14 April 2014

**Re. National Inquiry into children in Immigration Detention**

Following the Australian Human rights commission visit with Melaleuca in Darwin:

As requested I have recorded an experience we have had with one family and their child in detention.

We are employed with [a social service organisation as social workers]. Our work is to provide a range of supports to children and parents. Most families are referred by the Department of Children and Families, Child Protection (DCF CP). DCF CP refer families to [the organisation] after investigating reason for initial report to DCF CP and assessing the families would benefit from further support.

The situation of one recent referral was for a family in detention at [a detention centre]. The mother had struck the four year old child on several occasions and a mandatory report had been made. The mother is heavily medicated and presents as very depressed. The father is also depressed. The son, four years old is active and bright. We have observed them together and both parents struggle to respond to their son’s needs.

On listening to them they explained they had no problems parenting before they came here. They explain at [the detention centre] they live in a very small space and can not get a break from their son who is very active. The situation is too much for them. They only have television to watch. Mum hits son out of frustration. They had requested they have separated rooms so they can have more space and both have a break from their son. [Service workers] put them at opposite ends of the camp. This was too far away so they moved back in together again. It seems that whatever is in the best interests of the child / family cannot be realistically implemented.

We turned up to work with the family and there was no interpreter available. [Service] workers spoke scathingly of the son; that he steals food. Another [service] worker muttered negative comments about the mother, barely out of earshot. Another worker joins in with a scathing comment about the Mum. Human respect and care is not evident from these service workers.

We have witnessed the child having a tantrum when we left the play room and he had to leave a toy behind. While we would encourage the parents to walk away and ignore this behavior the [service workers] supervising instructed them to pick their son up and take him back to their room. It seems the [service] workers lacked understanding and insight into what was happening and what was an appropriate way to respond.

The family is unable to parent the way they would like. The [service] workers undermine them as parents which reinforces their sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. 2 [service] workers are present when we try to work with families, in the detention centre. All of this negatively impacts on the child, who is isolated from other children because of his behavior which can involve being rough towards the other children. This further compromises his development.

Saddest of all, this family is likely to be moved to Manus Is in the near future