Position Statement
People Seeking Asylum in Australia

Background
At MercyCare, we are troubled like others about the ongoing suffering and the violation of human rights of people fleeing from war, persecution and torture across the globe. Australia sees a very small percentage of the world’s displaced people who have been forced to leave their homeland as a result of war, persecution and torture. Our contact with people seeking asylum has taught us that most would prefer to be back in their homeland, and that those who came to Australia by boat have a right to be treated in accordance with international law.

Most have endured great hardship and risks to escape harm. Unfortunately, this trauma does not end with their arrival. In the last decade the way Australian governments have handled people seeking asylum has further exacerbated the trauma they have already endured. We have also seen an erosion of the basic values of truth and honesty in the public discourse and a diminishment of Australia’s collective humanitarian response to the plight and suffering of asylum seekers.

This ongoing trauma manifests itself as serious psychological and emotional damage, and further deprivations including indefinite detention, prolonged waiting to resolve visa status, restricted opportunities to attend to health needs, withdrawal of basic income support, restricted access to education, prevention of family reunions, and limited or no meaningful occupation or work. This makes their situation dramatically worse, resulting in many sliding into hopelessness and despair.

As a service provider working with asylum seeker individuals and families in Western Australia MercyCare remains concerned about their situation and believes there needs to be a serious review of the approach being taken in Australia.

MercyCare’s position
MercyCare desires to be part of an Australia that upholds and meets its obligations under the United Nations Conventions relating to the Status of Refugees and the Rights of the Child. MercyCare does not want to see any further erosion of our achievements on human rights and ethical standards.
We are acutely aware of the enormous number of displaced people around the world, and the real and complex challenges this presents for governments and the broader global community. We believe Australia has the capacity to respond humanely, act with compassion and to maintain ethical and human rights standards. According to international law, people seeking asylum have the legal right to do so regard-less of how they arrive in a country. Yet in Australia, those who have arrived by boat have been labelled as “illegal” arrivals – and treated harshly to deter further boat arrivals.

MercyCare is deeply concerned about both the protracted processes and the finally determined outcomes that people have been subject to in recent years in Australia in seeking refugee status. We believe that people seeking asylum can and do make a valuable contribution to our society, evident in the many stories from around Australia. However, without security and support they are not being given the opportunity to do so fully and freely.

MercyCare supports the following policy measures in relation to people seeking asylum and joins its voice with the many others across Australia who also believe that there are better ways in which we could be responding.

- Devoting resources to the pursuit of regional development and a humane framework to manage and provide effective protection and assistance for people seeking asylum additional resources being devoted to processing protection claims in Malaysia and Indonesia;
- Ensuring international law is upheld when offshore asylum claim processing arrangements are in place for people seeking protection in Australia, and we ensure people are assessed in a fair and timely way whilst living in humane and safe conditions.
- Increasing our level of humanitarian protection through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement program;
- Upholding and meeting our responsibilities under the UN Refugee Convention, to which Australia is a signatory;
- Upholding and meeting our international obligations under the Convention of the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory;
- Detaining people only for limited periods for identity, health and security checks;
- Ensuring that all individuals have access to legal advice in the processing of their claims;
- Offering appropriate trauma and wellbeing support to aid their recovery;
Ensuring appropriate English language and cultural adjustment support is in place to enable their inclusion in society;

Mandating that children of families seeking asylum have access to local public schooling;

Ensuring that people have the right to work while awaiting the outcome of their protection claims and appropriate income support if they are unable to find work or have barriers that prohibit them from working;

Making transport concessions available to help families access schooling and meaningful occupation in the Australian community; and

Creating pathways for family reunion opportunities.

MercyCare’s commitment to asylum seekers

MercyCare has been providing support to asylum seekers since 2011. Even though we do not support recent Australian governments’ approach to asylum seekers particularly those who arrived by boat, we have chosen to remain a service provider so that we can connect and support a group of very vulnerable people who have sought asylum in this country. This is motivated by MercyCare’s mission commitment to people experiencing vulnerability, marginalisation and significant disadvantage.

MercyCare has been providing a range of services to assist asylum seekers in settling into society, adapting to the new culture, navigating systems and services, finding a place to live and connecting into the community. Our commitment can be demonstrated by the organisation contributing our own funds when necessary to address unmet needs, implementing initiatives in the areas of social justice education, advocacy, provision of additional and/or complimentary services and emergency funds. MercyCare is committed to delivering services and forming collaborative alliances with other organisations to assist asylum seekers, thus enabling us to bring alive our focus on breaking cycles of suffering and significant disadvantage for those whose circumstances challenge our sense of mercy, compassion and justice.

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