

12 December 2000

Senator Andrew Murray  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
Suite S1 59  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Murray

I attach the submission from C-BERS Services to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into Child Migration. Thank you for providing us with this opportunity.

The submission is in three parts. The first part provides some details about C-BERS Services and our views on some of the important issues facing former child migrants. The second part of the submission comes from the professional staff themselves and identifies what they consider to be the core concerns for these men and their families now and particularly for the future. A number of clients of C-BERS have made independent submissions, which they have prepared and forwarded separately. The third part is a copy of C-BERS Services' brochure, which lists the services it provides.

Please do contact me if you would like any clarification. I do hope that we are able to have some further discussion about the matters contained herein.

I take this opportunity to wish you well in this important Inquiry. We all look forward to hearing and reading of the results of all of your work.

Yours sincerely

Maria Harries  
(Chairperson)

## Senate Submission

### Introduction

C-BERS Services (Christian Brothers Ex-Residents & Students Services) was established during the first quarter of 1995 in a small neighbourhood house in Subiaco, WA. It replaced the previous interim Helpline and Advisory Panel which had been established in October and November 1993 to investigate the needs of the former child migrants who had been residents of Christian Brothers child care facilities. Following its inquiry, the Advisory Panel recommended that:

“the Christian Brothers implement their proposal to establish an independently managed fund to service the needs of ex-residents”.

C-BERS now operates on a full-time basis to cater for the needs of former child migrants and former students of Christian Brothers' schools and residential facilities. The operation of C-BERS is based on the following principles:

1. Mutual respect between C-BERS staff and management committee, ex-residents, former teachers and other concerned agencies and persons.
2. The provision of services on a confidential basis.
3. The provision of services shaped by client needs.
4. The development of services in consultation with interested persons and organisations.
5. Professional accountability to ex-residents.
6. Financial accountability to the Congregation of the Christian Brothers.
7. The employment of qualified, competent and committed staff.
8. The delivery of best practice professional services.
9. The development and implementation of policies and procedures which are made public.
10. The separation of the management committee functions and the day-to-day professional service delivery.
11. The improvement of operations and services by way of periodic reviews and evaluations.

C-BERS is now in its sixth year of operation and provides a full-time service to men from all over Australia, and their families. The very nature of the brief and funding source for C-BERS means that its mandate does not cover women who were child migrants. C-BERS is funded entirely by the Congregation of Christian Brothers. It obtains no support from any government agency.

From 1995 to 2000, C-BERS has obtained \$1,334,961 in funding from the Christian Brothers.

C-BERS has provided reunification travel to 195 ex-residents and 23 carers, being 188 overseas trips (to UK or Malta); 7 within Australia; and 23 carers funded to assist overseas travellers. These trips have been arranged through either C-BERS or the Child Migrants Trust, but each has been wholly funded by the Christian Brothers. Access to travel funding is not means tested, nor is it dependent on men finding family in the country of origin.

C-BERS Services are provided free to all ex-residents of Christian Brothers' childcare institutions. They are offered without prejudice in relation to current or future legal proceedings.

## **Counselling**

There are some practical issues associated with providing counselling services to former child migrants:

- The number of counselling clients has not diminished over time. The quarter, March-June 2000, illustrates this. During that quarter, C-BERS staff had 81 interviews for counselling around 'reunification travel'; had 96 general counselling contacts; and conducted 129 telephone counselling sessions. This is representative of normal loads. At June this year, we had 393 clients on our books – 114 of these were 'active', with 25% of active clients being 'represent-ers', ie those who came back after an interval – quite common as the issues some clients are working through can be quite traumatic.
- Around 30% of C-BERS' clients live in regional areas or in other states.
- There is limited choice for people wishing to access specialised counselling expertise such as that provided by C-BERS. We are the only agency of our type in Australia and have to offer telephone counselling to those who cannot present in person, liaising with eg. Centrecares or private providers in other areas if necessary. CMT do have some services, but these are also geographically limited.
- Counselling must be made available to people accessing their personal records either at the time of access or nearby to it. The information contained therein can be either paltry; surprising; written in offensive language; and in other ways impact negatively on the recipient.

### ***Summary: Counselling***

Choice is a real issue. As is agency funding. We see the child migration as an area that is inherently and constitutionally part of the Australian Government ambit and would like to see funding made available at that level. The need is not diminishing. The 'treatment' can be long-term and involve a 'family counselling model' as the effects tend to impact on the person's subsequent (ie adult) family unit, if this has survived.

## **Former Child Migrants from Malta**

By far the largest 'sending country' was the United Kingdom and there is the chance that Maltese unaccompanied child migration could be overlooked. This would be unfair because, although the circumstances of their migration were different, the children from Malta did experience family dislocation – often with similar effects.

In total, 259 boys and 51 girls [310] came from Malta to Catholic institutions between 1950 and 1965, comprising around 10% of Catholic former child migrants to this country. Often, these children were the 'first wave' of a subsequent family migration but we are now finding that the impact of the separation has often had effects on the family unit that have been irreparable. C-BERS has funded a number of reunification trips to Malta for clients to meet extended family – but the need for both UK and Maltese former child migrants to experience the culture and ambience of the place where they spent their early childhoods should not be underestimated either. We are now finding a situation where female former child migrants, whose brothers have travelled through C-BERS' scheme, are now seeking reunification.

The ISS does *not* make funds or assistance available to Maltese former child migrants and this means their experience is inequitably treated when compared with persons from Britain. The only funding that we are aware of for this group comes through C-BERS, with individual, as-needs assistance from female religious orders.

### ***Summary - Maltese***

Notwithstanding the presence of family in Australia (and this does not apply to all former child migrants), the Maltese group may be equally in need of ongoing counselling and travel support, and choice of providers and must not be overlooked by the Senate Committee.

## **Mechanism for Exchange of Information (Internationally and Federally)**

The problems arising from unaccompanied child migration are inherently global, so it is important to address the need for a mechanism to bridge the geographical divide.

One area that we consider important is the sharing of knowledge among:

- Counsellors
- Those involved in tracing / reunification
- Those who store/hold/enable access to records

While we earnestly urge the existence of effective choice in service provision and recognise the need for client confidentiality to be honoured and maintained, we also need to pool our shared knowledge about the *services that work* for people in this group.

At the local level in Western Australia, we have some exemplary initiatives. C-BERS is a foundation member of the Receiving Agencies Steering Committee and has provided that committee with considerable expertise. C-BERS were helpful to the Western Australian State Government as it developed its Child Migrant Referral Index (though the Department of Family and Children's Services). This Index provides a link between the past and the present, across the ocean that divides people from their country of origin. Similarly, at C-BERS, we have built very strong links with the Catholic sending agencies in the UK. On the counselling and reunification front, C-BERS and the Child Migrant's Trust have an excellent relationship whereby approaches to reunification are discussed; protocols for information exchange have been developed and implemented; and knowledge about the experience before, during and after the trip to the country of birth is shared so that both services can provide better support to their clients.

We recognise the following gaps:

- We do not have a 'sending agency' contact group in Malta, so the 'front end' of their experience is missing;
- We do not have a mechanism for sharing information with other state government departments in the eastern states;
- Tracing is a frustrating and time-consuming process;
- There is no funding that would support professionals to learn from each other – and we believe this would be helpful, particularly as other states set up systems for information access;
- We do not have an integrated network of specialised service providers around the country, or even a limited number of 'centres of excellence' that disparate service providers can tap into for guidance and support when dealing with these clients.

In terms of tracing services, we have found that there are three critical elements:

- Access to accurate fundamental information (eg. birth certificate)

- Access to a dedicated search facility when looking for extant family
- Access to information exchange between the parties to 'smooth the way'

### **Summary – A Global Approach**

We would hope that one of the outcomes from the Senate Inquiry will address the 'knowledge gap' by enabling a mechanism for sharing expertise in the area of service provision for former child migrants. There is such a great deal of goodwill in the sector that a lot could be achieved with limited financial support. But it is essential to facilitate face-to-face contact between the stakeholder agencies – this will build a momentum that will have an impact far greater than the initial financial outlay; not only in sharing expertise, but in improving tracing outcomes.

### **Request to the Committee**

C-BERS believes it would be very useful for the Senate Standing Committee to meet with the Receiving Agencies Steering Committee of Western Australia for a round-table discussion of current and future issues and needs. We therefore request that the Senate Standing Committee meet with this group formally as part of the Inquiry, and that the discussion be recorded in Hansard.

# **Senate Submission: A Perspective from the Counselling Staff**

## **1. Introduction**

The following has been prepared for the Senate Committee by C-BERS Counselling staff to assist the Committee develop recommendations that will improve the quality of life for former child migrants from the UK and Malta.

## **2. Client Needs**

### **2.1. Acknowledgement**

There is a history, painful for our clients, of official rebuff of the truth of their collective unhappy experiences. Counselling proves ineffective - impossible even - without absolute commitment to accepting each man's experience as he reports it.

### **2.2 Counselling Focus**

The focus of counselling is twofold: reunification with families of origin, and work towards helping men deal with issues from their past and develop skills to improve their present and future lives. Given the age of former child migrants which is typically 55 – 65 years and the decades of "survival," of maintaining a more or less successful equilibrium in their daily functioning, major personal change is unusual. More commonly, clients can be helped to come to better understanding and acceptance of what happened to them, and make progress in recovering a sense of dignity and reclaiming personal worth. Commonly, anger is an incapacitating factor and anger management is an important aspect of the counselling task at C-BERS.

### **2.3 Retention of Specialist Counselling Expertise**

In the course of its six years of service to former child migrants, a substantial body of expertise and "practice wisdom" has been developed by C-BERS in terms of "what works" for them and also, what is of help to their partners and their children. For example, having supported (literally) hundreds of men in their reunifications with family of origin, it has been found that a period of euphoria following a successful first meeting with relatives will quickly give way - granted the costs and practicalities of travel - to depression over the small prospect of future visits and meetings. Post-reunification counselling work is a major feature of C-BERS Service to these men and the counsellors have

acquired much knowledge about managing an ongoing family relationship at a great distance. The men are here of course, the experts in their own situations. They are our teachers and it is essentially *their* expertise that we are able to disseminate, to share with new and future clients. Professional staff at C-BERS have gathered an impressive array of knowledge and experience working with a large group of men with distinct needs. This represents a cumulative knowledge base which should neither be dissipated nor altogether lost to the field of counselling practice.

***Recommendation 1***

*There should be continuation of a specialist counselling service, dedicated to meeting the particular needs of former child migrants*

**3. Anticipating Future Need**

**3.1. Knowledge from Canada:**

*Canadian experience, where child migration occurred earlier, has shown the needs likely to be manifested by our client base in the future. Thus, for instance, some former child migrants in Australia who have not formed families and who are lonely and socially isolated, may benefit from the provision of specialist accommodation services.*

*The passing of the men will not necessarily entail the ending of a need for services, since again, Canadian experience has demonstrated that the children of former child migrants commonly seek connection with the family of origin of their fathers and also often present with second generation problems which have as their source, the traumatic experiences endured by their parent.*

***Recommendation 2***

*Specialist counselling should be available to meet the needs of the adult children of former child migrants.*

**3.2. Family Tracing**

*Counsellors have become skilled at advising their former child migrants of the techniques employed by allied family tracing agencies and are able to*

*provide realistic assessment of the likelihood of success in finding families of origin after the elapse of more than half a century.*

*It is a sad fact indeed, that C-BERS have more than 50 clients for whom the tracing effort has as yet proved unsuccessful. Given the age of the men and that of their mothers, the need to identify families has become an issue of considerable urgency. Anecdotal evidence supports the view that the mothers of a number of the men have died whilst their sons have been trying to locate them.*

### **Recommendation 3**

Resources should be deployed from the Australian government to support the urgent effort of tracing members of families of origin

## Services available at C-BERS

**C-BERS Services is funded by the Congregation of Christian Brothers. It is run by an independent Management Committee. C-BERS Services is FUNCTIONALLY INDEPENDENT from, but financially accountable to, the funding body.**

**C-BERS'** services are FREE to all ex-residents and students of Christian Brothers Homes and Schools.

## Further Information

If you would like to find out more about C-BERS Services and the assistance we can offer to ex-residents and students, please contact us.

**Telephone: (08) 9381 5422**

**Freecall: 1800 621 805**

**Fax: (08) 9382 4114**

**e-mail: [cberss@iinet.net.au](mailto:cberss@iinet.net.au)**

### **Postal Address:**

**P O Box 1172  
SUBIACO WA 6904**

### **Location:**

**12 Alvan Street  
SUBIACO WA 6008  
(Behind the Regal Theatre)**



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**Christian Brothers Ex-Residents and  
Students Services**

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**We are a specialized service that  
offers assistance and support to**

**Ex-Residents  
and  
Former Students  
of  
Christian Brothers'  
Homes and Schools**

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**C-BERS'** services are  
CONFIDENTIAL. Professional staff  
do not release any personal  
information to anyone without the  
express consent of clients.

Using **C-BERS Services** DOES NOT  
PREJUDICE any **legal** proceedings  
which an ex-resident or former  
student may be involved in now or in  
the future

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**WE CAN HELP WITH****Personal & Family Issues**

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**Counselling**

Confidential counselling is available to help you deal with personal issues in your life and relationships. Counselling is provided by one of our professional counselling team.

**Reunification**

C-BERS Services offers assistance to former child migrants. We offer support and advice in the process of meeting with members of your family or in travelling to your country of origin. We can help you prepare and we can support you during and after this process.

As an ex-resident you can apply for reunification travel funding. C-BERS Services offers financial assistance in cases where a reunion is likely to be of benefit to all parties involved.

**Support to Family Members**

We offer counselling and information to

**Personal & Family History**

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**Family Tracing**

We can assist you in obtaining information about family members and in seeking documents relating to your family of origin.

**Personal History Index (PHIND)**

For former child migrants from the UK and Malta, this computerised index can assist you to find out where records about you are located.

**Photographic Collection**

We have a selection of photographs of the buildings and residents for viewing which can be purchased for a small cost.

**Practical Assistance**

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**Citizenship**

Not all former child migrants are Australian citizens. We can help you find out about your citizenship status and assist you in obtaining Australian

**Skills and Development**

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**Adult Education**

We offer support to ex-residents who wish to improve their reading, writing and other educational needs e.g. computer skills. Adult education classes can be organised at C-BERS, at a time to suit you, given sufficient demand. They are conducted by a professional tutor at 12 Alvan Street.

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**C-BERS Services  
is open**

**Monday to Friday  
8.30 am – 4.30 pm  
at**

**12 Alvan Street  
SUBIACO**

**PHONE: (08) 9381 5422**

**FREECALL: 1800 6211 805**

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family members whose lives may have been affected by your life at a Christian Brothers' Home or School.

### **Advocacy & Referral**

We can help you to represent your interests in dealing with other agencies and assist you in making contact with other helping services.

citizenship.

### **Forms & Applications**

We can help you to get and fill out official forms and applications such as passports and visas.

### ***No Interest Loan Scheme***

A loan of up to \$250 is available, with no interest and no fees (conditions apply).

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