

## ***STRENGTH AND KINDNESS***

### ***Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)***



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*I was a stranger and you made  
me welcome ...*

***Newsletter 96 June 2020***

The Project aims to:

- \* provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- \* actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- \* promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- \* raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

Racism can be as deadly as Covid 19. Indeed, racism has made, and continues to make many people sick! We see many people with mental and physical illnesses that must be attributed to our punitive, harsh and racist refugee policies.

For authorities to say it is not safe to gather to protest and at the same time not to acknowledge it is dangerous to lock up people indefinitely is somewhat breathtaking.

A global pandemic has surely made us more aware of the limited and ephemeral strength of national borders. Viruses such as Covid 19 have no respect for borders. This one has devastated the global economy. Much of Australia's rhetoric over the past twenty years has been around national security and this has been used to create a narrative to justify our treatment of people seeking asylum in our country. The political discourse has used images of a threat to our very existence: we were facing a peril, a menace, evil, a wave, an influx; the enemy was about to invade, inundate, swamp and flood Australia ... And now we have an 'enemy' that is actually able to threaten our welfare and our security but no name calling will help repel it!

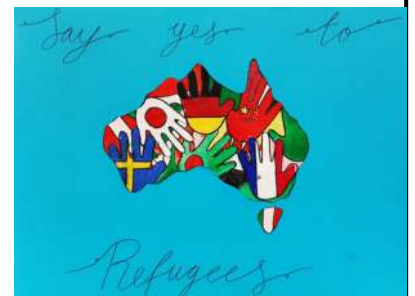
We still managed to resort to some xenophobia, where China was seen as somehow responsible for the pandemic because it was first detected there.

And we have the Black Lives Matter movement where our leaders are trying to rewrite history—slavery was never part of Australian history. It must be very distressing for our indigenous people to have the injustices of the past so dismissed.

One thing that history will certainly tell us is that prolonged and systemic racism will eventually result in a public revulsion. The reason that protests are occurring in Australia — and around the world — is that successive governments and people in privileged positions of power have failed to change the power relations that cause injustice.

We believe that many of the same forces are present in the persistent and abject failure in governance that refuses to change the abhorrent policies governing the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. There are degrees of simmering anger among many in our community that will eventually surface. History tells us that peace and prosperity follows from justice and the inclusion of all.

We have such potential for showing how good a truly free and welcoming multi cultural society can be. But this won't happen by accident.



Kildare College for refugee week

***Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible***

## **BASP and the last three months**

Since the last newsletter, the requests for help have continued to grow, given the impact of Covid on everyone, and given that people seeking asylum were one of the groups excluded from any government safety net.

Letters to MPs pointing out the dire situation this places asylum seekers in, brought forth replies that the SRSS benefit was available for this group. These replies omitted to recognise that SRSS has been systematically withdrawn from most people seeking asylum over the past 18 months. Many have sought to apply or re-apply through the pandemic and have been refused. This in turn has placed increasing demands on BASP and other organisations. Red Cross received some funds nationally for emergency relief but access to these funds has been affected due to the huge demand. Appointments for Red Cross can be up to 5 weeks ahead and assistance, while very appreciated when received, cannot provide ongoing rental and utilities.

BASP has responded where it can. It continues to house and assist over 130 in the houses it manages itself.

It has also assisted another 120 in their own rental properties but currently unable to pay rent.

It has helped these individuals and families as well as others with utilities, food and basic expenses such as phone and car registration costs. **Our total expenses on rent, utilities and emergency relief were \$100,000 in April and rose to \$130,000 in May.**

One couple with a young baby had been working for over 3 years at a local gym and had never sought help before. With the gym closing, the wife called BASP to seek our help. We were able to pay the rent and received this text: "thanks for your help, it meant a lot to me and my family, we thought we are about to be homeless but you just saved us for now."

This request and response has occurred many times over.

A family of 5, a couple and 3 daughters, live in one room of a 4 bedroom house, with another family and 2 single men. They could afford this while the husband had work but he lost his job as a baker when the Covid restrictions began. BASP has assisted with their share of the rent, utilities and has sent food for the family.

Another family of 6 had been managing with basic costs including rent until the husband had an accident with his hand in February and was unable to continue to work. Then the shutdowns further prevented a return to work. They have been in Australia since 2013 and have still not had an interview with Immigration. They borrowed from friends to cover one month's rent but have then sought assistance from ASBP as friends could not keep helping. The husband is looking for work again- making doors and window frames but having no luck to date.

An older Tamil man, with little English was homeless, resulting in him being admitted to hospital and having nowhere to go on discharge. His lawyer made contact with BASP and the man came to BASP from the hospital. Through his community contacts, we were able to secure a room in a house with others from the Tamil community, with BASP paying for the next few months while he regains his health and sees if any work is feasible. The lawyer's response was "That's such a relief. It is so sad that even during a public health emergency the government maintains such punitive policies and attitudes towards asylum seekers. You've saved the day on this one. Thanks again"

BASP receives and makes referrals to Red Cross. One case worker was hoping to get SRSS for a young woman but was aware that the process of submitting this to Immigration ( Home Affairs) would take a couple of months and Red Cross had used all the funds it could for this person. BASP agreed to pay her rent for 2 months. "I cannot express my gratitude and that of my client, enough, it was unexpected and a huge relief for this quite vulnerable mum to be. Your support will allow her to remain in her accommodation until 13 July which will give us plenty of time to follow up with SRSS and find other suitable accommodation."

## What is the current reality of the situation in Australia for people who are seeking asylum here?

### *Immigration detention*

Currently, 569 asylum seekers are in immigration detention centres in Australia, with a further 577 people in alternative accommodation, including hotels. (in particular The Mantra in Melbourne and Kangaroo Point in Brisbane).



A large number of organisations and individuals, for example The Australian Human Rights Commissioner, more than 1100 doctors, more than 1500 academics, churches, trade unions, the Refugee Council of Australia, Human Rights Law Centre and many more, have called for the movement of people from detention into the community. Before the crisis, 846 people were living in community detention. Community detention is only a partial answer but it is better than locked in detention.

439 asylum seekers and refugees are still in limbo in PNG and Nauru. At the beginning of the Covid 19 situation resettlement flights to the USA were suspended but they have been started again—even though USA is hardly to be seen as a safe place right now. Under the 2016 agreement, with the USA, 702 refugees have been transferred there. The original agreement was for 1250 individuals. President Trump would not take individuals from many Muslim majority countries in 2017; he then would not allow these rejected individuals to be considered in the subsequent years.

A report from the Catholic charity Caritas says that the advent of Covid19 has had a huge impact on the men in PNG in terms of their level of stress and anxiety. The high cost of food means that many cannot afford to eat fresh fruits and vegetables. The allowance from the Australian Government is inadequate and they are reliant on charity.

### *Asylum seekers living in the community*

Asylum seekers and refugees who do not have Permanent visas are not eligible for wage subsidies implemented as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. People on Bridging visas are eligible for the Jobkeeper or Jobseeker program. The Refugee Council of Australia estimates that close to 90,000 people on bridging visas have no safety net during this time. Moreover, some asylum seekers living in the community do not have access to Medicare which poses health risks if they become unwell.

The ACT, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria have offered packages of support to enable asylum seekers and others on temporary visas to access essential goods and services if they are experiencing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19. However, none of these are substantial enough to give people money for rent or other necessities.

### *Asylum procedures*

Some 'processing of claims has continued during the Covid 19 time of lock down—these are being done on-line. However the back log between the number of claims that are lodged and those resolved is getting bigger all the time.

### *Where do the current asylum seekers come from?*

In the past five years, the main nationalities seeking asylum by plane include those from China, Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Vietnam. There are relatively few applications from Syria, Afghanistan, Turkey, Libya, Iran, Iraq because of the difficulty of getting a visa from these countries to come to Australia. Ironically if people from these countries do get here, their chance of getting a positive response to their applications is much higher than those from the South East Asian countries who are the main applicants.

So we have effectively stopped asylum seekers coming by boat but almost totally changed the places they come from.

## All the things that need to change re the treatment of asylum seekers

What would we like to see changed? We are certainly tempted to say EVERYTHING. The only caveat on that is that each time we have said, 'Nothing can get worse', it has!



Actually the whole system is so shambolic that our first response is Stop and start again! That is not entirely fanciful—if the Government declared An Act of Grace and allowed all those who have sought asylum in Australia a Permanent Visa (which would only be relinquished by criminal behavior) we would stand a huge amount to gain—as well as moving away from a reputation of being cruel and punitive to those asking our protection.

To be more specific about the things wrong in the system of managing the application for refugee status in Australia: (with comments from people who are seeking asylum)

***I arrived in Australia in 2013 and applied for protection. I haven't yet had an interview***

Currently there is no timeline for any aspect of the experience of being an asylum seeker

***I have been in detention for 9 years. I haven't done anything wrong. I can't get out unless the Minister makes a ruling on my case.***

Immigration detention is totally indefinite. An Act of Parliament was passed in England in 1679 which said no one could be held indefinitely in jail. It has become known as the Habeas Corpus provision and it should mean arbitrary detention is not part of Australian justice (only to be overturned temporarily if there is evidence of activities such as terrorism)

***I was put back into immigration detention when I was charged with a minor charge. This was overturned by the Court. However I have now been kept in detention for two years because my visa ran out while I was waiting for the criminal case and then I was told I couldn't be released back to live with my family because I didn't have visa.***

The application for protection is multi-layered and no step has a time limit (except for the asylum seekers themselves who have to lodge documents within a specific time frame)

***I came to Australia in 2012. I was sixteen. I came from Afghanistan. All the people who came with me have Protection Visas. I have been rejected all the time and now I haven't had a visa or work rights or Medicare or income for four years. I was given a hopeless lawyer by Immigration. He didn't put anything about my actual case in the application.***

There is no time limit on how long a person does not have any visa to legitimize their living in Australia, no timeline for how long a person can be left without any entitlements. The law is used to make someone illegal (that is not renewing their Bridging Visa) and then their Visa can't be renewed because they are illegal.

***My family has been in Community detention for over three years. We had been imprisoned on Nauru. I asked that we be allowed to live in the community which would have meant I could work but my request was refused.***

There is no timeline on community detention. Some people in this situation have just been told they are not in community detention anymore – go and get a place to live and get a job; others are simply left in Community detention indefinitely.

***I can't find anyone to talk to about my situation.***

Lines of communication for asylum seekers themselves (and for their advocates) effectively exist only on paper. When someone in the Department of Home Affairs is actually willing to actually talk to a Migration Agent, an advocate or an asylum seeker it seems like a miracle.

*I never thought I would have to suffer again what happened to me in the country I came from but my situation here is awful and I wonder if I will ever see my mother and my family again.*

The possibility for family reunion is well-nigh impossible for many.

*Someone showed me a letter from a Minister of Parliament saying there was a way to get help during the Covid 19 time. The only reason we have a roof over our heads and some food is because BASP helped us.*

Most letters from MPs explaining the help available are gobbledygook.

**It is easy to feel quite hopeless. We can resist this by taking action.**

**Write or ring to the contacts on the next page.** We can become such a ‘nuisance factor’ that someone might begin to take notice and stop fobbing us off. As well, sign a petition (or several), attend a rally when it is possible, go to websites and be better informed.



**7 Years Too Long – Free the Refugees Sunday July 19.** The details are not clear yet because of Covid 19 but there will be activity—detention in PNG and Nauru for 7 years is definitely too long.

### **Petitions to sign**

**Game Over Petition** – Amnesty International Australia. 2020

*Take action to get all those trapped by Australia on Nauru and Papua New Guinea to safety. There are options.*

**DialitDownDutton. Don’t take away asylum seekers’ phones!** (change.org)

**Canadian community refugee sponsorship model for Australia** (Amnesty Australia and Community Refugee Sponsorship)

**Extend COVID-19 relief packages to temporary visa holders**

**Justice for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum**

**Bring Priya and her beautiful family back home to Biloela, Queensland**

Refugee Action Collective Qld—Change.org petition

**Petition drawing attention to the exorbitant cost of detaining refugees offshore.** Grandmothers for Refugees NSW. *Please print copies of the petition by clicking on the link and ask your friends and family to sign.*

**Petition:** Grandmothers for Refugees, NSW. March 2020

*... .. We therefore ask the House to actively assist as a matter of urgency the process of the permanent resettlement of refugees still on Nauru and in Port Moresby.*

**End indefinite limbo for refugees in Indonesia!**

**Lift Australia’s ban on resettlement! 2019**

*The Indonesian government is now in the process of closing the detention centres, so asylum seekers are left to try to survive without support.*

To sign this petition go to <https://bit.ly/2GN2cHc>

**Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA)**

Petition regarding SRSS cuts

**2020 Year of Welcome** – Refugee Council of Australia. 2020

*The Refugee Council of Australia has declared 2020, the #YearOfWelcome.*

*You can add your name to the cause and participate in one action each month to help foster a more welcoming and inclusive Australia towards refugees and people seeking asylum. The actions will be simple, locally-focused*

**Letters to Members of the House of Representatives**  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Letters to Senators**  
PO Box 6100  
Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Scott Morrison, Prime Minister** <https://www.pm.gov.au/contact-your-pm> phone: (02) 6277 7700.

**Peter Dutton, Minister for Home Affairs** [Peter.Dutton.MP@aph.gov.au](mailto:Peter.Dutton.MP@aph.gov.au) phone: (02) 6277 7860.

**Alan Tudge, Acting Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs**  
[Contact Form](#) Electoral Office: (03) 9887 3890 Canberra Office: (02) 6277 7790

**Anthony Albanese, Leader of the Opposition** [A.Albanese.MP@aph.gov.au](mailto:A.Albanese.MP@aph.gov.au) Phone: (02) 6277 4022

**Kristina Keneally, Shadow Minister for Home Affairs Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship**  
[senator.keneally@aph.gov.au](mailto:senator.keneally@aph.gov.au) phone (02) 6277 3512

**Also send a copy of your email to your local member of parliament:**

[Contact details for State Premiers and Chief Ministers](#) (April 2020)

[Contact details for State Attorneys-General](#) (April 2020)

Download a list of [Federal MPs and Senators Dec 2019](#)

Download a list of [Senators – Email, phone and addresses – correct as at 23 Sept 2019](#)

**Members of the House of Representatives as at 18 Sept 2019** [Email addresses – ACT MPs](#)[Email addresses – NSW MPs](#)[Email addresses – NT MPs](#)[Email addresses – Qld MPs](#)[Email addresses – SA MPs](#)[Email addresses – Tas MPs](#)[Email addresses – Vic MPs](#)[Email addresses – WA MPs](#)

**Senators as at 18 Sept 2019** [Email addresses – ACT Senators](#)[Email addresses – NSW Senators](#)[Email addresses – NT Senators](#)[Email addresses – Qld Senators](#)[Email addresses – SA Senators](#)[Email addresses – Tasmanian Senators](#)[Email addresses – Victorian Senators](#)[Email addresses – WA Senators](#)

### Letters to Editors

(Below are the major capital cities newspapers, but also write to your local newspaper—if they still exist)

**The Australian:** [letters@theaustralian.com.au](mailto:letters@theaustralian.com.au)

Sydney: **MH:** [letters@smh.com.au](mailto:letters@smh.com.au)

Melbourne: **The Age:** [letters@theage.com.au](mailto:letters@theage.com.au)

Brisbane: **The Courier Mail:** <https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/letter-to-the-editor>

Adelaide: **The Advertiser:** <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/letter-to-the-editor>

Hobart: **The Mercury:** <https://www.themercury.com.au/news/opinion/letter-to-the-editor>

Northern Territory: **NT News:** <https://www.ntnews.com.au/news/opinion/letter-to-the-editor>

ACT: **The Canberra Times:** [letters.editor@canberratimes.com.au](mailto:letters.editor@canberratimes.com.au)



***The following submission was made by Pamela Curr and Brigid Arthur to Senate Committee re the proposed legislation: Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2020. This Bill is mainly about the prohibition of mobile phones in detention centres.***

## BACKGROUND

We write from the perspective of advocates who for 20 years have visited people in detention centres all over Australia and Christmas Island to offer comfort and support. As members of the Immigration Department's Community Consultative Group at the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) and now closed Maribyrnong Detention Centre in Melbourne, we met quarterly with SERCO, IHMS and ABF to discuss policies and issues in the camps.

We were allowed as Designated Persons to take people out of detention on excursions to parks, cafes, visits with friends and family, picnics and zoos. No one escaped or was harmed in the 5 years of this program. This program was closed when Border Force took over Detention Centres.



## MANDATORY INDEFINITE DETENTION

Any examination of the conditions of immigration detention centres cannot ignore the human consequences of this policy of Mandatory Indefinite detention. Hundreds of people are told that they will never be released to freedom. Some are stateless and others are designated refugees unable to be returned. The department has tried and failed to secure removal as countries have refused entry to people they do not recognise as citizens. There are now people languishing in detention for up eleven years with no country to take them and the Minister refusing to release them into the community. There is no plan for these people in this indefinite detention situation. We have witnessed the mental and physical deterioration of people in long term detention as their spirits break and hope disappears.

Their connections to family and friends through their mobile phones are the last threads which hold them together. It is for this reason that we write this submission to present the arguments for the retention of the right to have a mobile phone to allow freedom of communication when all other freedoms are denied.

## CONCERNS

***M – If they take away my mobile, I will slowly die. I need it to talk to my friends and family. I use it for 7 hours every day. Without it I have nothing.***

In this submission we address a particular concern with this Bill namely that it is aimed at denying mobile phones to people in detention. The consequences for these people are that they will suffer harm by loneliness, social isolation, and risk of injustice by not having legal advice when it is most needed.

After 20 years of visiting and being involved in discussions around detention we have seen administrative Immigration detention become a highly securitised and prison-like place. The people held in these centres are subject to constant surveillance, counted and checked three times daily. Their rooms are entered at 11pm and 5am for checks. They no longer leave the centre except for urgent hospital care and even then, they are routinely restrained with metal handcuffs and escorted by multiple Serco guards. No one has been allowed to attend church, mosque or temple since 2014. Since March 24, no visitors including family and children have been allowed into the detention centres because of Covid19.

Every aspect of life is regulated including food and clothing. Birthday cakes and flowers are prohibited things. Personal iPad and computers are prohibited. Musical instruments, craft equipment, paints brushes, knitting and sewing things are prohibited. Every aspect of life is subject to scrutiny and search without notice.

## REASONS TO RETAIN MOBILE PHONES

To understand the reason why Mobile phones are so meaningful to those in detention it is helpful to have a glimpse of life behind the locked gates and fences. Detention life is boring with few meaningful activities. There is no personal space. People share bunk rooms and dormitories. The bunk rooms at most centres are 2.5 metres by 2.8 metres. These rooms are broken down into compounds in MITA of groups of up to 60 people. Here they are locked down and separated in a prison-like environment with guards and cameras watching them constantly. When they are required to go to another area they are physically escorted through multiple locked gates by guards.

There is no space for privacy or quiet. There is a television in the kitchen activities area, but this is so noisy that people use the centre's computers to watch films which makes landline phone access difficult. Mobile phones keep people sane in that they allow contact with families and friends outside. They enable parents separated from children to see their faces and for their children to see their parents.

***M- I was on Christmas Island with my friend when his wife had their baby. Now he is 7 years old. My friend talks to his son all the time. He watches him grow on the mobile picture. He says I want my son to know he has a father who loves him.***

There are men and women in immigration detention who have not seen their children for years. They left Afghanistan and other places like Burma, Sri Lanka, Syria, Palestine when their children were babies and now years later, they are teenagers. These parents grieve the loss of their children, at least with mobile phone they can see their faces as they talk to them. In many countries from which the refugees have come, mobile phones are the only method of communication. Contact with families is essential for their mental health and to keep hope alive.

***My baby's father is not allowed to visit for more than 2 months. We can only talk and play on the phone with him. She can see her daddy on the phone.***

Mobiles enable people in detention to seek legal advice and to meet legal timelines and to send documents and information. Without mobiles, people become virtually uncontactable. Inward calls must pass through the reception desk guards who then look to find the detainee among hundreds in different compounds, calling them to a phone and waiting for a connection. This is time consuming and often unsuccessful. Mobile phones relieve staff of this tiresome process. Mobile phones are used for internet access also as the computers in the camps are notoriously slow and always occupied.

***S- All the guys say that they cannot survive without their phone- there is nothing to do here.***

## OVERVIEW of LIFE IN DETENTION CENTRES

We include this overview of a day in an immigration detention centre to illustrate why a mobile phone is an important lifeline to people who exist in indefinite detention. People use the phones not only as an instrument of communication but also to pass the time, playing games and watching films in lieu of the meaningless activities on offer.

The day starts at 9 am with "activities" with which detainees can earn 2 points which can then be used to buy phone cards, cigarettes, shampoo or snacks. Attendance is required for 45- 60 minutes and attendees must queue up to sign register.

- Activities may vary slightly at different camps throughout Australia.
- Coffee club – must stay 45 minutes- don't have to drink coffee
- English class usually a paper to fill in or we see a film
- Sometimes Art - colouring in only-pencils allowed. Paints are prohibited. Not allowed to have art things outside the room.
- Gym for one hour but because there are not enough machines; this can become an area of conflict so many avoid the gym.
- Sometimes Bingo or playing a game
- Sometimes Women can paint their nails- nail polish not allowed outside room.

These 'activities' are broken up by queueing for medication rounds and meals. The people in detention tell us that they spend most of their time in their room on the bed, especially the long term indefinitely detained.



Image of a MITA room from The Guardian

## LANDLINE PHONES NOT SATISFACTORY

Detention centres do have landline phones but there are reasons why these are no substitute for mobile phones. In Bass 1 and Bass 2 compounds at the MITA, there are 7 phones each for 60 people. They are placed in a row in the computer room where people watch films. This space is noisy and offers no privacy for distressed people to talk to their families and supporters.

## WHO WILL BE AFFECTED BY REMOVAL OF MOBILE PHONES

40% of the current detention population have been detained for more than one year, many for up to ten years and more. They also show that over 40% are people seeking asylum either by boat or air and waiting for their cases to be opened or heard. Mobile phones have become a lifeline to friends and family as well to contact legal support. They are their most treasured possession in detention.

Refugees in long term detention are being held indefinitely. There are very few releases even for those with positive decisions from the Court and Tribunal. The refugees from offshore camps are told that they will never be released in Australia. To remove mobile phones from these vulnerable people will cause untold misery. We fear the consequences if people are denied this valuable link with their family, friends and supporters. It is what holds them together in the face of an indefinite loss of freedom. We ask that you do not pass this legislation on the grounds that it will cause serious harm and because there are already laws in place to deal with any improper use of phones and extreme surveillance is in place to detect this.

Pamela Curr

Brigid Arthur



## Some Members of Parliament from all sides of politics speak up for asylum seekers

Recently, **Russel Broadbent** spoke up in the Parliament for People in long term detention. Mr BROADBENT (Liberal Member for Monash) (13:47): Ten years ago next week is the anniversary of the toppling of the democratically elected Kevin Rudd by Julia Gillard. Australia woke up to a new government. So long ago—ten years. Since then, we've had so many prime ministers and administrators, and floods, drought, fire, pestilence and recession. And now, national trauma: physical, social and economic. Then I thought, there could not be asylum seekers still in detention since Rudd-Gillard government? Surely not in this country, that some would call the great 'South Land of the Holy Spirit'? I will ask Sister Jane Keogh, she will know if there are. Today, many shout 'Black Lives Matter', and injustice is called out through the nations. I am Russell Broadbent, member for Monash, Australia. I may stand here alone, but I say all lives matter. Asylum seekers' lives matter, and their children's lives matter. I say injustice matters, whether it's in the open, hidden or in your face. Even more so when it's in your own backyard. Some anniversary "

**Ged Kearney** (Labor Member for Cooper)

I actually went down and met with the asylum seekers in The Mantra. We met with their support group who are wonderful group of people, some of whom have known the asylum seekers for many, many years and they were on Manus. We've met with doctors and dentists and local health community and local community health workers to see if we can't get them some community health support. We've lobbied quite heavily at a Federal government level to have them released from the Mantra and into community where we can look after them and keep them healthy and give them some semblance of a decent life.

Andrew Giles (Member for Scullin and Shadow Minister for Immigration) said in an address to the Fabians in Adelaide in June last year: We can [situate] the asylum debate in its proper context. That is, as part of our wider commitment to immigration, and to multiculturalism. That I've been appointed as the shadow minister for Multicultural Affairs I think demonstrates how we can better link the mix of cultures that is such a strength of modern Australia to a sense of citizenship that is inclusive.

Australians are rightly proud of our immigration story, and should be concerned at how this government has been undermining its foundations. It's our job to call out the dog-whistling rhetoric, and to expose what lies beneath it.

*Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible*



Andrew Wilkie MP  
INDEPENDENT MEMBER FOR CLARK

29 MAY 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

The Australian Government's treatment of asylum seekers, in both onshore and offshore detention, continues to be cruel and inhumane. It is also a waste of taxpayers' money.

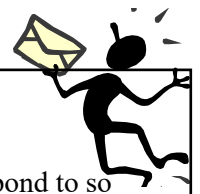
Indeed at the time we are facing the largest budget deficit in Australian history, the Government is spending tens of millions of dollars on the unnecessary and illegal detention of asylum seekers. This does not even include the estimated \$9 billion outaid between 2016 and 2020 for Australia's offshore detention policies. I have already raised with the Minister for Home Affairs the madness of detaining the Tamil family on Christmas Island, for example, which has cost taxpayers a reported \$27 million.

The Minister for Home Affairs has rejected a proposal by a coalition of community sector organisations to house and support up to 1,400 onshore detainees in Australia on Bridging E Visas. The community sector offered to deliver housing, medical and financial support to these people for approximately \$60,000 per person per year, which would be significantly less than the cost of their current detention which, I understand, is approximately \$350,000 per person per year. The release of these detainees, as well as the Tamil family on Christmas Island, would in fact save the Government over \$430 million per year.

The human and financial cost of Australia's asylum seeker policy is shocking and nonsensical. I ask you to urgently review this spending and seriously consider the enclosed proposal from the community sector.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Wilkie MP  
Independent Member of Clark



## An amazing story of need and generosity

While the requests have demonstrated the dire need of many, BASP has been pleased to be able to respond to so many, thanks to the ongoing donations which we have received.

There have also been other **heart warming moments** through these times.

A couple contacted BASP offering their 6 bedroom house on the outskirts of Melbourne for a family for very low rent. At the very same time, a man who has been here for 10 years, is now a citizen and therefore able to apply for family reunion, contacted BASP. He had arranged for his wife and 5 children to get one of the last planes out of the Middle East, before the Covid shutdowns could delay the reunion even further. They were currently in quarantine but he needed housing when they were to be released in 10 days. We love a challenge! John Meyer and 2 helpers swung into action and were able to deliver donated white goods, dining and lounge furniture and beds ; the owners gathered kitchen and bedding requirements and had it looking wonderful for the family's arrival. They also had warm socks and scarves, pencils, games and books ready for their welcome. A great team effort.



The family has been warmly welcomed by the owners, neighbour and others in the community.

We recently received a call from a father in great distress. He could no longer eat solids as his teeth needed attention and he had been waiting for free dental care for over a year. He also needed glasses but could not afford the glasses prescribed by a private optometrist. Fortunately BASP was able to arrange for him to see a dentist who has offered his services free of charge to asylum seekers. This was done within days. BASP is SO fortunate to have supporters in so many quarters.



We also arranged an appointment at the College of Optometry where he was seen within a week and prescribed glasses at a much lower rate which BASP could cover.

### No Notice Given.

Some months ago, BASP was asked to provide a letter to say it would help a woman with housing if Home Affairs decided to release her from MITA, the detention centre in Broadmeadows. We agreed to do so and time passed. About a month ago, we received a call from the woman's lawyer to say she had just been released, with no warning, and would arrive in the next hour! What a scramble ensued. A rejig of rooms, a hasty tidy-up and we were ready to welcome her.

This always happens on a Friday afternoon!!

### The same small human things matter in life – no matter our circumstances.

Maria is a supporter of BASP (Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project [include hyperlink to website](#)). She was prompted to buy two Mother's Day cards and bring them to BASP to give



to someone who would not have the money to buy a card for their mother.

We gave one to two small girls who live with their mother, Fatima, a single parent in one of our women's houses. The other one went to another small boy and his sister to give to Ibtisam, their mother. Both lots of children duly wrote wishes for their mothers and brought joy and tears to both Fatima and Ibtisam. If this was not enough, another lady - also an asylum seeker - who lives with Fatima prepared a wonderful cake with the girls for their mother, making the celebration of Mother's Day 2020 even more special for these women.

### Parlez vous francais?

BASP supports a French speaking couple from DR Congo and their baby with housing and emergency relief. However, the Covid restrictions made them even more isolated than before. One of the BASP English tutors made contact and has been providing on-line teaching each week through this period. We were able to put them in touch with another person from their homeland, an opportunity which both parties loved.



When Libby went to visit a family in St Albans, this little four year old proudly produced a necklace he had made for her. He was also very pleased to be able to greet Libby by name!

The FCJ house in St Albans continues to provide a safe haven for people. A family from Angola was the first to move in and they have been supported each week by Ursula, a French speaking BASP volunteer, who has helped them with a range of settling-in activities. This has included finding health



services, enrolling their son at the primary school and the language schools, furthering their learning of English and starting the search for work. This family was rejected for SRSS, despite arriving just prior to the shutdown and having little English. Another 2 women have since moved in to the other half of the house, and the interaction is going well. Several of the FCJ sisters visited them all at the house recently, bring afternoon tea to welcome them.

Also, many of the BASP houses have lawns and it is part of our responsibility to keep the outdoors well maintained. So yet again, we put out a call for lawn mowers on the website. We were successful with a couple and needed one more. Marian, based at home and limited in her usual volunteer role of seeking employment for people seeking asylum, made contact with Bunnings. As in previous years, they agreed to donate one to us, for which we are most grateful.

### A well deserved celebration—and more food

Noelle, who has organised the BASP pantry for many years, coming in 1-2 days a week to do so- had a big birthday recently. It was lovely to surprise her with a celebration at the centre to mark the day and thank her for all she does.



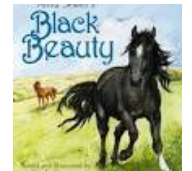
As well as the usual food support at BASP, additional food has been made available through Oz Harvest and other food outlets. This has been co-ordinated by Food Share (an initiative of the Port Phillip Council) at a Port Melbourne venue, enabling BASP, through volunteer Viv, to collect these well stocked food boxes to be collected weekly and delivered to those in need. This has been greatly appreciated by all who have been the beneficiaries.



### Isa and a fruit cake

Isa is a young man from Uganda. He arrived in Australia a couple of years ago—knowing none. He has since had a job for almost all that time. The Catholic Bishop of the area, Mark Edwards, offered him accommodation. This has lasted until very recently when Mark is moving to NSW to take up a new appointment. Isa has leaned to cook and one day told us he was making a fruit cake. He and Mark had gone down to the supermarket to buy a cake tin.

An eleven year old, Sofie, lives with her mother and young sister in one of the BASP houses. Margaret Fyfe who works with BASP has been using her teaching background to take books out to Sofie (and other children). She was delighted that this young student has become really interested in *Black Beauty* and similar stories. There is a lending library going on—Margaret takes out new books and Sofie returns those she has read.



### LCM Endowment Fund.

Each year for the last few years, the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary have supported an asylum seeker or refugee cover costs in their tertiary endeavours. This year a young woman, originally from Sudan, and a former pupil at Killester College was the recipient. Her part time job dissolved with the Coronavirus restrictions, which impacted her ability to pay the fees and rent. After hearing of her acceptance. She wrote to LCM and to us: 'I would like to express my gratitude towards the financial support you've helped me with. This has helped ease the financial pressure I was experiencing with paying my school fees and affording rent. This support has definitely has been life changing for me.'

One day a lady brought in a beautiful pink doona plus some other bedding. She wanted us to know that the doona was one she had had since she was a child. It was soft and cuddly—and well preserved!

**It is difficult for many of those who normally bring food to stock our pantry. However a number of places and individuals are still bringing in food and others have donated vouchers.**



The following are still very much appreciated:

Sugar , flour , cooking oil, Cans of fruit and tomatoes.

Blocks or individual wrapped cheese.

Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, honey, noodles, tuna, basmati rice, dates, jam

Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches (even when home!), Salt and pepper, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste and toothbrushes. Soap, deodorants

Toilet paper



**We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products.**

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust  
Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

**Please put your name on the entry and** please email us at [queries@basp.org.au](mailto:queries@basp.org.au) after making a donation so we can send you a tax deductible receipt.



We are very grateful for all the help we get from our supporters. The messages of encouragement that many of you send are wonderful.



In this time of greatly increased requests for help we have had increased donations and this has enabled us to help most people looking for help. We really want to continue doing this. There are not many options for getting rent and utilities paid.

Several schools and parishes have sent donations of money as well as food and household goods. These all have been wonderful. We would like to thank you all individually but time does get away from us.

It would be a great experience if we could share with you all the difference that your support has made to many. A young man said to us recently, "I would still be living on the street without your help." Instead he has a job, is both respected and valued by the employer and has moved out of BASP accommodation into a shared house.

We often marvel at the resilience and courage of people who come from different troubled areas in the world and somehow fashion a new life here. We dream of an Australia that will make this road to safety easier. In the meantime, thanks again for being in this endeavour with us.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)