About the NASAVic Housing Coalition

The Network of Asylum Seeker Agencies Victoria Housing Coalition (NASAVic HC) formed in March 2009, as a subgroup of the Network of Asylum Seeker Agencies in Victoria. The NASAVic HC formed in response to a growing occurrence of disadvantage being experienced amongst clients from the asylum seeker community represented by three core agencies (The Australian Red Cross, The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), and Hotham Mission – Asylum Seeker Project).

Background on housing issues for asylum seekers

While the current housing crisis in Victoria and an extreme shortage of affordable and safe accommodation options affects the broader population, clients from the asylum seeker community face further disadvantage in accessing housing. The constraints on these people include:

- a lack of income support and subsequent destitution;
- coping with multiple vulnerabilities (including language and cultural barriers, experience of torture and trauma, lack of access to transport, lack of familiarity with Australian society and special needs of women and minors);
- a lack of entitlement and access to emergency accommodation, transition accommodation, housing agency assistance and public housing;
- difficulty entering the increasing competitive and expensive private rental market;
- difficulty accessing asylum seeker entitlements; and
- uncertainty regarding immigration process and outcomes;

In addition to these constraints, where asylum seekers can access housing, the location is often isolated and far from support services, thus compounding their social exclusion and increasing their vulnerability. Recent policy developments around housing solutions also exclude consideration of asylum seekers in the community.

Aims of the NASAVic Housing Coalition

In response to these issues, the NASAVic Housing Coalition aims to:

- Raise awareness about asylum seekers within mainstream housing agencies;
- Record and provide feedback to the Department of Human Services (DHS) regarding negative experiences faced by asylum seekers in accessing housing services;
- Create a shared understanding within the sector about appropriate housing services, frameworks and models; and
- Identify and advocate for models of best practice within the provision of housing services.

These aims are met through monthly meetings, regular and continued visits to and correspondence with housing agencies and ongoing discussions and advocacy with both local and federal stakeholders regarding appropriate ways of moving forward in tackling the housing issues faced by asylum seekers.
Submission to the ‘Inquiry on the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria

The comments in this brief paper concern the client base of the three core agencies represented in the Coalition (Red Cross, ASRC, Hotham Mission): primarily asylum seekers on bridging visas with varying entitlements and living in the community whilst awaiting an outcome of their visa application. These individuals and families are unable to access the social safety net provisions of Centrelink, and are often without work rights or access to employment (and also Medicare), experiencing high levels of destitution and facing multiple and serious vulnerabilities. This paper will also refer to those asylum seekers who are successful in their claim for protection and who receive permanent residency (refugee visa) in Australia. These individuals and families do have access to social safety net provisions of Centrelink, Medicare, the right to work and to employment assistance but often continue to experience high levels of destitution and also face multiple and serious vulnerabilities despite holding Australian permanent residency.

This paper will examine and make recommendations regarding public housing in Victoria as a response to the outlined Terms of Reference for the ‘Inquiry on the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria.’ The paper will focus on the denial of access to public housing for asylum seekers and the barriers that both asylum seekers and refugees face in accessing public housing.

Asylum Seeker access to Public Housing

Currently asylum seekers do not have any access to public housing and limited access to interim housing options such as emergency accommodation and transitional housing. Due to these restrictions housing remains one of the greatest challenges facing asylum seekers in Australia. As signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Right, Australia has made a commitment to the statement that everyone has the right to adequate housing. The right to adequate housing should not be mitigated by the visa that someone holds.

Along with being committed to human rights, the housing sector has a key role to play in creating social inclusion and principles of social inclusion need to apply to all who lawfully reside in Australia, including asylum seekers. Social inclusion is an ‘all or nothing’ concept. It cannot exclude certain groups on the basis of their visa, when they are living in Australia lawfully. Social inclusion would therefore bestow the same rights and access to asylum seekers, using the same determinants.

Asylum seekers wait lawfully in the community for an outcome regarding their protection visa application and currently can apply and are placed on the waiting list for public housing. It is little known that asylum seekers are able to apply for public housing, which is something that needs to be addressed at a local office level. Despite being able to apply, asylum seekers are unable to accept an offer of public housing unless they are holders of a permanent visa. This policy is one that forces individuals and families, who could be in appropriate and safe housing, to remain destitute and often homeless.

There is no justified reason why asylum seekers should not have access to public housing and they are in fact one of the most vulnerable groups in Australia due to the multiple barriers they face in accessing services and supports. There are some asylum seeking individuals and families who do not receive permanent residency and as a consequence are repatriated. Individuals and families in such
circumstances are provided with support and assistance to return to their country of origin and if they were to be occupying public housing at such a time would be assisted to move out. To take such an approach would see the prevention of much unnecessary harm to individuals and families who are lawfully residing in Victoria. If Victoria is truly committed to human rights and social inclusion then asylum seekers should have access to public housing. This needs to be explicitly stated in government policy and work needs to be done to sensitise the public housing sector around this issue.

**Recommendations**

- Enable asylum seekers access to public housing through change to current government policy
- Investment in training and education for the public housing sector regarding the eligibility of asylum seekers for public housing following change to government policy
- Provide education to local housing offices regarding the existing eligibility of asylum seekers to apply for public housing

**Interim Housing Options**

As stated previously not only do asylum seekers have no access to public housing but they also have limited access to emergency accommodation and transitional housing. It is extremely difficult to consider the implications of the public housing waiting lists independent of what accommodation options exist for individuals and families in the interim. Whilst access to emergency accommodation has improved for asylum seekers it is not an appropriate long term option. Living in emergency accommodation forces many individuals and families further into extreme destitution and also makes them heavily reliant on charitable organisations for their basic living needs. Further to this emergency accommodation is often unsafe and inappropriate for asylum seekers given their background and experiences. The provision of stable transitional housing, and subsequently access to public housing, would not only prevent homelessness but also have a significant impact upon the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers. Furthermore if transitional housing was more accessible to those seeking asylum, the experience of waiting for public housing would not have such detrimental effects on individuals and families.

**Recommendation**

- Enable asylum seekers access to appropriate interim accommodation such as transitional housing (provide nomination rights for some transitional properties to an Asylum Seeker Support Agency)

**Segmented Waiting List**

Demand for public housing is well documented, with a shortage of housing and lengthy waiting times not only for asylum seekers, but for many vulnerable individuals and families such as children, people with disability or mental illness, Indigenous Australians, people fleeing domestic violence and low income earners. Without negating the vulnerability and needs of these groups it is important to state that the complete denial of access to public housing to asylum seekers serves to heighten the already high vulnerability and needs of asylum seeking individuals and families. The experience of seeking asylum is commonly marked by high levels of...
destitution and extreme transience with asylum seekers moving an average of eight times following arrival to source appropriate, sustainable accommodation. Alongside limited access to transitional housing, Asylum seekers face a multitude of barriers in accessing private rental that compound their transience, including: no or limited income, no local referees of rental history, insecure residency status, low levels of English and limited knowledge of Australia’s rental market.

Along with destitution and transience, a large proportion of asylum seekers have mental health issues. These mental health issues are often due to the experience of fleeing their country and their histories of torture and trauma, and are worsened through their experience of seeking asylum in Australia. The barriers that many of these individuals and families face in accessing a range of supports and services to meet their basic needs whilst seeking asylum has grave implications for their mental health, postponing effective recovery. That is the high levels of mental health issues for asylum seekers are exacerbated by their precarious housing situation. Furthermore the uncertainty inherent in waiting for an outcome on a protection visa application has far reaching implications for individuals and families mental health as does the uncertainty of waiting for public housing.

Destitution, transience, barriers to accessing private rental and the mental health problems are all indicative of the exceptional circumstances that asylum seekers face. Furthermore these factors would place many asylum seekers, who meet OoH eligibility, in the highest priority segment of public housing: Segment 1 – Recurring Homelessness. Despite this, there appears to be limited understanding of the experience of seeking asylum in the public housing sector leading to inappropriate segment applications. As such there needs to be acknowledgement of the specialised skills and expertise within the asylum seeker sector that does not exist in other mainstream services and housing agencies at present. Furthermore asylum seeker agencies are most appropriately placed to highlight the unique situations of asylum seeker, attest to their eligibility for segment 1 public housing and provide guidance and information the public housing sector.

**Recommendation**

- Direct consultation between asylum seeker agencies and OoH to further the understanding of the exceptional circumstances and needs of asylum seekers, so that they may be more appropriately assessed

**Barriers for Refugees**

Those individuals and families who are successful in applying for protection receive permanent residency (refugee), thus becoming eligible for public housing. The following is going to look at what barriers exist to accessing public housing for both asylum seekers and those who are deemed to be refugees. The primary barrier is the denial of access for asylum seekers to public housing, which has been previously discussed and will therefore not be explored again.

**Applying for Public Housing**

The process of applying for public housing is one that is extremely complex and timely and one that many asylum seekers and refugees have great difficulty in understanding. There is limited capacity in the housing sector to assist individuals and families in applying for public housing which means they are often left to complete these forms independently, with little guidance and support. Alternatively this role to assist asylum seekers and refugees in applying for public housing falls to asylum seeker support agencies that have very limited resources and rely heavily
on volunteers. Confounding these issues is that fact that public housing forms are only provided in English which means for many asylum seekers and refugees it is impossible to complete an application without assistance. It is important, therefore, that the system of applying for public house is simplified and made accessible to those culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals and families, for whom English is often a second language and for those who often have low levels of literacy and numeracy. Furthermore there needs to be acknowledgment of these barriers through the provision of focused and intensive support tailored for asylum seekers and refugees to assist in understanding the process and how to apply for public housing.

Cultural appropriateness of services & support
It is acknowledged that the provision of public housing to many of the most socially disadvantaged people in the community creates high need for appropriate services and supports. Asylum seekers and refugees have specialised needs, not only due to their experience of fleeing their country and their histories of torture and trauma but also due to their experiences in Australia as asylum seekers. Seeking asylum is not only marked by destitution and transience but also the denial of some of their most basic human rights. The experience of reoccurring homelessness and living from the support of charitable organisations has implications for individuals and families capacity to settle effectively in the Australian community. As such it is essential that appropriate supports be put in place that recognises the exceptional circumstances of those individuals and families and their unique needs.

Recommendations
- Simplify the process for applying for public housing, recognising the needs of CALD populations, such as asylum seekers and refugees (ie. provision of greater support to complete applications, application forms in community languages).
- Ensure funding and development of housing support and outreach services to individuals and families that recognise the needs of asylum seekers living in public housing

Conclusion
Asylum seekers are real people who lawfully live in the Australian community, and just like all people living in Australia, need a place to rest each night. Asylum seekers should not be denied access to adequate housing due to simply to the visa that they hold.

The NASAVic Housing Coalition aspires to be continually involved in the process of building better systems, programs and policies to target homelessness. The above recommendations based on inclusion and access to services for asylum seekers would be positive steps towards preventing the homelessness of asylum seekers.
NASAVic is a network of agencies working together in Melbourne to coordinate and advocate on behalf of asylum seekers.

Its member agencies are:
- Asylum Seeker Assistance Project
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC)
- Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre (ASWC)
- Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project
- Dandenong Asylum Seeker Centre
- Fitzroy Learning Centre
- Hotham Mission - Asylum Seeker Project (ASP)
- National Council of Churches in Australia
- Red Cross Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme and Community Assistance & Support Program (Observer)
- Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Network (RASHN) Victoria
- Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture
- Wombat Housing and Support Services

The NASAVic Housing Coalition, a subgroup of NASAVic comprises of:
- Red Cross Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme and Community Assistance & Support Program (Observer)
- Hotham Mission - Asylum Seeker Project (ASP)
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC)
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), Case Management