



Australian Council of Social Service

Sunday 11 September, 2011

Dear Member of Parliament

I am writing to you on an urgent basis to draw your attention to the [Community Sector Statement](#) about Asylum Seekers and Refugees. The Statement was published in last Thursday's [Australian Newspaper](#) (8 September 2011) calling for an end to off-shore processing and mandatory detention of people seeking asylum.

The Statement has been endorsed over the last week, in the wake of the High Court decision, by over 250 organisations including leading charities such as Mission Australia, Salvation Army, UnitingCare, Anglicare, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, and Barnados, as well as a diverse range of grass roots community groups from the cities, and regional and rural Australia.

It also includes a number of unions such as ASU, AMWU, CPSU, AEU, church, refugee and migrant organisations, and concerned groups like Amnesty International, GetUp, the Australian Greens, and many others. We estimate that as a collective these signatories constitute many hundreds and thousands of Australians demanding a more humane approach to this issue. In my experience the endorsement of the Community Sector Statement by such diverse and large groups so rapidly confirms that the views are widely held and strongly felt.

Onshore processing and community-based arrangements for people seeking asylum are not only far better, but also cheaper and keep expenditure in Australia. We estimate that, for example, the average cost of community detention is about \$40,000 per year compared to about \$177,000 for detention on Christmas Island and around \$500,000 as the average annual cost per asylum seeker for the former Pacific Solution. Community-based arrangements also prevent people from acquiring significant mental health problems which then require long-term treatment (at enormous expense) to remedy once a Protection Visa is granted.

As a vast collective the signatories to the community sector statement urge all political parties and Members of Parliament to stop using policies regarding asylum seekers to foster misunderstanding, social division and distrust. Instead we should seize this moment to get on with the job of fulfilling Australia's commitment under the Refugee Convention to treat people humanely, process applications for asylum onshore, and promote the better treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in our region.

As a nation, we must adopt just and humane policies about the treatment of people seeking asylum and in so doing raise the level of debate and treatment of some of the most vulnerable people in the world. Only then will Australia be able to hold its head high in the international community as a nation with a commitment to human rights and a deep appreciation of the plight of people seeking a safe haven from persecution.

We urge the Australian Government to do the right thing in the coming days on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

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