



BASP
(Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project)
OUR OUTREACH
to the
HOMELESS



Accommodation for asylum seekers from the perspective of BASP

The key concerns for asylum seekers in Melbourne seem to us at BASP to be accommodation, legal help and employment (if they have work rights) and getting enough money to survive in the absence of any or sufficient work.

I will outline some conclusions that come from the experience of BASP in helping people get sustainable housing.

History of BASP and housing

From 2002 onwards BASP has arranged some housing for people seeking asylum. Initially it was in two Brigidine owned houses. Gradually, the need increased so much and we have been able to source more housing – with a lot of help from the community.

Currently we have about 125 people in BASP supported housing. This ranges from houses owned by religious congregations (5), one house owned by an individual and given to BASP for ongoing use, rented properties (12), Parish supported housing (4), and housing offered by people in the community (20 places). We have a family who gives two weeks crisis accommodation as required.

Emergency Housing

Sometimes we assist people with community crisis accommodation. Often this is because all other crisis accommodation has been exhausted. Service providers such as Life Without Barriers, AMES, Red Cross have not been able to find any housing for their clients.

This is usually backpackers or rooming houses. While this is probably better than sleeping on the streets, it is difficult for many asylum seekers who have recently experienced trauma and then find themselves in a shared room with others who have mental health issues or are drug or alcohol affected. It is not cheap either – it is usually between \$25 and \$30 a night and this is in bunk beds usually with quite a number sharing a dormitory or bedroom.

Rooming houses

Having just returned from taking an asylum seeker from one of the accommodation places provided by BASP (courtesy of the Columban Priests in Essendon) to a rooming house in Kew, I am dismayed by the quality of housing available to people with small incomes in Melbourne. The room is about 2 metres by 3 with a tiny alcove for a chest of drawers. Besides its size, it is a dismal place in which to spend any time. There is a shared kitchen, toilets, showers in an area quite some distance from the room. And this for \$130 a week. Even finding the four weeks rent in advance and two weeks bond would have been totally beyond my friend's finances without assistance from BASP.

Key concerns re sustainable housing

When those we help get a job or other means of support, we ask them to move from BASP housing so that others who have no income can take their place. At that stage they need both to find a place and then usually provide four weeks rent in advance and a bond which is equivalent to another four weeks rent. Even for low rentals this 'moving' amount is considerable.

The other option for people is finding a shared room via the internet but the other occupants tend to choose someone who has a higher and more stable income than asylum seekers. And more often now the same amount of rent in advance and bond is required.

Apart from housing people with no income or some who are very vulnerable due to a variety of reasons we help people get rented accommodation. We do this by helping find places to apply for and sometimes negotiating with real estate firms.

Public housing is not available to people on Bridging Visas so getting accommodation has to be via the private rental market. A decade ago, we could rent houses/units in the price range of \$250-\$300. They were usually in suburbs on the outskirts of Melbourne. This same housing now is in the price range of \$350-\$400 and more importantly, there is much more competition for what is available.

A lack of a rental history is a particular drawback when it comes to securing a property to rent. Most real estate employees will pass over applications with no referees in favour of those who can show they have been good tenants in the past.

Even getting to see a range of properties with ten to fifteen minute inspections is difficult for people who are only beginning to find their way around. Filling in application forms with points that include documents they often don't have is another challenge.

Sometimes people can only get a room or part of a house with the money they have so this can result in their living in poverty and overcrowded conditions. We have seen many examples of up to thirteen people living in a three bedroom house. They are also at risk of exploitation by unscrupulous landlords or agents. We have seen a house where the floor boards were virtually non-existent because of white ants and they were covered over with mats!

Those seeking asylum fall into two broad categories. One group have limited income and the other have no income. The lack of stable income is the biggest determinant of causing difficulty in getting housing.

Finding affordable and adequate housing is almost impossible for people with insecure income, no rental history of renting and language barriers in negotiating rentals. They are always competing for a limited number of affordable rental properties. The price for a flat or a room or a house is often almost as much as their meagre income is. Many are living on allowances lower than any Centrelink payments. Others have no income except for charities.

All those seeking protection have the problem of entering into leases when their actual stay in Australia is uncertain and Bridging Visas tend to make prospective landlords wary.

Some groups are more disadvantaged than others

Some of the asylum seeker individuals and groups who are most disadvantaged in looking for housing are

- Those with significant health issues (physical and mental). Since most available housing is shared it is often very difficult for those with quite specific needs to get sustainable places. There is a level of support that is needed for these people that is not often available. From the BASP point of view we have to think of the overall good of the house where different people are cohabiting and that can mean not being able to include a person with specific needs.
- Women with children who are on their own due to domestic violence are a particular subset who find it hard to get housing. Sometimes they have short term housing provided by agencies who have assisted them after a domestic violence

report but then they have to find an independent place to live and they often struggle in many ways.

- Single men and women are more often than not without any Centrelink support and until they can get a job they cannot afford housing. Ironically it is almost impossible to get a job with a fixed address and some money to present for interviews and so on.

There is evidence of some prejudice in letting properties to people from an asylum seeker background.

Often asylum seekers lack the necessary English language skills to communicate effectively on housing issues so they will put up with appliances that don't work or leaking taps etc. because they lack the means of addressing such issues. At times they do not fully grasp the nature of tenancy arrangements or to advocate successfully if the accommodation is not appropriate to their needs or if they are having difficulty meeting their obligations as tenants.

How prevalent is homelessness in this group?

There are probably no statistics but there is certainly a level of homelessness in the asylum seeker population. Often enough this is cloaked because of couch surfing but there are certainly many who are sleeping in parks and so on. We have met a few who have been attacked while in this situation and added to the level of trauma they have suffered in the past this has caused quite severe mental health problems.

Housing problems affect making an application for protection

The destitution problems (housing is a big part of this) makes the whole managing an application for protection process much harder. Even getting notices from Immigration authorities is problematic if asylum seekers are constantly changing where they live or have no permanent address.

Because the Australian Government has introduced policies which significantly lengthen the period of time asylum seekers may be in the community without a permanent resolution of their case, the housing that asylum seekers need is no longer a short transitional period but can, and normally does, extend over many years.

Other factors

Families with children need to be in reasonable proximity to schools. This often mitigates against cheaper housing.

Being near public transport is very important in terms of getting a job and also getting to appointments. However, housing near railway stations is more difficult to access.

Cost to BASP

Currently we are spending \$16,500 on rent and \$20,000 on utilities each month. As well we give \$34,350 a month in emergency relief.

Our other biggest expense is for legal expenses (even though most of this work is done pro bono) and this is about \$10,000 a month.

(Paper written by Brigid Arthur csb – October 2018)