

Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

SUBMISSION INTO THE REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DETENTION NETWORK

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network. The Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Incorporated (CMCF) is pleased that there is bipartisan support for this review. Our treatment of vulnerable people, including asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants is a fundamental reflection of our nation's commitment to democracy and humanity. In recent years, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers has not reflected our nation's values, such as those of fairness and equality. We gladly welcome the opportunity to propose changes to improve Australia's asylum seeker policies and programs.

The Villawood riots, the incarceration of asylum seekers in prisons, the Christmas Island tragedy, overcrowding in our current immigration detention centers, the stalled and potentially illegal Malaysian solution, and the 1,000 children currently in detention centers are all evidence of a failed system. CMCF has a strong interest in resurrecting this system and supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers. We are also interested in ensuring the wellbeing of Commonwealth employees, community organisations that work with refugees, multicultural organisations and the broader community. The current system does not support the wellbeing of asylum seekers nor the broader Australian community.

CMCF recognises the importance of developing and implementing a new and comprehensive refugee, asylum seeker and humanitarian entrant policy. This policy should be based on meeting our international humanitarian obligations, ongoing collaboration with the community, adoption of a more strategic risk-based approach to application processing and a reassessment of the current costly commitment to mandatory detention. We commend the Committee for seeking to work with the community to develop a solution.

We believe that this review provides an opportunity to address the substantial problems with Australia's current asylum seekers processes, in particular, the:

- use of mandatory detention as a measure of first rather than last response;
- detention of women and children;
- significant costs of the current arrangements;
- indefinite and often prolonged nature of detention;
- lack of recourse whereby detainees can challenge the grounds for their detention;

- issues relating to the absence of transparency, equity and justice in the refugee status determination process;
- significant delays in processing asylum seeker applications; and
- lack of adherence to published Commonwealth principles and values that support the prompt and transparent processing of refugees, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants.

CMCF notes that the current Immigration Detention Network is comprised of seven detention centres, three residential housing locations and fifteen alternative accommodation options. That said, we understand that a number of asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants are in State prisons. While there are a multitude of issues to be addressed, in summary, CMCF recommends that reforms to Australia's current immigration and detention network should:

- be part of a broader strategy to promote multiculturalism and the value of cultural diversity;
- implement a risk-based approach to provide practical, flexible, positive and cost-effective options to process asylum seekers;
- support the continuation of residential and detention center options that are primarily located in rural areas;
- focus on options that do not detain or process asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants in nations that are not signatories to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees;
- use detention centers as an option of last resort only when community placements are not appropriate for a small number of high-risk asylum seekers;
- end the indefinite nature of detention, by setting maximum time limits that apply to all detainees;
- stop detaining women and children and house youths in the community, with a view to promoting participation in education, employment and the community;
- support the unification of families, by removing family units from detention as soon as possible;
- upgrade current detention and residential housing options, with a view to more cost-effective community-based solutions;
- support better transparency and public awareness of asylum seeker issues, through community collaboration, use of social media, and involvement of the broader media in detention centres and community housing;
- consider community and/or workforce obligations for asylum seekers as a means of integration and a mechanism to recoup the costs of providing accommodation;
- provide better training, guidance and support for Commonwealth employees, community organisations and the broader community; and
- improve public reporting and continuous evaluation of processing, detention and community accommodation activities.

CMCF commends FECCA's national policy framework to manage cultural diversity issues in Australia, the *Different But Equal* document, which was released in November 2010. The principles, pillars and policies outlined in the *Different But Equal* framework, would not only assist refugees but also provide unity for all Australians.

In conclusion, CMCF's role is to represent the needs and aspirations of Canberra's multicultural community, while celebrating its achievements and fostering a spirit of cooperation and harmony. In this role, the CMCF has a key responsibility to support ethnic communities and people who have experienced the refugee and migration processes. Given this role, CMCF is keenly interested in reforms to improve Australia's Immigration Detention Network. We would be more than happy to appear before the Committee to elaborate on any of the reform issues that we have briefly identified.

For further information, please contact Sam Wong on _____ or _____

Sam Wong AM
Chair
Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Inc
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