



Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT) Submission to the Queensland Housing Summit

October 2022

SUCCESSFUL RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES INTO A HOST NATION IS DEPENDENT UPON ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE, AFFORDABLE AND SECURE HOUSING, AND ESTABLISHING A PLACE TO CALL 'HOME'.

(FLATAU ET AL, 2015; 85).

About QPASTT

We believe that to heal is a human right.

QPASTT is a specialist agency supporting the recovery from torture and trauma of people from refugee backgrounds and people seeking asylum. We are a not-for-profit agency in receipt of funding from both the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments. We currently employ 87 staff as well as casual bicultural workers with refugee lived experience. We operate throughout Queensland with offices in Brisbane, Logan, Toowoomba, Townsville and Cairns. QPASTT is the Queensland member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT).

In the 2020-2021 financial year, QPASTT supported 6207 clients from 82 countries of origin. Almost 30% of our clients are children and youth. Approximately 14% are people seeking asylum. We ran 188 group activities involving 2417 participants. QPASTT also conducted 98 training sessions with practitioners from agencies throughout Queensland to build their understanding of refugee trauma. Jointly with Multicultural Australia, QPASTT facilitates quarterly gatherings for community leaders from Queensland's refugee communities.

As a specialist agency, our primary focus is refugee trauma recovery. This means that all of our passion, energy and focus is invested in delivery responses that support people from refugee backgrounds to heal. Increasingly our trauma recovery works detrimentally impacted by housing distress and homelessness. QPASTT is contributing to the discussion on solutions to the housing crisis to ensure that the needs and experiences of people from refugee background are considered.



Understanding the impact of homelessness and housing distress amongst QPASTT clients

In mid-2022, the QPASTT Leadership Team reported that across group workers, youth workers, counsellors and community workers, housing issues were increasingly impacting on our ability to delivery trauma recovery services and interventions. To understand this more fully, in August 2022, a survey was circulated to front line staff to build an understanding of our client experience of homelessness. Eighteen (18) staff out of 52 front line staff responded to the survey representing 35% of all front line staff. Respondents work within eight of the nine front line service delivery teams of QPASTT teams including Toowoomba, Brisbane, Logan/Gold Coast and Far North Queensland teams.

For the purpose of the survey, homelessness was defined as *people without conventional accommodation; people who frequently move from one temporary accommodation to another; and people staying in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards* (Mackenzie & Chamberlain, 1992).

The 18 staff survey respondents worked with a total of 345 total clients over a 12 month period between August 2021 and July 2022. Of the 345 clients, 42 clients experienced homelessness. This equates to **12% of our clients experiencing homelessness in the past 12 months**. Given the high response rate to the survey and representation across service delivery teams, this is a robust indication of the significant experience of homelessness of our client group.

Details of the survey results, de-identified case studies (names and other identifying features have been changed) and existing research has been used in this submission.

The importance of secure housing for recovery

Throughout the survey, QPASTT staff strongly expressed the incompatibility of homelessness with trauma recovery. While our role is to provide counselling/advocacy, group work, youth work and other therapeutic services to people with refugee backgrounds, as one staff member stated, “homelessness becomes an ongoing trauma which inhibits the healing journey”. Additionally, another staff member said, “homelessness can force people to re-experience displacement, fear, lack of emotional and physical safety, concern for the welfare of children and revoke feelings associated with being persecuted in the past.”

Secure housing is recognised by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as a core social determinant of health and mental health¹. Trauma recovery and healing is significantly impacted when our clients are without safe and secure housing.

Drivers of homelessness

Eight (8) key drivers for homelessness were identified by QPASTT staff. These drivers fit in to two different categories, drivers that affect all populations in Queensland and drivers that are specific to people with refugee backgrounds.

¹ AIHW (2022) Social determinants of health. Web article
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/social-determinants-of-health>

Drivers of homelessness shared with all populations across Queensland

1. **Housing affordability** is at an all-time low combined with extreme housing shortage. Anglicare's 2022 Rental Affordability Snapshot reports that over 99% of rental listings were unaffordable for individuals, couples or families on job seeker, disability pension, youth allowance, parenting payment single and age pension². Housing affordability was indicated by QPASTT staff as a significant barrier for clients to maintain or access secure housing.

Case Study – Single parent protracted homelessness

A single mother and her two children in the Gold Coast have faced homelessness from April 2021 until September 2022. The family arrived in Australia five years ago with a permanent refugee visa. The family now have Australian citizenship and have built connections with their community in the Gold Coast. They are well supported by the school the children attend where the mother also has permanent part-time employment.

Despite the family's supports, citizenship and stable income, the Gold Coast rental crisis alongside lack of public or emergency housing options meant the family were unable to access any secure accommodation. This started when their private 6-month tenancy was suddenly terminated by the lessor due to works on the property leaving it unliveable. The property works were initially only meant to take 4 weeks however this went on for 12 weeks, leaving the family displaced and requiring significant advocacy for them to receive compensation.

Since then, the family has been living in unaffordable motel accommodation at \$550 per week or couch surfing with friends. During this time, the mother had made over 200 private rental applications, has placed a Department of Housing application, liaised with a number of specialist housing services and still had not been able to access any suitable or sustainable housing, nor support with the costs of unaffordable motel accommodation.

The mother was advised to offer up to 12 months of rent in advance in private rental applications however this was not possible. There also appeared to be a trend of lessors refusing to consider applications from single income households. Therefore, the family were advised to move to areas such as Redbank Plains as the Gold Coast is no longer affordable. However, this would have resulted in disconnection from community, support services and employment. This placed the family at risk of poverty and de-stabilising the life they have worked so hard to build in Australia while seeking to heal from refugee related trauma. Finally they have recently been offered transitional accommodation with a local service however this was the result of significant persistent self-advocacy from the client as well as advocacy from a range of supports.

QPASTT supports target to increase the stock of social and community housing, however emphasises housing must be purpose built and located in areas with sufficient amenities and access to cultural, community and social services.

2. **Domestic and family violence/ family breakdown** is reported by staff as a significant driver of homelessness – particularly for women with children and young women. While domestic and family violence is experienced across the whole Queensland population, additional factors experienced by people from refugee backgrounds make this a homelessness vulnerability multiplier. Flatau et al (2015) report to the Australian Housing and Urban

² See <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-National-report.pdf>

Research Institute (AHURI) recognised that lack of information, large family size, language barriers and racial discrimination may be further barriers for people from refugee background fleeing domestic and family violence (see also Bartolomei et al, 2014; Rees and Pease, 2007).

3. **Unemployment** naturally impacts on affordability, however also influences perceptions of desirability as a tenant. In the context of extreme housing shortages, competition for private rental properties is high. Employment challenges faced by people of refugee background includes lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, lack of local experience and references, lack evidence of former work, vocational or educational experience, and language are all challenges to gaining employment that may lift an individual or families income sufficiently to afford housing. Additionally, visual differences of people from refugee background such as ethnicity and religious identity has also been a barrier to employment (see Hebbani, 2014).
4. **Mental Illness** is also indicated as a significant barrier to securing housing. This is a well-documented challenge to secure housing (see QAMH and QShelter 2021 position paper Mental Health and Housing). QPASTT supports calls for integration of services in accommodation to support long term tenancy.

Drivers to homelessness specific to people with refugee backgrounds

1. **Temporary visa status** impacting housing options was a predominant challenge to secure housing reported by staff who were working with people on sponsored, partner, temporary protection, bridging visa or otherwise in the process of seeking asylum.

Gaining 'housing literacy'³ in Australia is one of many new skills that people seeking asylum and with refugee backgrounds need to acquire. A 2015 AHURI study found that off-shore processed refugees entering Australia on Refugee or Special Humanitarian Program visas displayed a generally positive housing trajectory within three years of arrival in Australia (Flatau, et. al., 2015). However refugees who arrived by boat are highly vulnerable to housing insecurity due to the insecurity of their visa status. QPASTT staff report that clients who are residing in Australia on a series of short term temporary visas due to extensive delays in visa processing and protracted legal processes, frequently experience fluctuations in income and housing security. This situation is exacerbated by people on temporary visas being ineligible for social housing and related housing support programs.

³ Housing literacy is defined by the AHURI as "the extent to which households understand how to access necessary information and utilise this effectively in assessing options and planning for housing futures." (AUHRI Report No. 337, September 2020)

Case Study – Visa insecurity leading to homelessness

When Fatimah was nine years old she came by boat to Australia with her family. In Brisbane, she thrived at school, gained excellent English language skills and developed confidence. After six years, the increasing strain of changing family roles and dynamics developed into domestic and family violence directed toward Fatimah and her mother. For her own safety, Fatimah left home and began couch surfing. Once living away from her family home, Fatimah's claim for asylum which was linked to her father's history of persecution in her country of origin, was revoked. She was then required to make a separate application for asylum. During the application processing period, she was not able to access Medicare or income support. Fatimah relies upon the parents of her friends and multicultural services to provide accommodation, medical assistance and food. Five months on, Fatimah is still waiting for her application to be processed. She continues to couch surf but due to the ongoing stress of family conflict, visa insecurity and housing insecurity, she has been unable to maintain her school attendance.

2. **Racism and discrimination** from neighbours and landlord/real estate was reported by QPASTT staff as affecting ability to secure housing. Racism and discrimination toward refugees and asylum seekers in Australia is an ongoing trend which impacts on housing security and all other areas of life and has been well documented (see Baker et. al., 2021; Flatau et. al., 2015). Additionally, a frequently reported issue is the failure to use interpreters when communicating with people from refugee backgrounds, lack of support to fill forms in English and lack of housing information in languages other than English.
3. **Cultural needs specific to housing** require a diverse range of short term and long term housing options to suit single young people and adults, small and large families. Young people and single parent headed households, particularly larger families, experiencing homelessness are unable to access suitable housing options. Specifically, there needs to be a much greater supply of:
 - studio apartments or single sex shared accommodation for young people with access to prayer rooms, availability of halal and other culturally specific foods.
 - and secure, private 3+ bedroom homes, in welcoming neighbourhoods, for single parent households with large families.

Case study – Culturally unsafe crisis and long-term housing

Ikran is a 17 year old Somali women who has been in Australia for 10 years. Ikran became homeless as a result of increasing family violence in her families overcrowded home. She was accepted into emergency accommodation. Unfortunately, there were many difficulties during her short stay at the emergency accommodation. Firstly, the service was mixed gender which is culturally inappropriate. The accommodation service did not use an interpreter when communicating with Ikran and she was unable to express herself fully or ask questions. It had no space for prayer, halal was not adhered to and the location of the accommodation was an hour away from her networks. Ikran spent three and a half weeks in this very stressful, uncomfortable environment with strong fears for what her community would say about her living in a house with other young men.

As a studio apartment was not available or financially viable, the emergency accommodation service assisted Ikran to navigate the use of flatmates.com to find a room with other young women. Once Ikran was transitioned into flat share accommodation, she was quickly overwhelmed with the stress of the exposure of young people using alcohol. She felt unsafe and was unable to find ways to adapt to the differing lifestyle of the other housemates. Ultimately, Ikran returned to her family home where she continues to experience family violence.

4. **Intrusive trauma symptoms** such as nightmares and sleep disturbances, intrusive memories and flashbacks, and sensory triggers can have a significant impact on perceptions of a person as a good neighbour or tenant, particularly in high density housing. Intrusive trauma symptoms also impair daily functioning similarly to other mental illnesses, however most trauma symptoms are internalised and less visible, therefore less often recognised by others and more frequently misunderstood. QPASTT strongly supports the recommendations QAMH call for integrated social and mental health supports within housing services, as well as greater skilling up of the housing sector to work with people from refugee backgrounds and trauma survivors.

Case Study – Protracted poverty and trauma

Joseph, a man in his late 30s, had been sleeping in his broken-down stationary car in Ipswich for over 3 months before being referred to QPASTT. He arrived to Australia from Africa more than 5 years ago and was no longer eligible multicultural settlement support services. He had poor mental health, was suicidal and grappled with guilt and shame. His coping resources were so diminished he was unable to access any services unsupported. He had been forced to leave his share house because of an interpersonal conflict with his housemates, which had also impacted on his connection with his cultural community and church. He had no money and was cut off from his community and social networks. It took a number of interactions with Joseph to piece together what had happened and what he needed, and then considerable advocacy to locate the appropriate service to connect him to. Joseph was so unwell he needed to be accompanied to initial appointment with a housing provider. Through the housing provider he was able to secure accommodation, was introduced to a new church and was also supported to find casual employment.

Referral pathways and which are effective

Mainstream housing services are regularly being referred to by QPASTT staff as a pathway out of homelessness. Despite this engagement, the most effective pathways for housing security for young people, single parent and double parent families was multicultural services. This indicates that in circumstances where there are no multicultural housing services available, multicultural service staff are frequently liaising between individuals and families and housing services, or using community and informal networks to resolve homelessness. Single adult clients were more able to successfully access mainstream housing service providers independently.

QPASTT staff recorded 70 housing referrals between July 2021 and June 2022. QPASTT staff reported that about 73% of all their housing referrals were “warm referrals” which includes introducing the person to the referred-to service worker, and with consent, share useful information about how to best engage with them – e.g. time of day to contact, interpreter preferences, personal needs, etc. This indicates the volume of work involved in each instance taking a substantial amount of time and staffing resources. In many cases this is above and beyond the advocacy role that QPASTT workers are expected to play, however this work has been prioritised due to its importance and gap in support particularly for people who have been in Australia for longer than 5 years and no longer eligible for settlement case management support.

Secure housing outcomes for people with refugee backgrounds engaged in QPASTT services

Our staff reported that within the 12 months of August 2021 and July 2022:

- 30% of young people they worked with found secure housing
- 60% of single persons found secure housing
- 33% of double parent households found secure housing
- Only 6% of single parent households found secure housing

This data highlights the extreme vulnerability of single parents and their children and lack of secure housing available to them. Young people and double parent households also have low success in



securing secure housing. These groups of people with refugee backgrounds particularly and urgently need additional support.

Recommendations: Solutions considerate of the needs of people from refugee backgrounds and people seeking asylum

- A grass roots study to understand the true scope of homelessness and housing distress experienced. Grass roots approach is necessary considering common reluctance to engage in formal government data collection processes such as the census, and stigma/shame of homelessness.
- Sector upskilling in engaging with people seeking asylum and from refugee backgrounds; specifically use of interpreters, cultural competence and safety, and trauma informed practice.
- Engagement with cultural community and faith group leaders to identify gaps, respond to housing needs while at the same time building service understanding of community needs in this particular sector.
- Funding for multicultural housing support services that can assist people to build housing literacy long-term, and flexibility service eligibility for people on temporary visas.

Culturally safe long term secure housing – home should be a place where people feel safe and free of discrimination/racism:

- Housing services and supports that are accessible for vulnerable people with refugee background (use of interpreter services, translated materials available, assistance with form filling, culturally sensitive interactions, inclusive and welcoming of people from refugee backgrounds, brokering relationships with landlords etc.)
- Integration of trauma support and mental health services within purpose built accommodation, community housing and social housing to support people's long term tenancy.
- A range of affordable fit-for-purpose housing options (larger houses, townhouses, studio apartments, single-sex accommodation etc.) to meet the diverse needs of our clients, located in welcoming neighbourhoods with access to amenities and services.

Culturally safe emergency housing – which includes:

- Emergency housing which is accessible for vulnerable people with refugee background (translation and interpreting service, culturally competent and trauma informed workers).
- Culturally safe accommodation including secure single-sex accommodation, halal and other cultural dietary requirements, and with access to space for religious practice.
- Trauma informed and culturally safe transition to long term secure housing.



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