

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Sherrine Clark

Organisation Name:Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Your position or role: Director of Humanitarian Services

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Housing affordability,Rough sleeping,Services,Employment,Mental health,Family violence,Public housing,Indigenous people

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Other (please describe)

Humanitarian Services for people seeking asylum.

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

People seeking asylum - no safety net

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

We can if needed.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e7adf6207d86-Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Sherrine Clark



Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Victoria Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria.

About the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is an independent not-for-profit organisation whose programs support and empower people seeking asylum to maximise their own physical, mental and social wellbeing. The ASRC is the largest aid, employment, health and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum in Australia. The ASRC provides a range of direct services as well as participating in law reform, campaigning and lobbying.

Language

A **refugee** is a person who has left their country for their own safety due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. A refugee is unable to return to their country of origin unless the situation that forced them to leave improves.¹

A **person seeking asylum** has applied for refugee status and is awaiting a decision on their application. This submission speak to the experience of people seeking asylum who are living in the community in Australia and have sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been assessed or decided.

Background information and key themes

There are approximately 10,000 people seeking asylum residing in Victoria.

The Department of Home Affairs reports² that over 45% (6,634 individuals) of people seeking asylum in Australia who arrived by sea reside in Victoria. Additional to this are a proportion of the 24,566 people who arrived in Australia by plane on a substantive visa (e.g., a student, tourist, or business visa) and

¹ United Nations General Assembly 1951, *Convention relating to the status of refugees*, <https://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>

² Department of Home Affairs 2019, *Illegal maritime arrivals on Bridging E visa*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/illegal-maritime-arrivals-bve-june-2019.pdf>



subsequently applied for protection as a refugee during 2018-19³. Around 70% of people seeking asylum who arrive by sea are being found to be owed protection⁴

People seeking asylum have specific risk factors for homelessness due to asylum seeker policies and the refugee status determination (RSD) process.

Some people seeking asylum are able to access a small financial income through the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) however over the past two years, the Commonwealth government has cut its budget for the SRSS safety net by 60%, putting thousands of people, including children and young people, at risk of poverty and homelessness.

There are also people seeking asylum who have the capacity for financial independence through employment but are excluded from this through the denial of work rights. Currently one third of the people who the ASRC supports in preventing homelessness through the direct payment of rent, are unable to maintain their own housing sustainability due to being excluded from the right to work.

Additionally, many people seeking asylum residing in Victoria have been awaiting the outcome of their protection claim since 2013; for those who have been relying on community supports to buffer their risk of homelessness while experiencing very low or no income, these supports are often exhausted over time leaving the people seeking asylum at imminent risk of homelessness and the inability to meet basic needs.

People seeking asylum may have multiple and complex physical and mental health issues, with increased risk due to their asylum experience.

People seeking asylum are at increased risk of complex physical and mental health conditions as a result of pre-arrival experiences: human rights violations, trauma or torture alongside the increased likelihood of experiencing poverty, food insecurity, and prolonged uncertainty.⁵

Additionally, for many people seeking asylum, the refugee status determination (RSD) process can be lengthy⁶ resulting in extended period of uncertainty and the associated destitution outlined above; this is associated with mental health deterioration and in many cases the development of mental illness.

³ Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2019, *Onshore humanitarian program 2018-19*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/ohp-june-19.pdf> (NB, the Department of Home Affairs does not provide data on the state of residence or lodgment for plane arrivals.)

⁴ Refugee Council of Australia 2020, *Fast tracking statistics*, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/fast-tracking-statistics/3/>

⁵ Chaves NJ, Paxton G, Biggs BA, Thambiran A, Gardiner J, Williams J, Smith MM & Davis JS 2017, 'The Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases and Refugee Health Network of Australia recommendations for health assessment for people from refugee-like backgrounds: an abridged outline', *Medical Journal of Australia*, <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2017/206/7/australasian-society-infectious-diseases-and-refugee-health-network-australia>

⁶ At the primary stage of the refugee status determination (RSD) process there can be waits of up to a year for an initial interview with the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), followed by another one to two years wait for those appealing for review of immigration decisions to either the Immigration Assessment



There is a lack of affordable housing available in Victoria, with people seeking asylum experiencing further barriers to access.

For people seeking asylum who have access to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) safety net, they receive an income of 89% of Newstart to cover rent and basic needs. A recent review of the rental market found that there were no properties available in Melbourne (and just two nationwide) that would be affordable for a single person receiving Newstart⁷, never mind for a person receiving SRSS. Even for people seeking asylum who are working, there were only two percent of properties found to be affordable for a single person on minimum wage which can be expected to be highly competitive with discrimination and visa / refugee status determination uncertainty reducing the likelihood that these would be accessible to people seeking asylum.

There is a lack of safety net housing and homelessness support available for people seeking asylum.

People seeking asylum who are unable to access affordable housing and, in particular, those who have been excluded from income through the extreme restrictions on Status Resolution Supports Services (SRSS) eligibility and/or exclusion from work rights, largely rely on charity and the services of unfunded organisations to prevent or address homelessness. The ASRC currently receives funding from the Victorian Government through the *Stepping in to Support People Seeking Asylum initiative* to prevent homelessness through the payment of rent for people seeking asylum who are excluded from income (including those with work rights and the capacity to work who require time limited financial support while they work towards financial independence through employment) however these funds are currently limited to the 2019-20 budget and are not expected to meet the extent of the need for support⁸.

The mainstream homelessness service system also reports struggling to meet the need for housing and homelessness support with high numbers of people presenting being turned away with no supports provided due to capacity issues⁹. Accommodation is often provided night by night but this is inadequate to transitioning a person out of homelessness and enabling a plan to prevent future housing crisis.

There is a lack of safety net housing and homelessness support available for people seeking asylum who experience further marginalisation.

Further to the limited options for safety net housing and homelessness support available for people seeking asylum, the ASRC and the Network of Asylum Seeker Agencies Victoria Housing Working Group have noted further limitations in accessing suitable housing for people who are LGBTQI+, who have

Authority (IAA) or the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT). Court-based appeals currently have waiting period of greater than two years for Federal Circuit Court (FCC) hearings.

⁷ Anglicare Australia 2019, *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019: Regional Reports and Snapshots*, <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final---rental-affordability-snapshota302da309d6962baacc1ff0000899bca.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

⁸ At current rates, the allocated budget can provide rental payments for a maximum of 250-300 people at any time. This is lower than the 348 people being supported at the peak of demand in 2018 (subsequently reduced due to funding capacity issues) and falls significantly short of addressing the cuts to SRSS with an estimated 7,000 SRSS recipients expected to lose access this financial year.

⁹ Western Homelessness Network 2019, *Ending homelessness in Melbourne's west*, http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content2/c7/Ending%20Homelessness%20in%20Melbourne's%20West%20Aug%202019_1571202882052.pdf



disability and for people experiencing family violence. Even with low income, people seeking asylum in these groups experience greater limitations in accessing safe and appropriate housing options in both the private rental market and in specialist housing support services.

Recommendations

Ensure the continuation of funding for appropriate services to prevent homelessness for people seeking asylum.

Prevention of homelessness is both easier and more cost-effective than addressing homelessness. The ASRC estimates current costs of less than \$100 per person per week in its direct intervention to prevent homelessness for people without income contrasted with over \$300 per person per week in providing for crisis accommodation interventions for those already homeless.

Additionally it is well established that the financial costs of primary homelessness, particularly through the increased use of mainstream public support services such as health and justice, are higher than the costs of services that prevent or address homelessness¹⁰, even when using more expensive 'last resort' options such as rooming houses and other crisis accommodation options¹¹.

Address the lack of affordable housing through investment in social housing.

Social housing stock has not kept pace with population growth¹² resulting in an overreliance on the private rental market which, as discussed above, does not provide suitable options for persons on low incomes. Even if people seeking asylum continued to be excluded from social housing eligibility, as they currently are, adequately addressing the broader incidence of homelessness in Australia would potentially have a positive impact for people seeking asylum by reducing the competition for the very limited number of affordable properties and the burden on mainstream homelessness support services.

Ensure access to medium term and supported housing options for people seeking asylum, particularly those with higher or specific needs.

While people seeking asylum are not able to access longer term options such as social housing or accessible affordable housing, it is crucial that there are medium term options, such as transitional housing, made available to them in order to enable the temporary stability required to create longer term plans. Currently people seeking asylum are excluded from transitional housing due to eligibility and issues

¹⁰ Zaretsky K, Flatau P, Clear A, Conroy E, Burns L & Spicer B 2013, *The cost of homelessness and the net benefit of homelessness programs: a national study*, AHURI Final Report No.205. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute,

https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2032/AHURI_Final_Report_No218_The-cost-of-homelessness-and-the-net-benefit-of-homelessness-programs-a-national-study.pdf

¹¹ Witte E 2017 'The case for investing in last resort housing', MSSSI Issues Paper No. 10, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne

https://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/2756874/MSSI-IssuesPaper-10_Last-Resort-Housing_2017_0.pdf

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018, *Housing Assistance in Australia*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2018/contents/housing-in-australia>



of undersupply, ensuring access would significantly improve the outcomes for people seeking asylum and would reduce the burden on the limited charitable and unfunded services currently available.

Advocacy at a Commonwealth level in relation to prompt resolution of migration status, universal grant of work rights for people seeking asylum, and provision of needs based Status Resolution Support Services.

People's risk of homelessness, and reliance on safety net homelessness or financial support services, will decrease if applications for asylum are processed fairly and quickly, and those who are owed protection are granted permanent protection visas with work rights and support to participate fully in the economy and community.

For those who are still having their claims assessed, the granting of universal work rights to people seeking asylum will enable financial independence and economic participation during the process and will significantly reduce the risk of homelessness and reliance on homelessness support services.

Additionally, the fair provision of financial safety nets for people seeking asylum who are experiencing barriers to employment will reduce their experience of forced dependency, extreme disadvantage and marginalisation as well as their high reliance on a broad range of public support services.

Ensure data on asylum seeker status is collected as part of homelessness service reporting.

While estimates can be made of the significant number of people seeking asylum living in the community in Victoria who are homeless or at risk of homelessness based on assumptions about visa status and eligibility for safety net financial supports, data needs to be collected to establish the current level of unmet need for basic housing within this population. This will also allow for meaningful evaluation of service access and outcome and form the basis for service planning and Commonwealth level advocacy activities.

Case Study

Client details

The client (RE) is a 44 year old Persian speaking Iranian male who arrived by boat to Australia in 2013. RE has no family support in Australia and limited community support.

RE has extensive health concerns including seronegative inflammatory arthritis, Osteoarthritis requiring a hip replacement major depressive disorder, chronic pain, colitis and haemorrhoids. These health issues have rendered him unable to work and, since the removal of his SRSS support in September 2018, he has been homeless or in unstable housing.

Background

Between September 2018 and April 2019 RE was receiving direct intervention to prevent homelessness from the ASRC through the payment of his rent. Due to funding capacity issues, the ASRC was unable to continue these payments which resulted in an eviction request being lodged with VCAT in May 2019. During this time RE expressed concerns for his safety at the property stating that the property was also over crowded, that there had been a gas explosion. In addition, RE stated that the landlord had advised



him not to call emergency services at the time of the explosion. At this time RE's mental health declined, he commenced self-harming and presented with suicidal ideation.

In June 2019 the client began sleeping in his car due to his fear for his safety at the property. At this time the client was still experiencing extreme symptoms of arthritis and has very limited mobility which was exacerbated by limited access to heating.

In mid-June the client began living out of his car permanently after being evicted from the property.

RE utilised crisis accommodation during June and July, funded by the ASRC. An application to a specialist asylum seeker housing provider was unsuccessful as his needs were assessed as too complex.

RE's health continued to decline, his experience of homelessness exacerbating his arthritis, resulting in a hip replacement in mid-July.

In August 2019 RE was discharge from hospital to no fixed address. He continued to sleep in his car. However he was unable to drive and so had no access to his medications for management of his chronic and post-operative pain. This continued for a number of days.

The restriction of space within the car and the position in which the client was required to sleep had detrimental effects on the recovery of his hip replacement. At this time RE was continuing to self-harm and reporting escalating thoughts of suicide.

During August and September 2019 RE continued to sleep in his car, and attended the emergency department of multiple hospitals for assistance managing his pain, each time being discharged to no fixed address. During this time RE was unable to attend housing inspections or homelessness service appointments due to his pain and lack of mobility. RE's follow up appointments with the treating hospital were also missed as reminder letters were not received by the client as he had no fixed address. This was detrimental to the recovery of his hip replacement and a missed opportunity to address the damage already caused by his living situation.

In September RE was admitted to hospital with increased pain, self-inflicted severe burns, rectal bleeding and exacerbation of arthritis in both his knees and ankles. During this admission the client engaged in escalating self-harm behaviours. The client reported that the prospect of being homeless and in pain drove him to these actions.

The client was discharged to crisis accommodation for 2 nights and then recommenced sleeping in his car.

Due to RE's self-harm behaviours and having inadequate access to food the client experienced ongoing nausea, stomach pain and vomiting.

At this stage all short term housing options have been exhausted and the client had been unable to acquire a private rental tenancy due to his health (both mobility issues and mental health concerns) and lack of stability.

In October 2019 accommodation in a rooming house was secured with the assistance and advocacy of the ASRC. Once in stable accommodation RE's health improved, his pain reduced and his mood and mobility improved. He stopped reporting self-harm and suicidal ideation. The client attributed this to the fact that he was able to sleep on a mattress and not get too cold.

