



AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES
REFUGEE TASKFORCE



National Council of
Churches in Australia

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URGENT MEDIA RELEASE

CHURCHES TASKFORCE SEEKS ASSURANCES TO REDUCE DETENTION HEALTH RISKS

In an urgent letter to the Acting Chief Medical Officer Professor Paul Kelly and the Minister for Health, Mr Greg Hunt, the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) has sought urgent assurances from the responsible government public health authorities that the people at detention centres in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney have safe accommodation during the continuing pandemic as social distancing is not possible in the common areas of current facilities and where bathrooms and bedrooms are shared.

The Churches Taskforce appeals for guaranteed access to COVID-19 testing when any symptoms are present in immigration detention centres and an assurance that people moving in and out of these locations in a staff role are both trained and monitored with regard to the highest standards of infection control and prevention.

Mr Rob Floyd, Chair of the Australian Churches' Taskforce said that "With the recent infections of staff assigned to the Mantra Hotel at Preston in Melbourne's COVID 19 lockdown area, and Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney, we believe that the public health risks mean that those moving freely in and out of these centres pose the highest public health risk at this time."

"In seeking these assurances, we must reiterate that our preferred position is that refugees and asylum seekers in crowded immigration detention locations in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney are safely transferred into community housing as a public health benefit for all. We are some of the groups that have offered to help with housing" Mr Floyd said.

"Our church members, chaplains and ministers, including religious sisters and brothers, who have previously undertaken visits and maintain life-giving and at times life-saving relationships with immigration detainees in Australia, have conveyed to us their utmost concern about the public health risks associated with the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers in hotels and detention centres during the COVID 19 pandemic – specifically at Preston VIC, Kangaroo Point QLD and Villawood NSW" said Ms Liz Stone, General Secretary of the NCCA, in the urgent letter.

Last week workers assigned to working with people detained at the Mantra Hotel at Preston and at Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney have tested positive for COVID-19. This was a scenario feared by one thousand medical professionals in April, who asked the Government to release refugees and people seeking asylum from detention into safe housing, as part of a responsible public health approach to this pandemic.

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Background

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (The Taskforce) came together in early 2013 and is an initiative of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), a Council that represents 18 full members and 5 observer Australian Christian churches.

The Taskforce is committed to engage and advocate with asylum seekers and refugees in the national debate about Australia's treatment and attitudes toward them and the constantly changing government policies affecting them. This commitment is based on the strong Christian values of compassion, generosity and hospitality in response to people experiencing injustice. Love for our neighbour and care for the stranger are hallmarks of our Christian faith lived in the world.