

NORTHERN BEACHES REFUGEE SANCTUARY

A Project of the MANLY FRESHWATER CATHOLIC CHURCH

Mary Immaculate and St Athanasius Church

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Welcome to the NBRs Summer 2014 Newsletter

It has been an eventful and busy last six months. We have assisted 204 people with airfares making a total of 3,847 people we have helped. There are fewer people arriving on the Special Humanitarian Visa (SHV) and more arriving on the family visas. It has been very difficult to get family members a SHV so most recently arrived refugees are applying under the family migration stream. If the sponsor has arrived in the last five years as a refugee, we will help the family. We are also helping a number of families who are sponsoring orphan relatives.

This year the number of refugees in the world reached 50 million, the highest number since the Second World War. It is a time of urgent need. It is disappointing that at this time of great need Australia has reduced its refugee intake by about 30%. It is really sad that the arguments made for not helping refugees is somehow us doing the right thing. If we really want to help refugees we need to increase the number of visas we offer. We will only grant about 13,750 refugee visas this year. This compares with about 100,000 per year in the 1950's, although not all of these were classified as refugees. Sadly, we are not responding as generously to those in crisis as we have in the past.

The movement of refugees seeking safety is complex. The refugees leaving Syria at present have no safe place, the violence is following them. There are almost no visas offered to people in refugee camps; less than 1% will be granted a visa to a Western nation. The rest will stay in poverty with no long term solution; many will spend their whole life in refugee camps.

I am constantly amazed by the strength of those we assist. There is the Ebola crisis in West Africa, ISIL in Iraq and Syria not to mention the other problem areas of the world. The sponsor has to wait a long time for the visa to be issued so they can bring their families to safety. There are limited visas granted each year and required information isn't always available, so the applications can take a number of years.

One of the cases we have assisted with is a family of seven from Iraq. The father had arrived by boat in Australia and the application for his family took four years to be completed. When issued, the family were very keen to travel immediately. They are stateless people so needed an exit visa, which isn't easy or quick to achieve. IOM decided to take them to Kurdistan as they wouldn't need the exit permit. It was a 600 km drive through an area that is very close to the ISIL fighting. They got to the border only to be refused entry so they travelled back to Southern Iraq very tired and disappointed. The father in Australia was beside himself with worry but luckily had a friend whose brother worked in the airport in South Iraq. He said he could help with the clearance process. Tickets were then booked with a travel agent and soon after

the family were reunited. The family live in Melbourne so we have never meet them. The week after they arrived, I had a call from the father to say the family wanted to thank us for our help. Starting with the oldest child they all came on the phone. "Hello David, I am Mohamed. Thank you." I think that was about their total English! The oldest sounded suitably serious but by the youngest all I could hear was laughter and happiness in her voice. It was a very special moment. I am sure they will have a long and happy life here having escaped from the horrors of Iraq.

Another case we assisted with was a family of three coming from Liberia. The Ebola crisis gripping West Africa is a potential disaster looming. There are nearly 25 million people living between Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia so the risks of been infected are currently low. The Minister of Immigration has introduced a quarantine of 21 days for all those travelling to Australia. The day it was announced we had a family in transit who were stopped in Abu Dhabi, as their visa was suspended. It looked like they would need to return to Liberia. We suggested that the family approached their local Member of Parliament to seek assistance. Sharon Bird's office in Wollongong was very helpful and, after many late night calls to the Department of Immigration, they were allowed to continue to Australia. The sponsor was delighted.

We assisted a lady bringing her two daughters (9 and 11) from West Africa. There were problems with the application and it took four years before the visa was granted. Sometimes not all the information is available and previous applications may contain conflicting information. This needs to be clarified and it all takes time. Finally the visa was granted and we arranged for the girls to come. This isn't always easy as the girls were unaccompanied and needed assistance with each transit. IOM do a wonderful job of managing the travel. Before they were able to come, the new quarantine arrangements for people coming from Ebola countries were issued. The girls had to undergo 21 days of supervised quarantine. It cost nearly \$5,000 plus the airfares have jumped in price as so few airlines are now flying out of Ebola affected countries. We met them at the airport. Mum and her sister were there early but the children came out in a different section. We arrived just as the girls came out. They were with officials from Quarantine and Customs. Mum arrived shortly after and there was a very emotional reunion. As one of the Quarantine ladies said with tears in her eyes, she couldn't imagine missing out on so much of her daughter's life. One of the others made the comment that she doesn't allow her 9 year old to catch the bus by herself and these two had just spent nearly 3 days travelling from West Africa as well as 3 weeks in quarantine. How lucky are we born in safety and wealth? The girls will start school next week. Mum is still laughing.

We are still self-funding and are not looking for donations. Loan repayments continue successfully but we did have to write off a number of loans this year for various reasons. Loan defaults are still below 1% of loans made.

I hope you all have a Merry Christmas and all the best for 2015.

David Addington
Christmas 2014