

If the Asylum Seeker Centre of NSW cannot raise \$150,000 by the end of June, we will have to close the Centre or, at a minimum, severely curtail its operations – leaving genuine asylum seekers like Aisha and Manu without the vital specialist daily support they can only get from us.

1 June 2010

Dear Friend,

This is the most important and difficult letter I have ever written. The headline sums up why I am writing to you as a valued supporter of the Asylum Seekers Centre. I know that you care about our work and I am confident you would not want to see us fail, at a time when the need is increasing day by day.

After 16 years the work of the Asylum Seekers Centre is as vital as ever – if not more so. As the only centre of its kind in NSW, **last year we had a more than 50% increase in the numbers of asylum seekers needing our support** and this trend has continued into 2010. At the same time, with the global financial crisis and a public perception that the Federal Government had resolved issues in this area, we have seen a sharp decline in our income over the same period. These opposing forces have brought us to this very difficult moment. ***This is why we urgently need the most generous gift that you can afford at this time to help ensure the survival of the Centre.***

We exist to support our clients - asylum seekers who already live in New South Wales having fled persecution or other dangers in the countries they have come from. They are seeking protection and a new life in Australia. Many have experienced torture or other forms of trauma associated with organised violence or exile. Many have spent time in immigration detention. Some have been awaiting a final determination on their applications for humanitarian protection for many years. During this time, many asylum seekers often have no right to work which means that they cannot access Medicare and they are almost completely reliant on the support of organisations like ourselves. The best way to explain what the Asylum Seekers Centre means for each of those clients is to tell you the story of Aisha.

Aisha and Manu* arrived in Australia in March 2010 after fleeing from Liberia. Aisha was 26 years old and 7 months pregnant when she first arrived in Australia and on the doorstep of the Centre. She and her husband Manu were about to become homeless and they had not yet spoken to a medical practitioner about the pregnancy. Their immediate need for a safe haven was met when the ASC caseworker sourced financial and housing support. Most importantly, Aisha was given an appointment with our volunteer GP and a referral for ongoing pre-natal care. The ASC provided food and phone cards to ensure they were able to feed themselves and make essential phone calls.

Aisha's story is not uncommon, as genuine asylum seekers are often unaware of where to get help and are in desperate need. She and Manu were lucky they found the Centre. In the 16 years since

its inception, the Centre has provided a broad range of critical supports to over 3,500 adult and child asylum seekers like them. These are people who are living legally in the community but who sometimes desperately require assistance with homelessness, health issues, legal guidance and even food.

For asylum seekers like Aisha we offer a vital and unique service and one that is now under threat – from the squeeze of increasing need and a tougher funding environment. The number of new clients approaching the Centre for help recently has been the highest for eight years. And the need is not going away. In fact, if anything the challenges are increasing in scale and severity:

- in 2007-08 we welcomed 250 new clients from 46 countries
- during 2008-09, this number had swelled to 386 new clients from 52 countries.

This represents a more than 50% increase on the previous year and this demand continues.

In addition to this increased demand from new clients, we continue to provide assistance to more than 150 existing clients requiring ongoing support. Due to past experiences and the uncertainty of the refugee status determination process, many of our clients are highly vulnerable, often experiencing homelessness, acute illness or other crisis situations which drives some to consider suicide.

At the same time as the need is increasing, our regular donations and pledges from both individuals and charitable organizations have halved over the last 2 years. Like so many other individuals and organisations, we have been badly affected by the global financial crisis and perhaps the perception that the federal government had resolved issues surrounding asylum seekers.

It is important to remember that ***the Centre receives no Federal or State Government funding.*** We are entirely reliant on grants and donations from supporters as well as an extensive network of volunteers and pro-bono service providers.

As the management and Board of the ASC, we are doing everything that we can to re-establish the long-term financial viability of the Centre including urgently approaching relevant foundations and other sources for extra funding and launching additional fundraising events. I believe that these efforts will pay off in the longer term, allowing the Centre to not only continue but eventually expand and develop its services.

But right now we need your assistance to survive the immediate crisis. If we fail to raise \$150,000 before the end of June then we will have to either do the unthinkable and close our doors or reduce our service to a minimal maintenance level. If you could make a gift at this time then it will be a great help to our survival.

- **\$80** will allow a case worker to organise emergency accommodation for 3 families
- **\$140** will provide one week of English language lessons to 30 asylum seekers
- **\$320** will provide on-site medical support for 6 asylum seekers
- **\$1,000** will provide job readiness training for up to 10 asylum seekers each fortnight

All asylum seekers are ineligible for Centrelink entitlements and those ineligible to work also lack access to Medicare. For asylum seekers like Aisha and Manu, we provide vital services like social work support and healthcare for families and individuals. Our work includes:

- On-site medical support, referrals for pro bono health care and assistance in meeting pharmaceutical costs.
- Our social workers provide assistance to homeless asylum seekers in securing emergency accommodation as well as referrals for emergency financial support and legal advice.
- Our volunteers provide English language skills lessons, computer and art classes.
- Our newly established employment program volunteers provide asylum seekers assistance to build skills in resume writing, employment interviews and job readiness as well as establishing relationships with prospective employers.

If the worst comes to the worst, we will need to cut our health care program and reduce the level of paid social workers even further. This support - at the level we presently provide - is vital as Aisha and Manu's case shows. As if things couldn't get more critical, we pick up there story when she arrived at the Centre for her scheduled health check up.

On that day Aisha went into early labour and had to go straight to hospital. During that time they discovered she was pregnant with twins! The early labour was subsequently stopped but Aisha was admitted into hospital to monitor other complications. Manu had to commute over an hour each way to visit his wife in hospital. Our caseworkers made sure that the family's plight was brought to the attention of senior medical staff who arranged for a transfer to the local hospital, near to their accommodation.

Aisha and Manu continued to access an ASC caseworker and health care support as they needed ongoing support.

Like our caseworkers, we are not giving up. Rest assured we are developing a planned service model that can dramatically reduce costs but will leave us providing a bare-bones service, one that will greatly reduce our capacity to assist people such as Aisha and Manu. We will strive to provide the best services possible to asylum seekers through the greater utilisation of volunteers. However, we know that co-ordination of volunteers to deliver vital support services is in itself a great challenge and it is inevitable that the service will not be at the same level as we presently provide and it will greatly reduce our capacity.

This is why we desperately need your support at this time to help us reach our target of \$150,000. As an additional benefit, the public support through donations from generous supporters like you means that, in turn, we can gain increased support from Philanthropic Foundations and Grant makers. So, if you can give a generous gift, we have the opportunity to leverage that donation further.

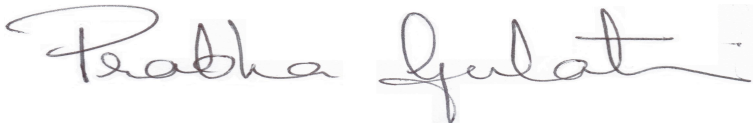
The bottom line is that the Asylum Seekers Centre is the only service of its kind in NSW and there is a real danger that the Centre may have to close or significantly curtail the vital support services to Asylum Seekers in desperate need. If closed it will cause immense stress not only to this very vulnerable group of people but also to the dedicated band of staff, volunteers and supporters whose passion has kept us going these past 16 years.

As a supporter of the Centre, I sincerely hope that you will be able to make an urgent and significant contribution to assist us to achieve the target of \$150,000 at this critical time. In a lucky country like ours, continuing to maintain the services of the Asylum Seekers Centre is the least we can do to help those less fortunate. It will mean so much to vulnerable people like Aisha and Manu.

If there is anything you would like to discuss in relation to the Centre and this Appeal, or for any other reason please do call me on 02 9361 5606 or email me on director@asylumseekerscentre.org.au .

My heartfelt thanks in advance for your support,

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Prabha Gulati". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Prabha Gulati
Director

PS - Aisha delivered two healthy boys in April and the family is now settling in at home with the support of home-visiting volunteers arranged by ASC and baby goods donated by supporters of ASC. The family is doing well, however, they remain in limbo waiting for a decision on their claim for refugee protection in Australia. They continue to access ASC support as needed

* Names and country of origin have been changed to protect the asylum seekers' identities