

Dear Senators,

I welcome this opportunity to express concern about Australia's current policies relating to asylum seekers and mandatory detention. Since April 2002 I have communicated with asylum seekers detained in Topside and State House Camps, Nauru. Over the years I have offered support to 15 different friends through letters of encouragement, clothing items and phonecards. I became involved in this through Rural Australians for Refugees and the programs initiated by Julian Burnside, QC, and continue this work through my local UCA congregation (St Luke's Belmont) and membership of the Hunter Presbytery Justice Committee.

My asylum seeker friends have mentioned the difficult conditions under which they lived, or still live, in the camps. Many are young men whose former good health has deteriorated badly during their detention; others had existing medical conditions which have worsened. For example, one of my friends described serious problems with his eyesight, and was informed that the facilities were inadequate for treatment. Another has high blood pressure and I understand that the stress of detention and drawn out processes of review have added to his ill-health.

One of my greatest concerns has been the psychological impact of detention. There is a reluctance to complain, but sometimes a simple inquiry about health uncovers serious mental health problems that involve the use of heavy sedatives and anti-depressants. One of my friends realised that he was in danger of addiction, but could see no other way to avoid the deep fear and anxiety of forced deportation or indefinite detention.

Several of my friends are among those who now have recently arrived in Australia. They have been welcomed by various support groups and are serious about finding employment and contributing to their new community.

I believe that Australians are ready to hear of the viable alternatives to the current system. There are alternatives proposed by refugee advocates and human rights organisations that are humane, cost effective and sustainable. These models are designed to support, rather than punish, individuals and families who seek Australia's protection and help.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Yours respectfully,

Kim Baird
Belmont