

# **Lifeline – the Destitution Project**

## Information for Accommodation Volunteers

*Updated May 12, 2010*

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# Introduction

Thank you for your interest in Positive Action in Housing (PAiH). This pack tells you about our humanitarian work with destitute asylum seekers, why we need to do it, the extent of the need and how you can help make a difference.

Destitute asylum seekers face hardship and poverty unseen in the UK since Victorian times. After having their case rejected, they are evicted from their homes, cut off from all state benefits and forbidden to work. Since 2008, we have seen a 25% rise in destitute asylum seekers, mainly involving asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Zimbabwe.

The Home Office says that *“failed asylum seekers without a barrier to leaving the UK are encouraged and assisted to make voluntary departures”*.

Part of this *“encouragement”* means forcing asylum seekers out of their homes and into the streets without money or recourse to public funds. However, many are unable to do so (China, for example, refuses to allow asylum seekers back) and for others it would be far too unsafe (such as those from Congo, Zimbabwe, Iraq or Afghanistan).

Some basic support known as ‘Section 4’ is provided, but not immediately and not for all, and it is not nearly enough. And to access Section 4, asylum seekers must agree to return to their country of origin – an impossible undertaking for someone who is in genuine fear of return. Asylum seekers receive £5 per day in ‘food vouchers’ and accommodation so basic that many have been forced to share bedrooms with strangers. There is no obligation to set up this support before the actual eviction. This has led to pregnant women sleeping rough. An application normally takes 2-4 weeks and often far longer, during which time our clients are left stranded. The help we provide is absolutely essential.

This policy violates both international law and the “common law of humanity”<sup>1</sup> according to a recent parliamentary report. It also contradicts British values of tolerance, respect for humanity and compassion. We aim to act in accordance with these values and help those who become destitute return to independent, productive lives.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Parliamentary Joint Committee in Human Rights, March 2007

## What we do and how you can help

The Lifeline began in 2005 as a response to the increasing numbers of refugees coming to our charity who were left without almost every basic human need such as food, shelter, a GP or financial support of any kind, denied recourse to public funds, emergency hostels or the right to work.

The Project provides short-term, direct humanitarian relief in the form of shelter and food to destitute people from Scotland's 'refugee' communities. The Project also helps service users with practical resources and support to avoid becoming 'invisible' citizens. It helps service users, especially young people and women, to avoid being vulnerable to exploitation, both labour or sexual, by offering resources to get back into the legal system with a view to achieving citizenship, if at all possible. In many cases, our intervention has resulted in destitute people getting leave to remain in the UK. Interestingly, there is often no rhyme or reason for these home office decisions.

We provide a **Hardship Fund** which gives out small cash sums for food and essential needs e.g. medicine, urgent travel. In some cases, we will pay for cheap hostel accommodation. We try to provide some form of assistance to everyone to ensure they do not become street-homeless. The Hardship Fund is paid for by donations from members of the public and charitable trusts.

We have a **database of accommodation volunteers** (you?) who agree to offer up space in their home to someone who is destitute for a few days, weeks, or even longer. We have a system to ensure destitute refugees and their hosts form the best match. Ultimately, this is a purely voluntary arrangement between both parties but we do our best to make the arrangement rewarding for all concerned. We desperately need more volunteers who are prepared to welcome people into their homes.

The project provides a service which cannot be provided by the public sector or any other agency, and relies on donations from members of the public and charitable trusts.

The need for the Project has grown dramatically. Between April 2008 and March 2009, we supported 276 people, including 21 pregnant women and 13 families with

27 children. 37% of people were sleeping rough when they approached us. This is a 25% increase on 2008.

## Finally...

We understand that for whatever reason it may not be convenient to host someone at certain times of the year or occasions. We understand this and will fit around your schedule.

If you agree to host one of our service users, and after checking background information on both parties, we will bring them to your home at a time agreed by you. We will give you information about them as well as any language and cultural needs and will help you in familiarizing the client round your home and the surrounding area. We will provide you with contact information for a named member of our team who has responsibility for you and the service user.

To submit your volunteer application please email [home@paih.org](mailto:home@paih.org) with the details requested on Page 6. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Casework Team, Sraboni Bhattacharya (Project Manager), Sunny Singh, Iain Chisholm or Moseka Mambi on 0141 353 2220 or e-mail: [home@paih.org](mailto:home@paih.org).

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*Thank you!*

## **Frequently Asked Questions:**

### ***How long will the person stay?***

We would usually ask for your help for a period of around 1-2 weeks after which we would try to find the person somewhere else to stay. If the client's government support application takes longer than expected, we may ask you to put them up for an additional few days. If you are unable to, or do not wish to, we will try to find alternative accommodation.

### ***What support will the person need?***

We shall provide the client with a small amount of money from the Hardship Fund. We would ask that you share food with the client, but only if you want to, and let us know if you feel there is a need for extra support, financial or otherwise. You are not expected to be with them all the time, in an ideal arrangement, both the volunteer and guest go about their own daily business with relative independence. Any additional support you want to give is up to you.

### ***What if we don't get on?***

This rarely happens as most people are just very grateful for having a warm, safe place to stay. We are, of course, on hand, to resolve things quickly if you have any difficulty.

### ***What if they don't speak English?***

Most clients speak good English, but if not we aim to introduce you with an interpreter. This is not always possible as we often find out about destitute clients at very short notice. We would at the very least provide you with an interpreter's phone number in case of any difficulty.

### ***Can I choose who I host?***

We work hard to match the needs of volunteers and clients, and will always respect the wishes of both parties. For example, most female clients do not wish to stay with single men, and most female volunteers would rather host women. Ultimately, it is always up to you who you decide to welcome as a guest.

### ***What you can expect from us?***

To minimise risk, we will carry out a risk assessment of new volunteers. We will also disclose relevant information about clients to volunteers, and vice versa. At all times, we are available to and are available to resolve any concerns or problems. We cannot take responsibility for any problems that arise, as this is ultimately a purely voluntary arrangement, but, as previously stated, problems are rare.

***I'm interested in becoming an accommodation volunteer – what do I do next?***

**Okay!** If you would like to join our database of volunteers, please email [home@paih.org](mailto:home@paih.org) in complete confidence with some background about yourself, your accommodation and guest preferences. We need to know the following:

1. *Your name, address, mobile number and email address*
2. *Who else lives with you (e.g. you and your family, single, couple, students etc)*
3. *The size of your home, (e.g. the number of rooms and bathrooms, and the space or number of rooms available).*
4. *Please tell us if you have any pets in your home?*
5. *Do you have any preferences for who you would be able to accommodate?*
6. *Do you have any preferences for who you would NOT be able to accommodate? (e.g. man, woman, pregnant women, young people, older people).*
7. *Are there any time periods when you do not wish to make your accommodation available? (This is not always possible to state but it's helpful if you can).*
8. *How long would you prepared to have someone living in your home (e.g. a few days, a week, a month or two).*
9. *Full disclosure of any criminal record.*
10. *Any other information e.g. reason for becoming a volunteer?*

All volunteers are expected to support Positive Action in Housing's mission statement and aims.

After we get your details we will then carry out a risk assessment. This involves a brief visit to your home. If this is not possible we would seek character references or something similar.

Once we have a service user whose preferences match yours, we will arrange – if possible – an introduction. If this goes off well, then that's it, we will contact you when a need arises, and if all goes well you will have a new guest in your home within a very short space of time.

## A client's experience....



*Clive, 39, is a Minister from Zimbabwe, a country known for grave human rights abuses including torture. Under government rules on asylum, he is forbidden to work, claim benefits or even stay in homeless shelters. Having slept on the streets of Glasgow with nothing to eat, he is now receiving basic government support and waiting for the Home Office to consider his asylum claim. Clive spoke to us about the help volunteers gave him in Scotland.*

*“When I first became destitute, I had literally nowhere to go. So I would sleep in the street, go without food, I had serious health problems. Since I’ve found Positive Action in Housing, I’ve never really been stuck.*

*“In my opinion, staying with volunteers is better than hostels. For one, you’re in a home atmosphere. In hostels I would share a dorm and someone would nick your toothpaste or your towel or soap, and that’s all you have. In one hostel, after paying for my three nights, I was told to clean the toilets, make beds. The guy said ‘if you don’t do it, get out’.*

*“I stayed with volunteers on three occasions, first with a couple in North Queensferry. Then I stayed with a lady for a week in Edinburgh, then again with a lady in Glasgow for about two weeks.*

*“They told me I was free to use the facilities, the kitchen and whatever I needed. I felt at home. There was an incident in North Queensferry. I have a heart condition, and at the time I didn’t have any medication. I collapsed and the couple took me to the hospital. I’m really grateful because if that had happened and I was alone, I wouldn’t be here.*

*“We’d socialise, going for walks or to the beach. I honestly didn’t expect that, I’d expected to stay in my room and that’s it. We went to a football match, I’d never seen one before. They support St Mirren so we went to Paisley to see them play Hibs. I’m still in contact with them.*

*“People who went through what I’m going through sometimes really struggle before they can get help. If it were not for groups like this, people would literally die in the streets. It’s a real comfort to know that there is hope for people who are going through what I went through. I’ve been fortunate, but some people out there are not fortunate enough. There are many people out there who would benefit if there were more volunteers.”*

## A volunteer's experience....



***Alison Swinfen is an education professor at the University of Glasgow, researching languages and intercultural studies. Over the last few years she has provided and spoke to us about her experiences.***

*"I've been volunteering for two or three years now. The first person who came was actually with us for about 5 months which I think is Positive Action's record, and they sent us a lovely box of chocolates after that. And then we had a couple of folk for just two or three weeks, then someone else longer term and then another for about 6 weeks.*

*"Being in the house when Joyce was reunited with her sons whom she'd lost touch with was incredibly special. It was just such a happy moment and to be able to share that was a huge privilege. Watching Shah Lin's English get better and better too was amazing. When she first arrived she could barely speak but by the time she left she was much more confident, and we're seeing the same thing with Rima at the moment, who's just turned 17. She's brought High School Musical and Dawson's Creek into our lives. We just love having her around and learning how to look after a teenager.*

*"She's learning to cook now so the house is full of the smell of lovely Eritrean food. Obviously when people stay they kind of want to give you something back so we've eaten some really amazing stuff. Shah Lin was incredible, when she got her money from Positive Action in Housing she used to go to the Chinese supermarket and cook amazing stuff for us in the evenings. We'd come in from work at the end of the week and there'd be this fabulous food waiting. We used to say 'no, we'll cook this week' but it was really important to her. I think it gave her a sense of worth that she was able to do that.*

*"We're just sharing a home, which means different music, different books, different conversations. Initially people have taken a little bit of time to settle and gradually developed a structure and routine around ours. And then gradually we'd involve them a bit more, and then start eating together and cooking together. And we do have a lot of laughter in the house. It was lovely at Christmas, we had a couple of people back who'd stayed with us in the past. It was a really special day. We just sat round sharing, telling stories and remembering things that happened when they were here, just things that were funny.*

*"I would absolutely recommend volunteering, it's transforming in so many ways. My advice would be that it's really important to remember that the people you welcome are just normal people who need to sleep and eat. Keeping a good routine and normal structure I think is important, not stepping out of your own routine and not going overboard. Some of the folk you'll stay in touch with and they'll be friends for life potentially, others won't be which is just normal, because you're dealing with normal people."*