

Friday 17 February 2012

ASYLUM SEEKERS DESERVE A HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Julie Edwards, CEO of Jesuit Social Services, expressed her dismay at the Herald Sun coverage of the welcome packs of household goods made available to asylum seekers released into community detention (17/2/12 *Asylum seekers made to feel at home, thanks to a \$10,000 welcome pack*). "These people arrive with nothing" said Ms Edwards. "We have obligations as a signatory to international human rights conventions to assist people seeking asylum on our shores.

"We are a rich country and getting richer, and other countries are responding more generously than we are" Ms Edwards continued. "Take Sweden for example. Together with other Nordic countries, with a combined population roughly equivalent to Australia's, they received and processed 51, 120 asylum claims in a single year, compared with Australia's 6 500".

Currently, Jesuit Social Services is in a partnership with MacKillop Family Services and CatholicCare providing accommodation and support to some of the children and young people who have been released into the community from detention. These children - in isolation from their families who are often still overseas- have fled the most intolerable conditions, conditions of a scale many of us will never see in a lifetime: war, famine, political chaos and sexual and physical and abuse, including torture.

"We have precedent for this kind of community welcome in Australia too - the placing of Congolese refugees in Shepparton as a Howard government pilot proved very successful, broke down all types of stereotypes and evoked a real sense of good will in the community".

Ms Edwards said that this type of welcome is far more consistent with the long held Australian value of giving everyone a fair go. "We see this value alive and well at times of natural disaster or human catastrophe through famine or war. Australians donate incredibly generously after such calamities. It's not just the money but the genuine outpouring of grief and dismay for the suffering of these people, whether on our own shores or far away, that I am always so impressed by. We need to understand the plight of refugees and asylum seekers in the same way - not see it first and foremost as an issue of national security.

"We need our leaders - and our media - to stand up for what's right and promote justice and a fair go for all" said Ms Edwards.

Jesuit Social Services is a not-for-profit organisation which works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged young people, families and communities.

Catherine Neville 0407 318 832

Julie Edwards, CEO 0418 163 539