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## Providing Rental Support for Asylum Seekers

### Introduction

This note identifies issues that need to be addressed in considering the provision by a parish of accommodation for asylum seekers. It includes a case study of a parish that has recently provided leased accommodation and other support to an asylum seeker family.

Each Parish will decide how it is best able to assist asylum seekers and refugees, having regard to the people and skills, and the financial resources available to the Parish.

Access to safe and comfortable accommodation is one of our fundamental needs, something many asylum seekers have not had access to. Rental support for an asylum seeker family is an important way for parishes to help, where this is a feasible option.

In addition, rental support can also sit well with other parish programs, eg fundraising for this cause can be a good community-building project, and provision of accommodation can increase parishioner awareness of asylum seeker issues and provide opportunities for engagement through property maintenance, provision of hospitality, etc.

For further information on any of the matters covered in this note, please contact:

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### Resource assessment

Before deciding upon offering rental support, the Parish will need to consider the resource implications of such support

- How much would it cost to rent a property?
- Consider the financial and other needs of an asylum seeker family. Some asylum seekers have work rights, others don't. A family without work rights may need more financial support, while a family with work rights may not be able to obtain work. This may place additional support obligations on the parish.

These issues can be explored with others who are engaged in this work. Our project can put you in touch with people from agencies and parishes who are experienced in this area.

The parish will also need to consider its own resources and interests –

- Is there a committed, reliable group of people in the Parish who could carry this project forward and sustain it over time?
- Does the parish have the financial resources to part or fully fund rental for a significant period?
  - the program would not be open-ended, but one year would probably be the minimum period.

- Nor would it be good if other valued programs were to suffer financially from this new commitment.
- How much will be raised from fundraising, and how much from existing funds? Does fundraising need to commence before a final decision can be made?
- Would it be beneficial to partner with a neighbouring parish or organisation?

### Next Steps

If members of a Parish decide to proceed, it will be necessary to work through a range of issues. Our project can assist in this preliminary work, and in putting into effect such steps as training for parish personnel.

- Ensure that key parish people are on board - the Parish Priest, the Parish finance committee, the local SVdP conference, etc, and are regularly updated.
- Consider the potential for the project to engage parishioners and other communities, eg the local primary school in the project. How can the project be used to extend awareness of asylum seeker issues?
- Select and train the parish team.
  - Who will lead the project?
  - How many parishioners will be directly involved? How will they be selected, considering that they may encounter new issues in relation to religion, culture and family privacy?
  - Who will train the parish team? Training may be available from one of the agencies who deal with asylum seekers, including CatholicCare, Jesuit Social Services, MacKillop Family Services, St Vincent de Paul Society
  - The Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne and all parishes have Child Safety Policies and Codes of Conduct to ensure the care, safety and wellbeing of all children and young people in our care. Everyone employed or volunteering in parishes has a responsibility to understand the important and significant role he/she plays to ensure that the wellbeing and safety of all children is at the forefront of all they do and every decision they make. Please refer to your Parish's Child Safety Policy and Code of Conduct for more information.
- Consider leasehold issues.
  - How will the Parish engage with the landlord and real estate agent on behalf of an asylum seeker family?
  - Who will sign the lease documents?
  - Will the asylum seeker family be required to contribute to the rent? To utilities or other payments?
  - Consider the leasehold obligations, eg for payment of rent, making good for fair wear and tear. Are responsibilities clear between the landlord, tenant and the Parish?

- Consider necessary insurances.
  - Consider the need to amend parish insurances for any extra risks that may be incurred, eg parish volunteers involved with providing accommodation and interacting with the asylum seeker family.
  - Public liability insurance cover for the accommodation occupied by the asylum seeker family
- Consider the needs of the family in relation to food, clothing, schools, transport.
  - Is the Parish able to help with any of these? Can Vinnies or other agencies help?
  - Will the family have access to medical and other services?
  - Who will keep an eye on the family's welfare?
  - As asylum seekers on bridging visas, it is likely that the family will be required to report regularly to an agency such as the Red Cross. It will be necessary to be clear on what supports the family has, and if there are any gaps which need to be addressed.
- Consider the needs of the family in relation to everyday support, hospitality and privacy.
  - How will these be provided and maintained?
  - What will the Parish take responsibility for, and will the boundaries regarding responsibilities be clear?
  - Who will be the Parish contact?
  - How will the family's privacy be ensured?
- Consider how the family will learn to fit in to Australian society.
  - Will the parish assist the family to get to know their new environment? If so, the aim should be to assist the family to become empowered to settle – to learn the language, to understand social, political and economic realities, without unnecessary intervention by the parish.

### Case Study – East Suburban parish in Melbourne

Initially three people decided that it would be good for the parish to support an asylum seeker family in rental accommodation. This was discussed with the parish's Social Justice Group, and agreed that it should comprise a separate initiative to the work of the Social Justice Group.

The proposal was agreed with the Parish Priest, the Parish Council and the Finance Committee. It was agreed that the parish would contribute \$10,000 a year to the project, with the project team to raise a further \$10,000. It is expected that the project will last for two years, with a further \$20,000 to be raised next year. The parish ensured that its financial strategy was achievable and sustainable before it committed to the project.

Additional parishioners joined the project team, including the president of the local Vinnies conference, a real estate agent member of the parish, together with several other volunteers, while an appropriate gender balance was achieved on the project team.

It was decided to rent a two bedroom unit for \$374 pw in a nearby suburb so that the asylum seeker family would be within reach of the parish, which could then provide additional services to the family. The estate agent member of the team assisted with locating properties and speaking with landlords to facilitate leasing to an asylum seeker family. Although the lease was initially signed by the parish, it was subsequently changed to the family, to help the family gain rental and payment history, with the parish acting as guarantor to the lease.

Sr Brigid Arthur, Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project, nominated an asylum seeker family who had arrived in Australia by air in need of accommodation. Parish appeals raised the additional funding required, and helped to furnish the unit.

The family is from the Middle East, comprising a husband and wife and two children. They do not receive Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme (ASAS) allowance, but have work rights. The father is seeking work while the mother cares for their two children, aged 6 and 8. The parish has helped the family to enrol at the local Catholic primary school. The school decided that they would not turn the children away for inability to pay, and has enrolled them. The family's English is good, and the children's English has improved rapidly.

The parish aims to provide the family with a level of support according to a basic Australian community standard. The family are responsible for paying utilities costs from their own capital, which contributes to establishing a positive credit history and providing an incentive to minimise costs. The SVdP conference supplies food vouchers to family each week, as well as school clothing.

The parish does not promote general parishioner access to the family, both to promote family independence and to ensure privacy. The family's private information is closely guarded.

The parish does not provide case management – this is undertaken by the Red Cross and ASRC.

Parish volunteers attended three or four training and familiarisation sessions provided by CatholicCare to ensure they understood aspects of relating to asylum seekers.

Parish insurance covers volunteers supporting the family. Public liability cover has been taken out for the unit occupied by the family.

Overall the parish engaged in 4 months fairly intensive planning and recruiting before it was able to offer accommodation to the family.

At the time of preparing this case study (August 2014), the family has been accommodated for 8 months. Parishioners are grateful for the opportunity to support the family, and have found the experience a very positive influence in the life of the parish.