To commtiee secretary
Tim Watling 12-8-2011

Dear Sir,
I have taken this opportunity to put forward relatively short but none the less important observations regarding aspects of detention, I believe to be creating unnecessary hardship for Asylum seekers. My observations are made from the perspective of a counsellor working with those who have suffered Torture and Trauma. I see first hand the difficulties encountered by individuals attempting to keep themselves from being overwhelmed by their emotional world and the external environment they find themselves in. While we may not be as a country directly responsible for these trauma's, I believe a goal we need to have clear in our intentions is; How do we keep these people as psychologically resilient as possible.

- Firstly, in regards to length of and therefore impact of detention, there is a glaringly large discrepancy between the lengths of time people spend in detention, particularly those from Sri-Lanka. This creates much confusion and hopelessness amongst this cultural group. This has created many emotional challenges for these people. It would also appear that the humbleness, great fullness and general resistance to complain they show, has rendered them silent, therefore, appearing forgotten. Perhaps they are their own worst enemy in this respect. Currently here in the Leonora APOD, there are a large number of Tamil clients who have been in detention for over 450 days. This appears incongruent with the level of trauma they have suffered in comparison to other cultures that are also going through the same process. They have witnessed many people come months after them, of which they have also left months ago, a very disheartening position to find ones self in.

- As a result of the losses Asylum seekers go through, much sadness is felt; home land and identity are two of the more difficult losses to reconcile. Therefore, in the interests of resilience, I believe it would be particularly worth while in supporting some of the smaller rituals and dates of importance. This would also be very much enhanced if the Asylum seekers had access to food items and cooking facilities enabling them to provide for them the food appropriate to each event.

- It would also be helpful to have weekly rostered nights where each culture could have access to cooking facilities. A sense of purpose as well as staying connected to identity through food, may go along way in regards to resilience. It may sound a simple and perhaps insignificant thing, however, I have on many occasions heard the delight in people the few times self prepared simple sweets has been allowed.. Food is very much apart of these cultures with much focus given to its preparation, role and meaning in life..

- I have had almost endless feedback since my arrival that the food served has been difficult for people to consume, though these last weeks I have less of this feedback, it is often a source of humour, born of frustration.

- Although I feel the staff of SERCO, are by and large doing their best in the role they play, particularly those in charge. Of which I have often been impressed with the handling of operations and different aspects of the job, I have unfortunately heard a number of incidences that have left Asylum seekers bewildered, angry, ashamed, and disempowered and on one particular occasion, physically hurt and traumatised. During the implementation of a PSP order, SERCO staff handled an Asylum seeker with perhaps too much zeal. This particular man was having a mild psychosis. I understand that things go wrong when handling people. Having said this, this was a man whom had some particularly deep trauma as a result of horrific torture; it is here I felt that staff lacked the training to deal with this case ending in heavy handed approach. Thus I believe training is in need, around basic psychological awareness, the nature of the kinds of traumas asylum seekers face, as well as cultural awareness.

- An experience was shared with me in one such cultural awareness program that took place here at the Leonora APOD. The person relaying their experience was highly alarmed at the level of racist undertone consistently shared through out the days training. I am left wondering how much of this appears through out the work of individuals and how this may manifest in defiant behaviour of Asylum seekers as a result of feeling disrespected. Having said the above, I have heard on many occasions that my clients have felt respected and cared for by SERCO offices. Though there is clearly room for improvement

In short, It is my belief we need to do small but significant changes that promote healthy identity to the given culture..
Allow times for cooking in general, but particularly for cultural connection and community connection.
Cultural education for both inter cultural respect and awareness between Asylum seekers, which may help the different cultures develop better connections with each other.
Good quality well presented Cultural awareness to staff, with a focus on how to work with respect and with out personal ideologies interfering with the delivery of their service.
Allow a sense of purpose be found in opportunity's through programs that promote out comes, IE gardens that produce foods, volunteer programs that allow participants to move out into the community.

Thank you
Grayem White