

## **ACT Budget submission 2023-4**

### **Acute Rental Support Coordinating Committee (ARSCC): a partnership comprising Companion House, Canberra Refugee Support and St Vincent de Paul Caritas Christi Conference.**

#### **Category: Community Services and support for families**

**Re:** Community Services Directorate: Office of Multicultural Affairs

#### **Funding:** Discretionary Funding

For the years 2022-3, 2021-2 the ACT government through the Office of Multicultural Affairs has provided \$195,000 discretionary funding per annum for asylum seekers who are eligible for the ACT Access Card and are not in receipt of any other income. The Guidelines for the Discretionary Funding 2022-23 are provided as an Attachment. Prior to this, a level of Discretionary Funding of \$15,000 per year had been provided through OMA as one of a range of commitments by the ACT Government to support asylum seekers who were resident in Canberra.

The Discretionary Funding program was designed by the ACT Government on the advice of RASH (Refugee Asylum Seekers Humanitarian) its advisory committee on refugee and asylum seekers issues to deal with problem created by the LNP Federal Government's cuts to funding and the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS). The background to this is set out in the attachment on the SRSS drawn up by the Refugee Council of Australia.

Financial support for asylum seekers while awaiting resolution of their claim for protection is a responsibility of the Federal Government. ARSCC is writing to the ACT's Federal Parliamentarians in support of the RCOA proposal to expand the eligibility of the SRSS Program and develop a mainstream option in parallel, based on the Special Benefit.

The difficulty faced by the agencies represented by ARSCC is that at this stage, late April, we have no assurance that the Federal Government will deliver on the Federal Labor's pre-election platform on SRSS in this budget or that even if it does do so what the timetable for implementation will be.

Just as importantly, even if the Federal government reinstates the SRSS criteria to acceptable levels, it won't cover everybody who needs support. The Discretionary Fund existed prior to its expansion in recent years in recognition of the vulnerability of asylum seekers. An increased Commonwealth contribution to SRSS does not mean that a discretionary fund is not needed. A reduced amount of funding will still be required.

This is because there are other drivers outside of SRSS cuts have led to asylum seeker vulnerability. The long processing times for decisions on claims for protection, now up to six-seven years has significantly compounded the difficulties facing asylum seekers. The very slow "fast track" for people who arrived by boat is also another special factor of its own, which has resulted in eroded health and well-being amongst

boat arrivals, some now suffering chronic conditions and mental health concerns after years of uncertainty and family separation. Covid-19 also eroded people's financial lives, with employment disrupted, businesses destroyed and savings depleted -with long term consequences for some individuals and families.

ARSCC is therefore requesting that the ACT Government continue to provide discretionary funding for 2023-24 at the current level of \$195,000 per annum on the understanding that funding at this level would reduce appropriately on the date of implementation by the Federal Government of substantially improved SRSS funding and eligibility. In the absence of Federal Government funding, and without ACT funding, the ARSCC agencies will be unable to sustain the level of support we are currently providing to this vulnerable group of people for any length of time.

We want to acknowledge that the ACT role in supporting asylum seekers has been important. The discretionary funds were for a large part a response to the cuts to funding, and the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution |Support Service (SRSS).

The impact of not providing ongoing support by the ACT Government is that people can't pay rent and will become homeless, people can't pay medications, have little food security, become more and more marginalised and suffer health consequences. All of these will impact in varying ways on the ACT service provision. The agencies who have been providing support for asylum seekers will also face financial stress in trying to meet these needs from their donor funds.

Dr Douglas Hynd

On behalf of Acute Rental support Coordinating Committee

- Canberra Refugee Support
- Companion House
- Vincentian Refugee Network