

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON
AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DETENTION NETWORK

FROM Mirella Green, MA, BAHons, DipSocSci

CONTACT DETAILS Tel.

I make this submission as a retired Psychologist, formerly registered in NSW, with additional postgraduate qualifications in Sociology, in which I made special study of the sociology of closed institutions (such as detention centres).

In my professional work I visited clients detained in Long Bay Jail, Sydney, and also provided psychological services to prison officers and nursing staff of the Jail.

I have recently become a volunteer with St Vincent de Paul visiting detainees at the Northern Immigration Detention Centre (NIDC) at Berrimah, Darwin.

CONCERNS

1. The policy of mandatory detention for asylum-seekers

Australia has a long and sad history of incarcerating vulnerable people in closed institutions (Stolen Generation, treatment of British and Irish child migrants cf. the documentary "The Leaving of Liverpool", orphanages and church institutions). Research shows such institutions frequently have a most negative effect not only those incarcerated but also on the staff.

Recent comments by detention staff and local residents on Christmas Island bear this out. I agree, from personal experience, with the eminent psychiatrist

who recently said words to the effect that asylum-seeker detention centres are factories for producing mental illness. As over 90% of asylum-seekers are found to be genuine refugees and are eventually released into the community, how does this advantage either them or the community?

2. The practice of out-sourcing management of the detention centres to a private company of non-Australian origins - Serco

The psychological stress for anyone kept in detention for an unknown period, following an inevitably traumatic escape from their own country and journey to Australia, is so great that to maintain normal balance they require the care of specially-trained staff. Otherwise the distressing suicides, episodes of self-harm, and desperate roof-top dramas, which we're now seeing, are only to be expected.

My impressions of Serco staff from 2 visits and other interactions is that few, if any, have adequate appropriate training. At NIDC I witnessed a staff member in a Reception role acting most unprofessionally. This included verbal abuse of myself as I attempted to sign out after a successful visit to a detainee. She apparently followed up by putting in a false report to Serco Security, so that a ban was placed on me entering any detention centre. It has taken 5 months of persistent negotiation by the SVDP volunteer coordinator, the coordinator of dassan (Darwin Asylum-seeker Advocacy Network), and a senior staff member of the Dept. of Immigration (DIAC) for Serco to admit that a mistake had been made and there was no cause for complaint against me. Meanwhile I have been debarred from offering the voluntary service of stress management/relaxation small group classes for detainees. And this in a situation where we're told there's a lack of mental health services for asylum-seekers!

I believe custodial staff need to be carefully selected, well-trained and closely monitored, otherwise abuses will occur – especially when sited in remote areas. In Serco there appear to be many people promoted to positions well above their level of competence or training.

I'm also concerned at the vast cost of contracting Serco to provide custodial services, the cost of acquiring land/premises for new detention centres, and all the overheads of running such centres. Apart from humanitarian concerns, it would be so much cheaper to release asylum-seekers into the community where they could earn a living and pay for their own keep.

In Darwin the detention centres appear to have become a local industry, with a local businessman selling land and leasing property to the NT government for new centres.

3. The wastage of human potential by incarcerating healthy young asylum-seekers of working age

In the local NT News of August 11 the NT Govt placed an ad on a "Skilled Migration Briefing Session" to be held in Darwin saying NT employers were facing skills shortages which were about to become critical. The NT Govt offers information about bringing in overseas workers on special visas. Meanwhile healthy young intelligent male asylum-seekers are languishing for months and years in detention in Darwin, longing to take their place in the community – and Australian tax-payers foot the bill!

4. Misinformation

I'm constantly astonished at the misinformation put out in the media and by politicians of both major parties, and repeated in countless private conversations, eg., reference to asylum-seekers as "illegals" and "queue-jumpers".

I would like to see the whole question of Australia's responsibility to asylum-seekers and refugees placed in proper international context, and taken out of the party-political arena as a vote-catching issue. I believe the present Australian strategies which involve the trafficking of human beings to be as reprehensible as the activities of the people-smugglers.

