

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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*I was a stranger and you made
me welcome ...*

Newsletter 95 April 2020

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

A life of uncertainty ...

As ordinary citizens we are currently experiencing something of the insecurity that people seeking asylum live with – often for many years. When will Covid 19 be contained? How long will we be in this situation? When can we see the people we love again? Is anything happening to my parents or my children while I am not able to see them, visit them? How long will this lack of freedom to go about life as usual be? Will our jobs be reinstated when we are allowed to work again?

More extreme variants of these questions face asylum seekers every day - those in detention and those going through the process of applying for protection. Many sink into hopelessness.

Not having any income means asylum seekers are being told if they don't pay their rent they will be evicted. At BASP we meet many in awful predicaments. A woman with a five-month-old baby has been sleeping on a sofa outside

someone else's room because she didn't have money to pay rent.

Imagine trying to keep a child from crying so as not to disturb those paying for their room, trying to look invisible so that she can stay even in this place. Or the family where the breadwinner has been driving UBER and who have been given until March 31st to vacate. Or the person who has had cleaning jobs in people's homes and are now not needed because the people themselves are home.

Experts tell us that panic buying helps people feel in control of the situation.

Under circumstances like a pandemic, people feel the need to do something that's proportionate to what they perceive is the level of the crisis.

For many people, hand-washing seems to be too ordinary. This is a dramatic event, therefore a dramatic response is required, so that leads to people throwing money at things in hopes of protecting themselves.

Those seeking asylum are ordinary people with the same fears as everyone else. Their level of insecurity is way beyond what the rest of us experience.

Many of those BASP supports have been in casual and part time jobs that are not there anymore.

Then there is the heartache for many asylum seekers of not being able to send money to their family to pay rent and buy food—in places also gripped by the fear of Covid 19.

It is in times like these that we find out what holds us together as a community.



The fear and uncertainty of the community is imaged in these pictures.

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Financial support for asylum seekers

There is a lot of talk in the media about people on temporary visas in Australia. Often no differentiation is made between those who visit Australia for a limited period, and those who have come seeking asylum. It is both misleading and possibly very dangerous to the rights of asylum seekers when the discussion is not clear.

In the current COVID-19 health and economic crisis, there is some public discussion suggesting that many people on temporary visas may need to return 'home', as these people can safely return to their home countries. However, this does not apply to asylum seekers and refugees holding Bridging Visas, TPVs or SHEVs because they are either seeking protection or have been granted protection from the persecution they have fled. They have no home to go to.

Facts about the different groups of people in Australia on temporary visas:

- * About 10 million people come in a year as tourists. The average stay is a few weeks.
- * About 800,000 overseas students are studying in Australia at any time.
- * About 700,000 backpackers come each year. Their average stay is about 10 weeks.
- * Short term work visas
- * At any one time, somewhere in the order of 60,000 people have overstayed their visa we are told.

The Australian government has said more than 2 million people on temporary visas, including students, skilled workers, and visitors, are in the country.

Facts about numbers and categories of asylum seekers on temporary visas:

- * Around 13,000 people who arrived by boat are on Bridging Visas (BV). All have been in detention and then, when released, were given a Bridging Visa that means they may be in Australia only while their application for protection is being processed.
- * Those whose application for protection have been completed and where the individuals have been recognized as refugees, only get a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) for 3 years or a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa. (SHEV) 5 years. There are about 8,400 people on TPV's and 16,000 on SHEVs in Australia. They are required to re-apply every 3 or 5 years to show they still need protection and then they are eligible only for another TPV or SHEV. These arrangements only apply to people who arrived by boat after 13 August 2012 .
- There are about 24,000 people who arrived by plane on various visas and subsequently made an application for protection. If successful, they will get Permanent Protection Visas (PPV).

People who are seeking asylum: At the moment, people seeking asylum who have lost jobs do not have access to any form of safety net.

There are around 37,000 people who are seeking asylum on Bridging Visas. Some have the right to work and have been supporting themselves in casual insecure work such as in hospitality services, Uber driving and construction. Most have lost their employment in the COVID-19 crisis.

None of these groups of people currently have access to Special Benefits payments (now Job Seeker or Job Keeper) or rent assistance when they lose their work. Some have never had the right to work.

Some asylum seekers get government support through the Immigration Department's program called Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) but this support has been significantly cut in the past couple of years. (The funding for SRSS was cut from \$139.8 million in 2017/18 to \$56.2 million in 2019/20). Even for people getting this payment it is 89% of the former Newstart.

Like us, all these people are anxious about the COVID-19 risk, and we need to ensure that they can feel secure about maintaining their housing and capacity to cover essential living expenses.

Getting people out of detention

We have been arguing for a long time now for the release of those detained in Immigration Detention centres and in Alternative Places of Detention (APODs). It seems essential that the 1400 or so asylum seekers and other non-citizens detained in such places are released now. In the past few weeks, there have been concerted calls from refugee advocacy groups for such action. However, the Home Affairs Department has rejected these humanitarian requests.

Those detained are in cramped conditions and many are compromised in terms of their general health. Health controls and physical distancing cannot be maintained. Some of those brought from PNG and Nauru were quite sick when they came to the mainland. Many of them are in hotels; sixty are in the Mantra in Preston in Melbourne and one hundred and twenty in Kangaroo Point Hotel in Brisbane. They are all very at-risk people in terms of Covid 19.

There are pragmatic and humanitarian reasons for placing these people (predominantly men) in the community. We are proposing this for those who pose no or low risk to the community. Such a move would save critical public resources as well as being a humane and compassionate response.

Releasing people from immigration detention would provide significant cost savings, as it costs \$346,660 to hold a person in immigration detention for one year, compared to \$103,343 for community detention and less than this if they were just released into the community.



Two year old Isabella who has been in MITA with her mother since she was born

There are some of those detained who have family or friends able to house and support them. Others would be supported by generous groups within the community. It would be important that those released be given Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments to ensure a minimal level of income with Medicare and work rights.

Meanwhile, all visits to detainees by family members and friends have been stopped, as well as all non-essential and non-critical outpatient appointments at clinics and hospitals. The men can only earn points by attending activities such as having a cup of coffee, watching a video, doing gardening, going to an English class and so on. All these activities involves being in close contact with each other. In MITA some of the rooms have five bunks in a room—so ten men in a small sleeping area.

Australian doctors and lawyers are also calling for detainees to be released. They especially called for a two-year-old girl being held in MITA to be released.

Other countries are freeing people from detention centres. The United Nations has called on governments around the world to immediately release refugees and migrants held in formal and informal places of detention as fears grow of a coronavirus outbreak in camps. The United Kingdom released hundreds of detained immigrants early in April.

Advocacy

It would be good to write to the Members of Parliament in the box opposite re income support for all asylum seekers and for the release from detention of all those in immigration Detention Centres.

The Hon Scott Morrison MP Prime Minister

Parliament House Canberra ACT
2600

Phone: (02) 6277 7340

Email: Scott.Morrison@aph.gov.au

Senator the Hon Anne Ruston Minister for Families and Social Services

PO Box 6022

Parliament House Canberra ACT
2600

Phone: (02) 6277 7560

Email: Senator.Ruston@aph.gov.au

The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP Treasurer

PO Box 6022

Parliament House Canberra ACT
2600

Phone: (02) 6277 7340

Email: Josh.Frydenberg.MP@aph.gov.au


A cross sector attempt to shine the light on all aspects of immigration detention

On Friday 21st February a Symposium on immigration detention in Australia was held at the Melbourne Law School. This was organized by the Refugee Advocacy Network. BASP is a very active member of this network.



About ninety people listened to a panel of expert speakers who critiqued the Australian policy of mandatory and indefinite detention from different perspectives. There was an initial presentation by Pamela Curr and Brigid Arthur which used actual words from people in detention.

21
February



**BEHIND CLOSED DOORS:
The Crisis in Australian
Immigration Detention**

Friday 21 February 2020
9.30am – 12.30pm
Melbourne Law School
185 Pelham Street, Carlton

‘Stateless’

Many of you doubtless viewed this mini series on the ABC. For those who didn’t see it we suggest you try to get it on ABC I-View. The series centres on four strangers in an immigration detention centre in the Australian desert: an airline hostess escaping a suburban cult, an Afghan refugee fleeing persecution, a young Australian father escaping a dead-end job and a bureaucrat caught up in a national scandal.

The series has been really well researched and it is gut wrenching. For those who have been closely following the history and experience of asylum seekers who end up in Australian detention centres this is a kaleidoscope of reality. While it has a focus on Cornelia Rau, a German citizen and Australian resident, who was unlawfully detained for 10 months, it depicts many aspects of the trauma of all those who arrived here by boat. It also shows the impact on some staff obliged to carry out government policy.

Rau’s detention triggered a major review of the immigration department's policies but a lot of the sheer inhumanity of the system remains.



Speakers and planning group

Message from the BASP Board

The Board wants to thank everyone who has been involved in the transition to the new normal. Thanks to all the volunteers who have adapted to the changes in how we work, to ensure we comply with government physical distancing requirements. Thanks to those who are still sending in food donations, and thanks to all the people who have donated money over time, that meant when a crisis such as this occurred, we had the financial reserves to ensure that we could keep going. The Project is still open, still supporting those who need our help, and ramping up our responses for those who were self sufficient but are now in need again, after losing jobs.

The Board has every confidence in our ability to continue this important work and navigate these difficult times.

The government has made it clear that they are drawing a line with who they help, and that line does not include asylum seekers. We all know how the people we work with have no home to go back to, and that the government position means it is up to groups like us to keep these people fed, housed, and connected. This makes the work of this Project, and our partners in the sector, more important than ever.

Julie Francis, Mark Northeast, Cecilia Merrigan, Margaret Hill, Norman Katende, Josh lourensz

Current work at BASP

Our centre is still open. We have a lot of requests for help because of the current situation in the community. We are doing as much as we can over the phone to help people but some come in for food or to see us because they have been given our address.

Housing

The FCJ Sisters have made a house available to BASP in St Albans. It lends itself to separate bedrooms and bathroom for 2 family groups, sharing the kitchen and laundry. The first occupants are a family - parents and a seven year old boy - recently arrived from Angola and French speaking. Additional residents will be introduced when and as suitable candidates emerge. A French speaking volunteer has been in phone contact with the family and this assists us greatly in keeping in touch.

One of the houses BASP rents in Lalor has been sold and the 3 men are to vacate by mid-May. One has been working full time and can seek alternative private arrangements, all being well re the virus. The other 2 have no regular income and are unlikely to gain this in the current circumstances. BASP will assist their relocation by the due date.

As at 8/4/20 BASP is housing 118 in BASP managed housing and is paying rent for a further 37.

Killester College in Springvale made a house available to a mother and her two daughters from the end of April. This family has no money, relying on BASP and other charities for all expenses. The mother's health precludes her from working at present and the eighteen year old daughter has not been able to find work. Thank you Killester—the family is thrilled.

Food- bank and Emergency Relief

BASP paid \$12k in emergency relief to people coming to the office or via food deliveries in March.

The Food bank was replenished by several generous donations from parishes, prior to the restrictions imposed because of the COVID 19. Individuals have continued to drop in goods.

Lobbying for asylum seekers to be included in the Job Keeper pack age has not been successful—to date

The following are examples BASP forwarded to the Refugee Council of Australia to assist in lobbying the government to include all employees who had worked for more than 12 months to be included in the Job Keeper package.

AB - a Sudanese man formerly assisted by BASP but became self sufficient with work, paying rent and then set up his own business. He has had to close the business for now and he again needs support with rent.

DB - an Ethiopian man supported by BASP with housing and money for several months on arrival 2 years ago and was assisted by us to get full time work. He moved into private housing but has been stood down while restrictions apply and has no income/support for rent.

AB - an Iranian woman who has worked for 3 years as After School coordinator at a secondary school - has been stood down. She came for food/money and to seek an arrangement with her landlord about rent. She has never sought help before.

MS - a man from Sierra Leone, stood down from the Windsor Hotel after 18 months. Like the others, he was formerly supported by BASP but moved on to paying his way while working. Now BASP needs to pay rent while restrictions apply.

It's not so easy to come to Australia—or to leave

A young man born in Tamil Nadu in India of Sri Lankan parents has been rejected at every step of the protection process and has been advised to leave. He has been to the Sri Lankan Embassy and told he does not belong in Sri Lanka as he has never been there. He went to the Indian Embassy and was told he cannot go there as neither he nor his parents are Indian citizens.

Home Affairs don't know what to do and he is in limbo with no visa or rights in Melbourne.

Another couple who came from Malaysia and have had two children here have also reached the end of their process and been told to return. We understand the Malaysian Embassy is seeking to review the comments they made in their protection



application because these may mean Malaysia will not accept them. It may also mean they could face retribution from the authorities in Malaysia if they actually do return.

The dilemma of having no visa

Ali is a young Afghan man who left his home in Ghazni Province in Afghanistan in 2012 as a sixteen year old. There were one hundred and seventy six on the boat he came on from Indonesia; about fifty of them were minors like him, many also from Ghazni.

Most of the young people were moved around various detention centres and eventually all were released. Ali lived in a BASP house for about four years. He was given a lawyer under the funded IAAAS program and he had negative results at every stage. He had the same grounds for application as most of the people from Afghanistan we met over these years.

Ali has kept in touch with a number of the others who came on the boat with him, and all except himself have been given Permanent Protection Visas.

Ali has never been in trouble. He has been without any visa since 2017. His life is on hold—

From a man we know who is detained in MITA

I am Sudanese. I am twenty six years old. I come from Darfur. Civil war has been going on in our part of Sudan since 2003. My father was killed by the Janjaweed (the militia).

I was a student in Khartoum University—I was doing Computer Science. I left home in 2013 because I was very frightened. Students were being abducted and killed. In 2014 I escaped and tried to get to Australia. The boat I was on was picked up and after a few days on Christmas Island I was sent to Manus Island. In December 2014, I went through the application for protection and was given refugee status. In 2016 I had another interview and was again given a positive answer.

In 2018 I applied to go to the US but Donald Trump said he would not take anyone from a number of countries— Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. So I couldn't go. The following year that ban by the US on people from Sudan was lifted but when I applied again they said because I had been not able to go the previous year, the ban still applied. About seventy five of us were rejected because of our country.

Then the people in charge closed the camps and we went to a compound. I used to go and see some people I had got friends with on the other side of the island. One day on the way for this visit I was attacked by some locals and badly beaten. I was in hospital for two months. After that I was too scared to go out. I still feel dizzy and I cant sleep or eat.

Then we were taken to Port Moresby. I was there for a month. A lot of my medical records were lost. However, eventually I was brought to Australia as part of the Medivac scheme. I was taken to MITA here in Melbourne in June 2019 and I have been here since then.

My mother won't talk to me because she says I must have done something very bad to be locked up all this time. I sometimes ring my sister in Sweden and ask her to tell my mother that I have done nothing wrong.

Several of my friends who came on the same boat were helped by BASP. I wish you could help me. I am grateful for the phone cards you send me.



“Tenacity in spades”

When we first met Mohamad he was homeless. A young twenty three year old, he had arrived in Australia a few months earlier with no support and no friends. He had had a job for three days with a removalist company but had dropped a TV and the company sacked him and took the money owing in wages to pay for the TV. BASP found him accommodation. It was almost Christmas. The only friend he had was an older Italian man who looked after him in the park when they were both homeless. That poor man has since been attacked and ended up in hospital.

Mohamad has worked so hard to get himself a job and into a position where he can care for himself. He looked for work everywhere - online, going to stores and cold calling - all to no avail.

Then someone contacted him and wanted to meet him about a potential job at 8.30pm.

Sounded a bit suspect but Mohamad went. It was a small cabinet maker who would teach Mohamad as long as he could work overnight. This meant travelling from Glenroy to Altona at times when there were few trains. It also meant walking quite a distance to the train stations at both ends of the journey.

‘Not a problem’ Mohamad said ...he started and at first made very little money but he improved and then was paid bit more.

However with the advent of Covid 19, there was no more cabinet making so Mohamad found a job stacking shelves at Coles.

When the firm that employed him lost the contract, Mohamed was again looking for a job... the third time in three months!

And now he has found a job that pays well and has a future - working in recycling.

This is a testament to his tenacity and his amazingly positive attitude. [Marian Steele]

While the world and how we live in it has changed since our last newsletter, many things remain the same – or increase.

People seeking asylum continue to need help with rent, food, money for myki and phones. Some, previously working and independent, are returning for assistance as discussed elsewhere.

However we also continue to see kindness and generosity from the broader community, even when they too are having their world shaken. We have been so appreciative of the continuing donations of food, Easter treats and children’s books from supporters. Also, a big thank you to those volunteers able to continue their activities, like Noelle who prepares the food deliveries, Pat, John and Tom who deliver to the households and John who does the furniture deliveries. We know also that other volunteers are in touch with their asylum seeker family or individual to check in on how they are going and letting us in the office know when something is needed.

Recently, we housed a family who came from a French speaking area in Africa.

If there are any volunteers who would like to try English lessons via Zoom, there are a couple of people interested in getting such help. Please call Libby if interested.

An amazing story through the work of Judy Dixon (probono Migration Agent with BASP)

Qays and Helen and their family are from Iraq. They have lived through some terrible times, including being homeless for three years after they had to flee for their lives from their town when it was attacked by DAESH in 2014. In 2017, they then went to a refugee camp in Turkey.

A couple of years ago, a relative of the family had asked BASP to assist with an application for two of his family members and their families to get a visa to come to Australia as refugees. One family's application was almost immediately rejected and there was no answer for the second family.

Then about a month ago everything changed. Judy Dixon was notified that they needed to lodge a document with much information. She did this and almost immediately they were given a response to go and pick up their visa.

Helen has a brother, Tareq, in Geelong and Judy rang him to say the family had been granted a Special Humanitarian Visa (a Permanent Visa). Tareq rang them with the good news.



He said to Judy that he had let them know about the Visa and

**‘They were sleeping,
now they are dancing’**

The photo above shows a beautiful moment

when they first got the news in Turkey. And the one to the right is arriving at Tullamarine.

They are now very happily in Geelong. Unfortunately, because of Covid 19, the children can't yet go to school and things are on hold. We wish this very brave family happiness as they embark on all things new.

On the next page we include another story of inspiring tenacity of the part of two people—a refugee and the same migration agent!



A cancelled event and a happy ending!

A group in the Castlemaine area had planned its annual picnic for people seeking asylum and refugees but this too came within the shut down period. The group worked tirelessly to prepare for a memorable day for all who attend. Never daunted, they arranged a virtual raffle and one of the proposed BASP attendees won 3rd prize. They also sent beautifully made material show bags with treats inside, to be distributed to people in Melbourne.

A poignant reminder

One family with 3 young daughters was able to have a few days away at the Presentation Family Centre (PFC) in Balnarring, before Covid 19 took hold.

Both parents have significant physical health issues and no money and they loved this opportunity for their family. When asked if they had had a holiday before, they said yes, the weekend away at DOXA camp last year.

Another family's holiday to PFC was cancelled, as was a weekend away for 2 families with members of the Mariana Community at Millgrove. That has been sad.

Jobs

During the past five years BASP has helped 140 asylum seekers to look for employment.

Some jobs have been professional—including a civil engineer working for a major construction company, some semi professional like the driver working for a car franchise or a fruit picker.

If anyone has any work they could offer to an asylum seeker we would be very pleased to hear from them. Work makes all the difference to a person's sense of self worth as well as providing them with some income.

After waiting and waiting and waiting ...

Another story of Judy's tenacity is clearly evident in many applications over many years. The following is one ...

In **2015** a young man was granted a Permanent Protection Visa in Australia. He was one of those people who was a refugee with no rights who lived all his life illegally in another country. He married a young woman from that country.

In **2016** he applied for a Partner Visa for his wife and 4 sons.

In **2017** this application was refused by the Australian Immigration Department.

Judy made an application to the AAT for a Review of the Decision. There was a Hearing early in **2019**. This was successful. The Department was notified and asked to grant the Partner Visa.

He waited more than 6 months for a response from Immigration.

The Paper File apparently had to be sent to Dubai, UAE, before any action could be taken.

Since then he has been asked to provide an enormous amount of documentation. This has included

- Evidence of enrolment at school and student ID cards (impossible for the children to attend school, as not legal residents),
- Country residence cards (they don't exist)
- National Police Checks (impossible if not a legal resident)
- Biometrics,
- DNA checks,
- Health checks,
- new passports,
- signed Australian Values statements.

This is in addition to the usual Birth Certificates, Statutory Declarations, character witnesses and so on. Many of these documents have to be paid for.

He has provided all of this with Judy's help. And he has supported his family overseas, worked at hard back breaking jobs, and stayed extraordinarily cheerful.

In the meantime because of the long delays, two children have reached adulthood and there may be new rules applying to them.

Earlier this year this amazing man was notified that he had passed all requirements for Citizenship and this would be awarded in April. Due to Covid 19 virus, this has been postponed.

He is still waiting.....



News 17 April: A Tamil couple and their two Australian-born daughters from the regional Queensland town of Biloele have had yet another reprieve and will not be deported to Sri Lanka immediately, after a federal court ruled that the family was denied procedural fairness in considering their visa claim in 2019. We hope there will a happy ending to this terrible and drawn out situation.

It is difficult for many of those who normally bring food to stock our pantry. However a number of places and individuals are still bringing in food and others have donated vouchers.



The following are still very much appreciated:

Sugar , flour , cooking oil, Cans of fruit and tomatoes.

Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, honey, noodles, tuna, basmati rice, dates, jam

Gladwrap, tinfoil, pegs for hanging out washing,

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches (even when home!), Salt and pepper, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste and toothbrushes. Soap, deodorants

Toilet paper



We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products.

We have enough cans of beans, tinned soup, beetroot and corn.

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust
Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

Please put your name on the entry and if possible send us a message so that we can send you a receipt. This could be a text message on 0438 001 515 or an email to jcaldwell@basp.org.au.



We are very grateful for all the help we get from our supporters. The messages of encouragement that many of you send are wonderful.



Over this time of 'social distancing' this has been particularly true. It is so hard for most people—but many of us have phone and internet connections with family and friends. Many asylum seekers are really isolated.

We are looking forward to the time when some kind of normalcy returns. We even keep hoping for some changes that because of adversity, some kinder responses - some regular income for everyone and a release from detention centres of those locked up. So far no changes.

May you all stay safe and may you experience some of the warmth that many who are assisted by BASP feel towards you.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)