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20 December 2007

Mr Graeme Innes AM
Human Rights Commissioner
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Innes

Response to Summary of HREOC's Observations following the Inspection of Mainland Immigration Detention Facilities 2007

I am writing in response to the Summary of HREOC's Observations following your Inspection of Mainland Immigration Detention Facilities in 2007. We welcome your observations and recommendations which will further enhance our ability to deliver a consistently high level of service to the clients in our care. It is particularly pleasing to note that the favourable comments which you made in 2006 regarding our staff's approach and attitude remained evident in 2007.

Many of the issues that you raise require a response from DIAC and not GSL. One issue which has attracted attention relates to excursions and HREOC expresses its concern in the Observations about updated Detention Operations procedures which have the effect of limiting excursions, particularly for high risk detainees. GSL is very conscious of the value of external excursions for the mental health and general well-being of those in detention, and for minimising the impact of detention. Within the approved policy framework, GSL will be happy to engage with stakeholders, including HREOC and the Commonwealth Ombudsman, to increase the number and variety of authorised excursions. It is however appropriate that DIAC, which is responsible for the updating of the Detention Operations procedures, should respond to the points raised in the Observations.

I have outlined below our response to those matters in your Observations that do fall within our area of responsibility.

Northern Immigration Detention Centre
Section 20 Warning signs on fence
Warning signs in Indonesian on the electric fences have been erected.

Perth IDC

Section 23 Internal Activities As HREOC's Observations note, Perth IDS is a small, cramped centre which unavoidably restricts activities. Nevertheless, as HREOC also notes, management and staff at Perth "have continued to make efforts to improve the facilities and services and to remain open to suggestions from detainees and others about such improvements". As an ongoing part of this process, internal activities at Perth IDC are currently being reviewed. GSL has conducted a comprehensive survey to better understand the requirements of clients, as well as to identify the skills, hobbies and interests of staff members, including DIAC staff, in order to contribute to a more interactive and dynamic program of activities. A new timetable was introduced on 10 December 2007.

GSL management at Perth IDC is also reviewing the teaching of English as a Second Language, to incorporate study groups led by on-duty Detention Services Officers. They will assist clients with homework assignments, such as English classes and computer studies. Clients have warmly welcomed the employment of a new ESL teacher since the visit of HREOC to Perth and the participation rate in ESL classes since her appointment has been very high. The multi-purpose room will in future be used for ESL classes to eliminate the cramped conditions in the computer room, where classes have been held to date.

GSL is constantly looking for opportunities to develop skilled activities at Perth. As one example, clients are constructing flower boxes for the courtyards, and ISS has been engaged to repaint the lines in the yard to allow more sporting activities.

GSL is softening the image of the dining room at Perth IDC by providing table clothes, menus and serviette holders.

Villawood IDC

Section 18 Interpreters HREOC recommends that DIAC "should where possible ensure the availability of permanent onsite interpreters when there is a large detainee population from a single language group...[particularly at] Villawood with a large population of Mandarin-speaking detainees". While this is an issue for DIAC to determine, GSL does have considerable experience and this has demonstrated to us that appointing a permanent single-language interpreter in a large facility (I have in mind particularly an on-site Mandarin-speaking interpreter at Villawood), in addition to those already being utilised by DIAC, is seldom justified or the most efficient use of resources.

While it may seem desirable for GSL to place less reliance on TIS telephone interpreting services by employing an on-site interpreter, an analysis of usage suggests otherwise. Many of the occasions when Mandarin-speaking interpreters are used at Villawood are after hours, sometimes late at night, or during the weekend, or on public holidays when a permanent employee would not be on duty, thus requiring the continuing use of the telephone interpreting service. At times of heightened tension, demands for an interpreter can be concurrent, with many clients and GSL wanting the service at the same time. The sex of a permanent interpreter may also restrict their use in some

situations, for example if a female client is describing a sensitive complaint. This is never a difficulty with the telephone interpreting service for commonly spoken languages such as Mandarin or Cantonese. Regional and class issues can also figure strongly with some PRC clients. The TIS telephone interpreter service is professional and in the great majority of cases, very efficient.

Nevertheless, GSL does recognise that there are situations when a face-to-face interpreter, particularly for the large Mandarin-speaking population, would be desirable and in consultation with D1AC, we are constantly reviewing the situation, particularly at Villawood.

Sections Recommendation 18 Access to books While the issue of clients visiting a public library is one that it is more appropriate for DIAC to address, GSL is currently reviewing the range of books and other reading material available at V1DC, particularly in languages that are more representative of the nationalities of the clients. Improvements are being made.

If there are any issues relating to the Observations which you would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact either myself on [Number Deleted], or David Brown, Director of Detention Services, on [Number Deleted].

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Hall', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Tim Hall
Director of Public Affairs