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REDACTED

FOSTER HEATING

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Mons. Christopher Prowse
Vicar General
Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne
PO. Box 146
East Melbourne, 3002

3/04/2003

Dear sir,

Re: Emma Foster

REDACTED

I write in support of the enclosed letter forwarded to you by Mr and Mrs Foster. My name is Nicky Maheras and I am a family therapist registered as a clinical member with the Victorian Association of Family Therapists[Vaft Inc.]. I have over 17 years experience working in the health and welfare field and within this time have provided counseling services to many families where trauma, violence and sexual abuse has occurred. I have been providing counselling services to the Foster family for over two years. These sessions have included contact with Emma Foster. A summary of her current status is provided below.

Emma has experienced sexual abuse perpetrated by a Catholic church priest. This abuse occurred over a prolonged period commencing as early as age six. Disclosure about the abuse did not occur until after Emma as a teenager, became a patient of a mental health service showing symptoms of anorexia, substance abuse, self harming and suicidality. These symptoms are present in nearly all cases of survivors of prolonged sexual abuse. Treatment of such symptoms is made more difficult if patients are not stabilized in secure and supportive accommodation. The abuse creates a lack of safety and lack of safety in other situations exacerbates the symptoms. Emma has not been able to maintain her accommodation within the family home because of these symptoms and their impact on family relationships. To preserve these family relationships and ensure that Emma does not become cut off and socially isolated from vital support networks it has been necessary for her to leave home. Her parents continue to provide emotional and practical support in a way that can be more useful to Emma from the position of living away.

Although her homelessness has resulted from a series of crises including an overdose, leaving home has also been an important transition for Emma in regards to maintaining the normal life stage developments of independence and autonomy. However, because of the specific characteristics of her psychiatric disability it has not been possible for Emma

to be placed in suitable accommodation that caters for her special needs. Some of her special needs are outlined below.

Emma is 21 years old and therefore does not qualify for youth services set up for runaway teenagers. However one of the effects of the sexual abuse is an arrest of emotional development. Therefore, Emma's emotional responses and behaviour are more closely matched to a person much younger than her 21 years, particularly some of her acting out behaviour. Although Emma has been assisted by mental health services, her diagnosis is not considered in mainstream psychiatry to be treatable and therefore she does not remain an inpatient or access psychiatric services accommodations.

Complicating this gap in the net is also her substance abuse problem that serves as a way of self anaesthetizing from the painful memories and flashbacks of the abuse. Mainstream drug and alcohol services that provide accommodation exclude Emma because of her psychiatric history and mainstream psychiatric services exclude Emma because of her drug usage. Generalist accommodation services exclude Emma based on her self harming behaviour which can be distressing and can be misinterpreted as a sign of suicidality. This further reduces opportunities for Emma to access accommodation services.

The complex symptoms that Emma presents with are a direct effect of the violent abuse she was subjected to as a child. These symptoms preclude her from accessing mainstream accommodation services. Emma can function in independent accommodation if she has appropriate social supports and a network of treatment providers who are united in their responses to her behaviour. The desperation of her housing crisis can not be illustrated more clearly than by the fact that Emma has had to be housed in an aged care facility since her discharge from hospital. Given that this housing crisis results directly from the ongoing emotional, psychological, physical, mental and social effects of abuse, responsibility for providing suitable, accessible and supportive accommodation for Emma clearly rests in your hands, as you are rightfully taking measures to Emma in providing her with other relevant services.

I look forward to a speedy response to this family's request as the matter is of considerable urgency. Further queries or elaboration about any of the above can be responded to by calling on 8500 4831.

Yours sincerely



Nicky Maheras
Family Therapist