

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST
RENTAL ACCOMMODATION**

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The House of Welcome
A Project of the NSW Ecumenical Council

*Churches supporting refugees
and asylum seekers.*

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

Dear Mr West,

I write on behalf of the House of Welcome, project of the NSW Ecumenical Council, an attempt by the Christian Churches of New South Wales to give assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. I thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on the issue of "Homelessness and Low-Cost Rental Accommodation".

With three staff members and over 30 volunteers, we have contact with many refugees and asylum seekers. Over the six years or so we have been in operation, we have almost 900 on our files, most of these representing families.

In the extremely difficult housing climate, often we are called on to assist our clients with regard to rental accommodation or applications for public housing. We have direct experience of the difficulties that refugees encounter in their efforts to find somewhere to call 'home'.

We also have temporary accommodation, three houses and five units, which we make available to the more needy among our clients. While individuals or families occupy these residences, we give overall support. We provide this accommodation for which we are required to pay high rental.

Our submission is based on wide experience and we present these suggestions in the hope of contributing to your ongoing reflection on the problem of homelessness in our State.

The Federal Government's **Green Paper on Homelessness** listed among the groups at risk of homelessness those on Temporary Protection Visas. The Government has of course abolished the Temporary Protection Visa, a very welcome decision. However, those recently arrived in Australia or those released from detention centres, face the same risk and need special consideration.

The **risk of homelessness is augmented for refugees and asylum seekers** because of the vulnerability particular to their situation, such as **cultural and language barriers**. Many are also **victims of persecution** in their own country or people further traumatized by time spent in Australian Detention Centres.

Refugees experience great difficulty in **dealing with Real Estate Agents**. Difficulties with the English language and first-time experience in renting property in Australia lead to problems with understanding the process. Real Estate Agents easily lose patience and expect too much from the client. One of our clients told a staff-member that his family had made 15 applications for rental property and were not accepted. Another client, who has a wife and young baby, was actually homeless. This family were not even able to find a place in one of the refuges.

Once in rental accommodation, often they are advised with short notice of **arbitrary increases in weekly rent**. Increases of up to \$30 per week are very difficult to cope with and sometimes there is no option but to leave.

Refugees and asylum seekers also have difficulty with finding **employment**. Many are people who have nothing, no backing, no employment history. Sometimes they are people who have professions, but because of language difficulties or difficulties in getting qualifications recognised in Australia, they are unable to find work.

Money gained either through wages or Centrelink benefits is rarely enough to cover expenses. Refugees want to give their children education/training in order to give them a fresh start in Australia. They also invest in their own development in order to be able to compete in the job market, doing such things as TAFE courses. A history of trauma more often than not leads to psychological and psychosomatic disorders, some refugees being so marked by their experiences that they are unable to function normally.

NGO's and Charities attempt to bridge the gap, offering refugees and asylum seekers the help they need. But this sector has become overburdened. There are many situations that we are faced with and unfortunately are unable to offer the support the person requires. NGO's, Charities and like organisations are constantly calling on each other in attempts to refer those whom they cannot help. Between Monday and Tuesday of last week, this organization received six requests for accommodation, all in need, most of these at risk of homelessness. Unfortunately we were unable to help because all the accommodation we have at our disposal was full.

In recent months, it is our impression that there are more requests for accommodation than there were in the past. This probably reflects higher rental costs in Sydney and greater competition for rental properties and the current financial crisis.

Finally, I would like to stress the fact that refugees and asylums seekers, as well as other vulnerable groups, require a total support package. It is not enough to have a roof over their heads. The House of Welcome endeavors to provide ongoing accompaniment and

supervision as they deal with the many issues they face as they adapt to life in Australia. They require help in order to learn how to access basic services.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to share our grass-roots experience with refugees and asylum seekers. I hope that our thoughts will contribute toward making Australia a better place and a more just society.

Yours faithfully,



James Carthy
Coordinator