

JUST IN TIME



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No place like home...

Each year Australia offers a approximately 13,000 refugees a place to call home. However, being granted residency in Australia is not the end of the story. For many refugees, it is just the beginning of a long struggle to find an actual, physical home to call their own.

There was a time when the "Aussie dream" was to own your own house on a quarter-acre block of land. Some Australians, through years of hard work, were able to realise this dream. Today, owning your own home has become more of a fantasy than an achievable dream. This is especially so for those in the most vulnerable positions in our society.

With the economic downturn, and other social push factors, more families have turned to renting rather than taking on a mortgage. This has lead to a rental crisis in NSW. With increased competition has come greater strain on those in need of low-cost housing.

Thankfully, the NSW and Federal Governments are seeking to ease the strain on families in need of affordable housing. Since coming to power in 2007 Prime Minister Rudd has stressed that housing and homelessness are important issues for his Government. As a means of tackling these issues the Government released their **Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan (NBESP)**.

In NSW, this plan focuses on the creation of 9,000 new social housing homes by 2012. These houses will be spread across the state and mixed in with private housing developments. The planned total spending from the State and Federal Governments is \$2.9 billion for the construction of new housing and a further \$470 million on maintenance and upgrades for existing social housing.

It is reassuring to know that the Government is working to address the housing shortage, and the flow-on problem of homelessness. However, there are social, not just logistical, factors that need to be addressed.

When considering housing in NSW, the housing shortage, and the Governments' plans to address it, are obvious points to consider. However, the problem for refugees posed by the housing shortage is not an issue that receives much coverage.

When refugees are discussed in the media, the focus is generally on the controversy associated with the way in which some of them enter Australia. Rarely do we get a glimpse of what refugees face once they finally reach Australian shores and are granted residency. Unfortunately, the housing shortage and rental crisis make it especially difficult for refugees to start a new life in Australia.

In addition to the obstacles facing anyone looking for affordable housing in NSW, are the added disadvantages of having little or no English skills, no stable income, no rental history or references, and an unfamiliarity with how the housing market operates. Despite the old adage that "beggars can't be choosers" refugees also have specific needs that not every house can meet.

One of the most significant of these is the need to be close to a familiar ethnic community and the services that go with that community.



The Fairfield area of south-western Sydney is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Australia. Due to its vibrant communities and its variety of culturally-appropriate amenities, it is a popular destination for newly-arrived immigrants and refugees.

Unfortunately, the pull-factor of this region has only added to the rental crisis and made affordable housing in the area extremely scarce, with rental costs rising by over 15% in recent years.

Despite rising prices, refugee families still seek to live in this area, as having the support of a familiar community is an invaluable aid in the process of coming to call Australia home.

In addition to having a supportive community, another common housing need specific to some refugee families is the need for a large house. Some refugee families, particularly those from Sudan, can have up to ten or more children. This makes finding appropriate low-cost housing almost impossible. Some families have been known to crowd into one or two bedroom houses, making-do in the cramped conditions.

When faced with homelessness many refugees stay with friends or relatives, creating a new set of problems for both families.

This "hidden homelessness" is sadly not uncommon amongst refugee families. Stories of refugees sheltering in garages or sleeping in churches at night reveals that homelessness is not just something that we encounter on the streets of the city.

The **House of Welcome**, a not-for-profit organisation located in Carramar in Sydney's south-west, helps to provide refugees with emergency and low-cost transitional rental accommodation. They also help with finding permanent accommodation, provide English and computer lessons, and generally assist refugees and asylum seekers to settle successfully into the Australian community.

We spoke to the Assistant Manager of the House of Welcome, Catherine Rothery, and she stressed the importance of stable housing for someone who is new to Australia.

Often refugees have experienced the destruction of their home or the trauma of having to flee their homeland. The stress of shifting back and forth between emergency accommodation, or the indignity of living in cramped and squalid conditions only adds to the sense of vulnerability and alienation that many refugees already feel.



The House of Welcome at work

We asked Catherine how JUST IN TIME readers could become involved in this issue. One suggestion she offered was that each of us needs to become personally informed about the problems facing refugees. Ignorance can often be the biggest obstacle to change, so Catherine suggests that you share a conversation about this issue with friends and colleagues. Sparing a thought for those struggling to find housing when we are in our own homes is also a valuable exercise.

Of course writing to your local politician, or the Minister for Housing (see details on the right) to express your concern will also raise the profile of this particular issue in the political sphere.

The House of Welcome receives no government funding and runs primarily on the work of volunteers and donations from churches and the public. If you are in a position to make a donation, or if you would like to extend your own hand in welcome as a volunteer, see the contact details (right) to find out more.

Web links

HOUSE OF WELCOME

www.houseofwelcome.com.au

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NATION BUILDING ECONOMIC STIMULUS PLAN (NBES)

<http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/Changes+to+Social+Housing/Nation+Building+Economic+Stimulus+Plan/>

and click on 'NBESP newsletter - January 2010'

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