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Housing Asylum Seekers – A Partnership Approach

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During 2004/2005, Red Hill Paddington Community Centre auspiced two “Housing for Asylum Seekers” projects on behalf of several volunteer refugee support groups throughout Brisbane. These projects were funded through the Brisbane City Council’s Community Development grants and although the funding allowed for six months full time work, the Centre spread this over sixteen months, which allowed the project to develop over time.

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The Project aims were to:

- ◆ Gain recognition of the needs and human rights of refugee claimants
- ◆ Join and strengthen the advocacy efforts at State and Federal levels
- ◆ Seek policy changes that enable refugee claimants to access essential services (eg housing assistance, health services, and income support)
- ◆ to find innovative housing solutions for refugee claimants and the community agencies supporting them

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The project was grounded in a research project conducted by Mandy Cox and Emma Greenhalgh, “Asylum Seekers and Housing: Barriers, Issues and Needs.” The aim of the research was to provide an evidentiary basis to the work of advocates for refugee claimants and the housing project. The report was launched in June 2004, and directed a number of recommendations to government and community groups.

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One of the most marginalised groups in our community is asylum seekers on bridging visas. If a person arrives in Australia with a valid visa and applies for asylum, they are given a “Bridging Visa” that allows them to remain legally in the country while their application for refugee status is being considered.

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They are not entitled to:

- ◆ Any government support through Centrelink
- ◆ Access to English Classes or resettlement assistance
- ◆ Access to public housing or other housing assistance

Commonly, refugee claimants also do not have work permission and therefore no access to earning a living or health services through Medicare. Individuals and

families in this situation are living a “hand to mouth” existence that is totally reliant upon the charitable impulses of people in Queensland. (See PowerPoint Table)

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The Red Hill Paddington refugee support network must raise over \$40,000 per year to provide minimal (barely covering living costs) support for nine asylum seekers that the group have taken responsibility for. Most of this money goes to their housing costs.

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The Red Hill Paddington Community Centre has provided significant financial and staff support for the Project. The Centre’s work with homeless and marginalised meant we recognise the primary importance of housing in people being able to exert positive control over other aspects of their lives. Our work auspicing the Refugee network of Support meant staff had contact with refugee claimants, which sensitised them to the needs of this disadvantaged group.

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Our partnership approach assisted RHPCC as a management and risk assessment tool. RHPCC is not a registered housing provider. Instead we work as an ‘enabler’ or ‘community broker’. We have contracted out the tenancy management for properties that have been acquired through the project with a Community Rent Scheme (MATCH). This arrangement has meant that MATCH carries out tenancy and asset management procedures, and RHPCC is bound by a lessor agreement.

The project aimed to engage with the private sector in a number of ways. Urban developers and public relations companies had been identified as pivotal to the success of the CRASH model in the UK and in Sydney.

However, the Project identified a number of issues arising from the CRASH ‘caretaker model’ for the client group. These included:

- The investment required to make commercial dwellings habitable, and the quick turn around required for stock that was slated for development, meant that privately owned properties were not generally suitable for the project;
- The visa conditions of refugee claimants precluded training and/or receiving payment in kind by providing a caretaker/security services.
- Local Planning constraints.
- The housing stock acquired was not always the right profile for the clients (for example, three bedroom homes when our clients were largely single adults). This meant that a cross-subsidy model was employed, whereby low-income families could access the housing, and their rents would contribute to the housing costs of refugee claimants. This was also suitable for refugee claimants who wished to avoid the unsettling process of moving house.

The Housing for Asylum Seekers Project determined that better housing outcomes for refugee claimants would be gained from project-specific requests for assistance and involvement from the private sector. To this end, private donations have been sought for the redevelopment of properties that have been acquired.

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The project identified opportunities for development of housing options:

Sisters of Mercy

- Convent and flat made available for up to six months for refugee claimant (this timeline now over)

Queensland Rail

- 3 houses available at peppercorn rent for three years. RHPCC undertook refurbishment on the properties; two were funded through corporate donations and RHPCC fundraising activities, and one through a GMBF grant.
- Cross Subsidy Model -

Brisbane City Council

- Funded Research Report and “Housing for Asylum Seekers Project.”
- House at Kelvin Grove through Community Housing Partnership Program.

Future Possibilities

- Redevelopment of four Red Hill units owned by BCC.
- Queensland Rail crew quarters may be gifted if land and removal/renovation funds can be found.

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There were a number of people who helped us along the way. Our aim was to talk to as many people as possible to see if they could help us make a contribution towards an appropriate housing response for refugee claimants. Although the great majority said no, the small percentage that said yes made all the difference – and who they were shaped the model of housing response that we ultimately ended up with.

(Show Flow Chart Here)

Some helped us by ‘making the connections’ for us in introducing us to potential partners. The Affordable Housing Unit in the Department of Housing did this for us with Queensland Rail. Mr John McAuliffe, Property Development Consultant and Board Member of the Brisbane Housing Company and the Mater Hospital paved the way for us with the Sisters of Mercy.

Our main engagement with the private sector has been through the refurbishment of properties. This was largely funded through activities such as the Adrift Art Show at the end of 2004 which attracted a large amount of private sponsorship (we raised about \$55,000 from that one event), and from tradespeople who gave us significant discounts and in kind donations to make our dollar go further.

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Throughout the Project it was important not to lose the Vision of what we wanted to achieve. Sometimes things can take a life of their own and what you end up with doesn’t meet the needs of clients or fulfil the practise principles that should be non-negotiable. As a long time tenant advocate, I feel too often the right questions are not asked – What will it be like to live here? How can we make sure that tenants needs are met based on their priorities, rather than the organisations?

The cross-subsidy model came about purely as a response to our client group giving us feedback.

Cost considerations for low income households means that for housing to be affordable, the bottom 40% of households on the income distribution should spend no more than 30% of their income on rental payments. RHPCC would ensure that the rent policy for tenants would conform to this definition of affordable housing. As a registered charity Red Hill Paddington Community Centre (RHPCC) could harness private and community sector support for the project that would not be otherwise available to Council. RHPCC as a registered charity has GST exemption and Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) status, which gives us significant cost advantages over Council and private developments. The objects of our Association also ensure that the property cannot be used for a profit-making purpose.

Security of tenure for tenants can be offered through the lease arrangements RHPCC has with Queensland Rail, which we feel is a more appropriate response than what DIMIA has asked their community housing contractor to provide.

Property prices and development pressures have contributed markedly to the loss of low cost housing stock in Brisbane over many years. RHPCC therefore feels a strong commitment to pursue every opportunity to increase affordable housing in the inner city. We know we can't make a difference unless we work in partnership with others, especially the refugee claimants and the volunteers from the Network of Support. For example, the Reference Group for the Housing for Asylum Seekers project consisted of a number of agencies that were attempting to respond to the needs of refugee claimants and others:

- Red Hill Paddington Community Centre
- Refugee Claimant Support Centre
- Gateway Community Support
- Kyabra
- Project Micah
- QCOSS
- New Farm Neighbourhood Centre
- Brisbane City Council – Social Action and Equity
- MATCH Community Rent Scheme
- Queensland Department of Housing – Brisbane Central Office

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Finally, the challenge in working in an environment where more and more players are keen to avoid direct housing provision for disadvantaged groups is to look at the resources that go into projects and determine the 'market' value of what has been achieved. For the fairly modest amounts provided for the project workers wage, we are happy to say that the implied financial benefit of the housing obtained far outweighs the costs to the funding body.

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When looking at the sustainability of the Project, the housing has the potential of being available to us into the next decade.

In addition, we have by no means tapped the potential of disused or underused residential stock that could be captured in a similar project elsewhere in Queensland or Australia,

We have been in discussion with the Queensland Government over the 1,000's of residential dwellings that are currently rented on the private rental market or are sitting empty while they await their ultimate fate – why not in the meantime hand them over to community groups? Registered community housing providers funded through the Community Rent Scheme Program would be well placed to take on the tenant management of the properties. We need department to department agreements to make this happen, and we ask for others to join us to create a supportive community, government and political environment so that these resources can be mobilised to address affordable housing needs in Brisbane.

Thank you