

Who does the Romero Centre help?

The Romero Centre gives practical support to refugees on Temporary Protection Visas, former TPV holders and their families, some asylum seekers and stateless people as well as other disadvantaged refugees.

More than 2200 refugees have passed through our doors, of whom a minority have settled in Brisbane. And they're still coming – most recently (2006) from West Papua.

The refugees we support have:

- fled their homelands because of persecution and arrived in Australia by sea – i.e. are “boat people”
- been held in Australian detention centres for periods ranging up to 7 destructive years
- been found to be genuine refugees as defined by the UN Refugee Convention
- been released into the community and granted temporary visas and have lived a life of uncertainty for up to five years
- been granted only limited rights in Australia - eg to reduced Centrelink benefits, to work, to health care
- been denied the right, while on TPVs, to have their wives and children come to Australia
- been denied access to the Adult Migrant English Program
- been treated as “second class” refugees, with limited or no access to Government settlement services available to mainstream refugees

Those who have finally been granted permanent residence visas may apply to have their immediate family join them, usually at their own expense. These family reunions sometimes need more support than government provides, and for a longer time.

A little history

The Romero Centre started as a drop-in centre in March 2000 in a house kindly made available by the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy. Later that year, the Centre moved to the nearby Little Kings Movement building, and after two rent free years there, to a privately rented Queenslander in the same street. The Romero Centre is now in its fourth home in six years, this time in Woolloongabba.

The Centre is independent of government and grew out of the Catholic Centre for Multicultural Pastoral Care. Later, it came under the auspices of Uniting Care and Lifeline Brisbane and is currently auspiced by Mercy Family Services, the community services wing of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy

How do we help?

The Romero Centre continues to provide a welcome and settlement assistance for current TPV holders arriving in Brisbane. It also maintains contact with many who came in former years and are now permanent residents. Some still suffer the after-effects of detention. Almost all want to re-establish contact with their families, who are often living in difficult circumstances overseas. Our services include

- Hospitality and drop-in centre; a meeting place
- Settlement support, help with housing, basic furniture and appliances, arranging utility connections
- Friendship, as well as emotional, practical and spiritual support
- Mail collection for those with no permanent address

- Assisting with interstate relocation
- Accessing various services, including legal, medical, trauma counselling, English language courses. Referral and follow-up
- Assistance with preparing resumes and searching for employment.
- Help with obtaining travel documents and legal advice in their applications for family reunion
- Welcoming the newly arrived family members and assisting in their settlement
- Advocacy – speaking up for refugees and empowering them to speak for themselves. Calling on government for better legislation.
- Community education – helping people to understand about refugees and what Australia's obligations are. Raising public awareness about human rights. Providing speakers, references and materials. Assisting researchers. Writing submissions and articles and letters to the editor.

Romero Centre Operations

Since 2001, the Romero Centre has received grants from the Queensland Government, but none from the federal Government. Since 2004 Multicultural Affairs Queensland has funded projects which have enabled the employment of a part time bilingual community support worker.

The Centre is a faith-based, ecumenical organisation. Its support comes from the community – religious orders, especially the Sisters of Mercy and the Franciscans, but also Good Shepherd Sisters and the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Quakers, individual Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church parishes, service clubs and individual donors. Without their generosity, we could not exist.

The Centre currently has two part-time workers and about 30 volunteers. Many of these work at the Centre regularly. Some rarely come to the Centre, but concentrate on finding accommodation, teaching English, assisting with job searching for individual refugees.

Australia's Obligations to Refugees

Australia is one of 139 countries which have signed the UN Convention on Refugees. The UN defines a refugee as

“ any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable... to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country”.

According to the Government, this means that Australia:

“is required to provide sanctuary to those refugees to whom we have protection obligations regardless of whether they have entered Australia lawfully or unlawfully”
 (“Refugee and Humanitarian Issues – Australia’s Response”
Dept. of Immigration, October 2000, p.27)

The Government, however, penalises those who arrive by sea, without proper visas or identification, calling them “illegals” “queue jumpers” and most recently “unauthorised arrivals”.

This is in spite of the fact that the Refugee Convention, in Article 31, recognises that people fleeing for their lives usually cannot organise passports and visas before they leave. Indeed, in many cases to do so would put them in even greater danger.

Brisbane Actionweb for Refugee Collaboration

For further information about refugee and asylum seeker issues, organisations and actions in Brisbane, go to the BARC website at www.barc.org.au

How you can help

Give time - become a volunteer worker; befriend a refugee living near you

Donate money – fund raise! The Centre relies on donations for its operating costs. All donations are tax deductible.

Donate material goods - Donations of household goods and utensils, non-perishable food, bedding and small items of furniture are always useful. Check with us first if you’ve got something you think might be useful

Keep yourself informed – There are refugee networks on the internet which inform and discuss asylum and refugee issues in Australia and our region

Speak up - Find the courage to voice your concern in support of refugees’ rights to kindness, consideration, acceptance and dignity. It becomes easier!

Participate in our democracy – Phone your local MP and the ten senators for Queensland. Write to newspapers. Call radio talkback programs.

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Correct as at October 2006

The Romero Centre



Australians assisting refugees

The Romero Centre takes its name from Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980 for standing up for the dispossessed.