

## London Churches Refugee Fund

○ **How did your organization begin its work with refugees, and when was that?**

Freedom from Torture, formerly the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, was established in 1985 as part of Amnesty International's Medical Group. The six founding members recognized that there was no provision for therapeutic and practical support for survivors of torture arriving in the UK after fleeing persecution, nor was there any systematic documentation of evidence of torture, and so the organisation was established to change that.

○ **What was the identity of the first asylum seekers and refugees to come to you? Has the identity of your visitors changed since then?**

Freedom from Torture's long history means that we have treated asylum seekers and refugees affected by most major human rights violations over the past 27 years; our clients' identities change as countries begin to, or cease to use torture. In our early years, clients were fleeing military juntas in South America; currently, a significant proportion of our clients are from Sri Lanka, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

○ **What have been the main needs of the visitors over the past year? What are the services that you offer to meet these needs?**

Our clients have a multiplicity of complex needs, including psychological and physical issues arising from their experiences of torture; the difficulties of adjusting to life in exile; issues with negotiating the complex asylum and immigration system to secure protection; and, in the case of 97% of our clients in London, poverty. For vulnerable, traumatized individuals, it is key that we are able to both offer therapy and practical support. We offer a tailored, holistic support package to clients, which can include individual therapy; group therapy; legal and welfare assistance; assistance with other practical matters including emergency funds; and a number of therapeutic activities such as art, music, and horticultural therapy.

○ **The London Churches Refugee Fund is particularly concerned with refugees and asylum seekers who are destitute. What does the experience of your visitors tell you are the main causes of destitution?**

Many of our clients are in poverty; for those that are destitute, there are a variety of reasons. One is that they have been made forcibly destitute due to the failure of their

asylum claim, and are “Appeals Rights Exhausted”. This is not to say that they do not have a good asylum claim; rather, poor decision making on the part of the Home Office means that their valid claims have been disbelieved. Others fall into destitution due to maladministration on the part of those bodies responsible for administering financial support to asylum seekers, or those who have recently been awarded refugee status.

- **Which changes in society do you think have impacted most on your visitors? Do you think any changes have created more destitution over the past year, or maybe reduced it?**

Our clients are impacted both by the negative public and media discourse about asylum and immigration, and by government policy. Government policy and maladministration is directly responsible for the destitution that our clients face; the terms of the public debate mean that it can be hard for organisations to build campaigns against destitution for this group.

- **What policy or practical measure or change do you think would do most to reduce the level of destitution among people seeking sanctuary?**

We believe that an end to the government’s policy of making Appeals Rights Exhausted asylum seekers destitute would be an important step; improved administration of financial support is also vital. Better decision making in asylum decisions would also ensure that fewer people became destitute.

- **Is or has your organisation been in a position to do any public advocacy for the people who come to you? If so, what do you think has been effective?**

A key part of Freedom from Torture’s work is policy advocacy to improve the lives of our client group; at the moment, one of our focus areas is poverty among torture survivors. Our research report on poverty, ‘The Poverty Barrier’ was released in July 2013, at a parliamentary event, which attracted some key policy makers. We are now undertaking a variety of policy advocacy initiatives to work to reduce poverty and destitution among our clients.

- **The LCR Fund can offer only modest amounts: if an imaginary windfall to the Fund could double its grant for your destitute visitors, how do you think you would use it?**

Freedom from Torture supports around 1,400 people a year, many of whom need financial support. Doubling the grant that we receive would enable us to help more of our clients to have access to food, clothing, and emergency supplies. While we provide financial support

in emergencies, we also work to ensure that government policy improves, and that Freedom from Torture staff are trained to help our clients deal with the underlying issues causing destitution as far as possible.

- **Can you sum up the vision of your organisation? Can you foresee any changes you might make to develop your services to people seeking sanctuary?**

Freedom from Torture exists to ensure that torture survivors in the UK are able to rehabilitate and rebuild their lives after their traumatic experience. We do this through direct service provision, training and capacity building, and policy advocacy, and have been extremely successful in our work for 27 years. As circumstances change, we will continue to develop in order to provide the best possible support to this vulnerable group.

Katie Commons

Trust and Grants Fundraiser

Freedom from Torture – [www.freedomfromtorture.org](http://www.freedomfromtorture.org)