighted. The report stated that:

“People experiencing homelessness face violations of a wide range of human rights...A person who is homeless may face violations of the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, the right to liberty and security of the person, the right to privacy, the right to social security, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to vote, and many more.”²

All of the above problems are magnified in the case of refugees whose situation is often complicated by cultural and language barriers. Thus, refugees' right to protection and

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Which Way Home? A new approach to homelessness*, (May 2008), 19.

² Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 'Homelessness is a Human Rights Issue', online, URL: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html, accessed 3rd June 2008. (2008).

asylum should be understood to extend beyond the initial granting of refugee status. The provision of adequate housing that can be maintained by the refugee is a necessary extension of the right to protection that is acknowledged when the asylum seeker is granted protection in Australia.

One member of CLRI(NSW) recently discovered that four different Sudanese families who had attempted to settle in the Blacktown area of Sydney's west (where there is a large Sudanese community) were planning to move to Orange in rural NSW, as their attempts to find adequate housing in Blacktown were unsuccessful. The concern for these families is that they have no guarantee of securing work in Orange, meaning that even if housing is more affordable there they may still find themselves at risk of becoming homeless. One of the major difficulties facing newly arrived families from Sudan, and several other African countries, is that their families are generally larger. Several CLRI(NSW) members have witnessed families of seven or more people attempting to fit into two-bedroom houses. In one such case a family in Blacktown was living in a two-bedroom house that had been marked for demolition and had inadequate plumbing for simple whitegoods. In another case a Sudanese family with seven children was crammed into a two-bedroom house in Punchbowl, until the North Sydney Mercy Sisters provided the family access to a four-bedroom house in Penrith. The flaws of a one-size-fits-all housing approach are also apparent in terms of the situation as well as the size of the property. Multi-storey apartments without lift facilities make it impossible for elderly or disabled refugees to live safely and comfortably. One woman found herself in the position of having to carry her elderly mother up the stairs to their fourth-floor apartment.

These cases demonstrate the fact that simply providing one-size-fits-all housing stock is not an adequate way to address the problem of housing for refugees, as their needs may be quite different to those of Australian-born residents. As the HREOC report on homelessness highlights, "The right to housing is more than simply a right to shelter. It is a right to have somewhere to live that is *adequate*."³ This includes a house that is of sufficient size, affordable, habitable and has access to facilities including transport. Sadly, then, many refugees beginning their lives in Australia are being denied their full right to housing through the sheer inadequacy of the dwellings provided for them. To flee your homeland only to be again denied an adequate home seems to be a case of adding insult to injury.

³ *ibid.*

In 2007 the then director of the Jesuit Refugee Service of Australia, David Holdcroft sj, gave a speech 'What place the homeless? Towards a new social imagination in Australia' discussing Australia's treatment of homeless people, particularly refugees. He pointed out that some Australians feel that if refugees are not yet citizens of Australia, the responsibility of the Government in providing for their welfare is minimal. However Holdcroft argues, as do we, that "we have a duty of care to people who legitimately come to our shores to claim asylum and this care should carry a guarantee that their human dignity will be respected".⁴ Indeed, the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has said that "the beginning of human dignity is to be able to call some place home".⁵ This is especially so for refugees, who have already battled to establish a new "home" in a new country.

In many cases, refugees rely wholly on non-government organisations to ensure that they remain off the streets. In 2007 three Sudanese brothers were abandoned by their guardian, who took most of their furniture and left them to continue paying rent on their own. The boys' case officer tried desperately to find a home for them, and if not for the efforts of their Catholic school in Granville, which sourced emergency accommodation, the brothers would have certainly faced homelessness. Since that time an arrangement has been established with Marist Youth Care to provide emergency accommodation in such cases.

While many refugees who leave detention may initially find housing through family connections, non-Government organisations, or through public housing, the lack of consistent and integrated services for refugees means that homelessness can ultimately become a real threat. This threat is increased by difficulties in finding employment and accessing services due to language barriers and cultural differences. Many refugees struggle to deal with real estate agents, particularly where an understanding of dense written documentation is required. Families who are struggling to find stable employment can then be set back by rent increases: in one case, a refugee's rent was increased from \$250 to \$280 per week. The father of the Penrith family, mentioned above, is a qualified mechanic but has been unable to find employment because his English skills are not yet adequate. Despite being provided with an inexpensive rental property by the Mercy Sisters, without having a stable income the parents of this family of nine will certainly experience

⁴ David Holdcroft, 'What place the homeless? Towards a new social imagination in Australia', online, URL: <http://jrs.org.au/content/view/35/53/>, accessed 3rd June 2008, (27th November 2007).

⁵ Kevin Rudd, 'Remarks to the "Touch Life 2008" Launch', online, URL: http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0202.cfm, accessed 3rd June 2008, (16th April 2008).

difficulties in maintaining their rental payments and providing a suitable quality of life for their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that responding to problems in housing and homelessness for refugees involves much more than providing bricks and mortar. It is necessary that a comprehensive range of services be readily available to refugees once they are granted protection, so that when appropriate accommodation is acquired it can be maintained by the family. Great sensitivity to and respect for the challenging situation faced by refugees is required by the Government and by all organisations and agencies with whom they deal.

At the CLRI(NSW) Housing Seminar, Ms Plibersek spoke of the need for housing services to be integrated and for the services to come to the client, rather than the client having to search out the various services relevant to them. We feel that this is particularly important in relation to refugees who often do not have the language skills to seek out the services that could be helpful to them. This was noted in the Green Paper, with reference to the under-utilisation of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services by people from “non-English-speaking countries”.⁶ This under-utilisation was attributed to the clients’ lack of knowledge about the services or lack of confidence in accessing them. Another reason suggested in the Green Paper is that these people “may also have access to different support networks in their own communities or have extensive family and community links that assist when people are at risk of homelessness”.⁷ While strong community and family ties are certainly positive, they cannot be relied upon for the provision of services to refugees and non-English-speaking immigrants.

In response to the conclusions of the Green Paper, we feel that all ten “Principles for change” are valid and worthwhile, and that they can all have direct application to the special situation of refugees. The first principle is important as refugees can be particularly vulnerable to poor leadership. Recent exploitation of refugees by banks lending loans of up to \$80,000 to people without work and with no English skills is an appalling display of

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, 18.

⁷ *ibid.*

irresponsibility within the business sector.⁸ A sensitive and tailored approach to dealing with refugees or immigrants with English difficulties is also necessary within the real estate profession. Some refugees have experienced repeated difficulties in dealing with real estate agents, not only due to language barriers, but due to the unwillingness, in some cases, of the agent to return calls and to oversee repairs. The “multi-disciplinary approach” suggested in principle number seven is especially relevant, to ensure that refugees are able to fully utilise the services available to them in all areas.⁹ Principle number eight is also critical to emphasise, as refugees are experiencing an extreme transition point in their lives, and are certainly vulnerable during this time of great change and upheaval. It is worth noting that children should receive special consideration in this area. As the HREOC homelessness report noted, “children and young people coming to Australia as refugees are at even greater risk of homelessness and have distinct needs that must be addressed independently of their family or carers’ needs...Many young people have had limited or disrupted schooling...and there may be significant religious and cultural barriers that prevent them from taking advantage of available services”.¹⁰ Finally, the further research suggested in principle number nine is certainly encouraged by the CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee. We would like to see further reports about homelessness in Australia place a greater emphasis on those who are, though newly arrived, just as entitled to their basic human rights and dignity as the rest of the Australian population.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this submission has served to highlight the special and urgent needs of refugees and non-English-speaking immigrants in the area of housing and homelessness. We commend the Government for its commitment to reducing homelessness in Australia and providing better services for those who are homeless. As acknowledged in the Green Paper, the causes of homelessness are very complex, and it is our hope that we have provided some insights into one of the many situations that can lead to homelessness, that faced by refugees. Refugees will benefit from all of the changes suggested in the Green Paper, but it is important to pay them further consideration in the planning and structuring of services, due to their specific cultural and language needs. We hope that the Prime

⁸ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Commonwealth Bank “exploited refugees”’, online, URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/03/31/2203069.htm>, accessed 8th June 2008, (31st March 2008).

⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, 58.

¹⁰ Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 2008.

Minister's statement that "the beginning of human dignity is to be able to call some place home"¹¹ will shape the creation of the White Paper on homelessness, but particularly with regards to those who are only beginning to call Australia "home".

¹¹ Kevin Rudd, 2008.

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