

A home for refugees

Jesuit Refugee Service has wet the roof of its newest asylum-seeker shelter, a large house in the Sydney suburb of Ashfield.

The organisation jumped at the opportunity when the Josephite Community Aid-owned property, situated close to a railway station and within a strong community, became available for lease. 'That was our whole aim, to break through the isolation so that these people could feel like they are part of a community', says Louise Stack, JRS Project Coordinator.

The house – which has been fully furnished with donated goods – houses seven asylum seekers. 'They are from different countries – different continents even! They come from West Africa, South America, the Middle East and Asia', says Louise.

The Shelter Project, which includes a house in Kings Cross and two flats in Petersham and Croydon Park, accommodates and supports asylum seekers while they move through the immigration process. Of the 60 people currently being assisted by JRS, 26 are housed in purpose-run accommodation. 'We give them a six month housing agreement, and then review it to see whether they're earning enough to support themselves or have received a permanent residence visa', says Louise.

Most of these asylum seekers attend English classes. 'If they already have English and they have permission to work, then they're looking for jobs', says Louise. But, while more and more asylum seekers are receiving permission to work, finding a job has become more difficult. 'Also, every time there's a new legal phase in their immigration process, they have to focus on that rather than on finding work', says Louise. JRS facilitates this process by accompanying asylum seekers and referring them to the people who can give them appropriate legal advice.

At the Ashfield house, fortnightly meetings will be held with the aim of building a sense of community, and volunteers plan to set up a community gardening project. 'We want to involve as many of the asylum seekers as we can', says Louise.

Despite the expansion of the Shelter Project, the need for accommodation is endless, says Louise. 'We'd love to get more accommodation. We get two or three calls every week from people who are in need of accommodation. A lot of the time we can't do anything, we can only refer them elsewhere. There's still a great need there.'

Can you help?

The new JRS house in Ashfield needs a washing machine, as well as funds for plants and gardening supplies. Travel 10s (bus tickets) would also be appreciated.

By Catherine Marshall

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