9 August 2011

Dear Sir/Madam,

I write as a concerned member of the public who last year began visiting asylum seekers, specifically unaccompanied minors, who were being housed in the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation facility in Broadmeadows after hearing from a friend they were getting bored, lonely and depressed. The boys really appreciated visitors, as this gave them something to look forward to.

When I started visiting (around August 2010), all of the 42 boys were going to a language school in Sunbry a few times a week. This was important for them as most had little English and they were also all under 18 years old so really needed to be in school. However, after a few months, due to an expansion of the facility, there were not enough places at the school for all the boys to attend. Some boys were going only once a fortnight and a lot were going not at all. Coupled with the decrease in availability of places to go to this language school, the boys were becoming increasingly depressed due to their incarceration and the unknown status of their visa applications, which also affected their motivation to go to school.

The boys I met were in detention for 10 months to one year. Generally the boys waited for 2-3 months to hear the outcome of their first Immigration interview, which, in all the cases I heard of, came back with a "negative" decision. Upon appealing this decision, the boys generally waited another 3-4 months to hear the outcome of the merits review. Nearly all were granted refugee status after this. However, then they waited a further period of time (usually around 2-3 months) for their security clearance. As you can see, the boys were in detention for a long time - and it is an unspecified, indefinite amount of time - just waiting. They became frustrated about the lack of communication between themselves and Immigration, as they never knew at what stage their application and consequently how much longer they would be locked up.

The instances of self harm I saw evidence of, and was told about by the boys, was a direct result of this waiting game coupled with being locked up and usually not knowing where their family was and if they were safe. I saw lots of evidence of cutting, and still see that now with the current group of boys in MITA. One boy late last year threw a chair through a window. This was because no one could give him any information about the status of his visa application despite being in MITA for over one year. The other boys who had been on the same boat from Indonesia had all been granted visas, passed security checks and were living free in Australian society while he was still locked up waiting for a decision on his visa. He said he had to do something drastic to make Immigration notice him, so

that they would remember he was there.

I witnessed a change in the boys who were released into community detention. While still anxious about their visas and their families, they became less depressed. They said that they felt free, and were able to do other things than simply sit around in a facility thinking about their visa. They went to TAFE to do a language course; they went to the supermarket to do shopping; they cooked for themselves and went to the movies. This sense of freedom as well as taking responsibility for themselves was great for their mental health. They said that in detention there was nothing to do except play soccer and watch TV (which got very old after a few months, let alone a year); they could not cook for themselves or do any of those other day to day activities we normally do that give us a sense of purpose.

I think that the detention system needs to be overhauled. Processing times are way too long. Mandatory detention is not humane and it damages asylum seekers' mental health. It is abhorrent that people who have fled such terrifying and brutal scenes in their homeland are locked up indefinitely, and come out of detention as incredibly damaged people as a direct result of our Immigration system.

I hope that you will take seriously the calls to abolish mandatory detention.

Yours sincerely,