

## ACT Budget submission 2024-5

**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

The purpose of this submission is to seek continuation of an annual allocation of \$195,000 in discretionary funding to assist destitute asylum seekers in the ACT Budget for FY 2024-25.

For the years 2023-24, 2022-~~23~~, and 2021-~~22~~ the ACT ~~G~~government through the Office of Multicultural Affairs has generously 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 2023-24 and the Application form are available from the ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs. Prior to this, a level of Discretionary Funding of \$15,000 per annum 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 policy is set out in the attachment on the SRSS drawn up by the Refugee Council of Australia: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss/> Financial support for asylum seekers while awaiting resolution of their claim for protection is a responsibility of the Federal Government. In 2023 ARSCC wrote to has previously written in 2023 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 St Vincent de Paul Society also supported these proposals nationally. Unfortunately, the Federal Government made no commitment to easier access to or increased funding for SRSS in its 2023-24 Budget, nor has it since given any indication of providing any sort of financial safety in the future.

Given this lack of any progress in changing the policy, RCOA and other agencies including Vinnies are again calling on the Federal Government to accept its responsibility for these vulnerable people and include funding for a fair financial safety net for in its 2024-25 budget. ARSCC will be writing again is writing again to Federal Parliamentarians from the ACT on this issue advocating change. Given the Federal Government's track record on this issue to date, we are not confident that it will change its position for FY 2024-25. Sadly, we anticipate that it will continue to ignore its 2023 Party Platform commitment to such a measure, as it has ignored previous platforms which have had a similar commitment. A copy of this correspondence is attached. We had been hopeful that the Federal Government would have acted on this issue by this

~~date. We have received no tangible assurance that this will take place in time for such action to make a difference for asylum seekers in the coming year.~~

~~Furthermore, the Federal Government has done little to reduce the number of people seeking asylum across Australia, who are still suffering destitution. In the ACT, the agencies comprising ARSCC were supporting at least 50 households in late 2023 with either or both living expenses and rent assistance. Unless there is an unlikely positive announcement in Federal Budget in May 2024, without an ACT Government discretionary fund grant of the same amount as for this year, ASRCC will be unable to keep these families from destitution in FY 2024-25. The difficulty faced by the agencies represented by ARSCC 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.~~

Even if the Federal Government reinstates the SRSS criteria to acceptable levels, in the budget 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 will not be needed, though the amount of funding required would be substantially reduced because there are other drivers outside of SRSS cuts have led to asylum seeker vulnerability.

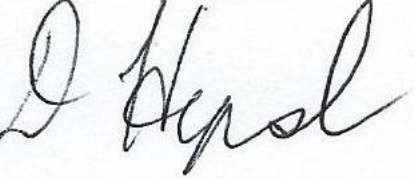
The long processing times for decisions on claims for protection, now up to six-seven years has significantly compounded the difficulties facing asylum seekers, though we are hopeful that the policy announcements by the Federal government will assist in reducing this time frame over the next few years. 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 ~~FY 20243-254~~ 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 critically 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. We estimate that over the financial year 2023-24 the agencies cooperating as AARSCC would have contributed around \$100,000 from funds donated by individuals and groups in the Canberra

community towards support for asylum seekers. Without the supplementary support provided through the Discretionary funds we would be facing a crisis in providing support for asylum seekers within matter of a few months.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Hynd', is centered on a light-colored rectangular background.

Dr Douglas Hynd

On behalf of Acute Rental support Coordinating Committee

- Canberra Refugee Support
- Companion House
- St Vincent de Paul Caritas Christi Conference.

| -