



PRESIDENT'S REPORT
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
1st November 2011

Background

- This is the tenth Annual Report of Canberra Refugee Support Incorporated (CRS).
- The role of CRS is settle refugees in Canberra, to provide advocacy, to develop policy and to undertake associated tasks.
- Our reporting period is the financial year - 1 July to 30 June.

Acknowledgements

- Our achievements are dependent on the contribution of our members and friends. I would like to acknowledge and thank all who have contributed to the work of our organisation over the past year.

Committee

- Our Committee during the 2010/11 year and has consisted of:

President	Geoff McPherson	
Vice President	David Cran	
Secretary	Ben Pynt	
Treasurer & Public Officer	Daryl Evans	
Member	Morna Whiting	
Member	Colleen Fox	
Member	Doug Hynd	
Member	Don McDonough	
Member	John Collard	Resigned 14 July 2011
Member	Rochelle White	Resigned 2 August 2011

- I commend the work of the committee and thank all who have contributed to the running of CRS.

Membership

- There has been a steady growth in the number of members of CRS over the past year. The current membership is about 170. This is an increase of about 50 over the previous year.
- The trend for younger people to join CRS has continued and this is a very welcome trend.

Support to Refugees

- There are a small number of organisations in the ACT that provide significant support to asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to CRS these include Companion House, Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul and the Refugee Resettlement Committee of St John the Apostle at Kippax.
- CRS is represented on ACT and Commonwealth Government committees including on the ACT Government's Refugee Asylum Seeker & Humanitarian Coordination Committee (RASH), the Department of Immigration's Committee on Migration Planning & Settlement Services (COMPASS) and the Multicultural Advisory Group in Centrelink (MAGIC). We have also participated in other forums such as the ACT Asylum Seeker Network (ACTASN).
- CRS seeks to work cooperatively with other agencies to maximise the benefits for refugees.

Casework

- Most of the support provided to refugees in the past year has been to new clients.
- During the past 12 months we have also provided significant ongoing support other clients and we have had casual contact with a much larger number of others.
- In the ACT the number of new asylum seeker cases rose sharply in 2008/09 from an historical average of 10-15 cases per annum to about 50 in 2009/10. A further increase in the 2010/11 year to about 60 has confirmed a trend.
- As asylum seekers living in the community are often the most needy clients, in recent years CRS has provided support to these people as our priority.

Scholarships

- CRS has promoted and facilitated scholarships to recognise and support refugees in Canberra. In 2011 a total of 23 scholarships were presented to students at the Canberra Institute of Technology, the University of Canberra and to children at the ACT Government's Introductory English Centres. Most of the funding involved has been provided by sponsors and there has been wide public acceptance of the scheme.
- This program has grown to be highly valued and the UNHCR Regional Representative has publicly acknowledged its success. It is intended to continue to work in this area as the benefits to the individuals, CRS and the community are considerable. CRS provided a focus on World Refugee Day (20 June) and presented Scholarships on that day.
- In 2011 the sponsors who funded scholarships included individuals, student groups and workplace groups. CRS provided \$1,750 for the program with about \$12,000 provided from sponsors in cash or kind. This year CRS has had early donations from several former sponsors and this is a strong indication of the success of the program.

Refugee Mentoring Program

- In 2008 CRS sponsored a major initiative to establish a Refugee Mentoring Program (RMP) at Calvary Hospital. The purpose of the RMP is to provide work or study related assistance to individuals with a refugee background. This program will also enhance self-esteem, assist participation in the community, and foster networks to support their engagement with the Australian social and cultural context. A pilot course was conducted in the first half of 2008 and this proved to be very successful. The program is proceeding on a regular basis with nominations from refugee related organisations across Canberra. The experience of most participants is that they learn and gain practical experience that is otherwise not available to

them. Many have found employment as a result. CRS is represented on the RMP Advisory Committee.

Finance

- The work of the Treasurer is essential for the sound functioning of CRS. I would like to thank Daryl Evans for so diligently fulfilling the role of Treasurer and for preparing for the annual audit. Under his guidance, the financial position of CRS has been sound over the past year. We have been able to respond appropriately to all requests that have involved demands on our funds.
- Our approach to fundraising has been to conduct activities as we have needed to build up a small reserve to cover anticipated expenditure. We closely control expenditure with Committee approval being sought before any financial commitment is agreed.

Public Recognition and Reputation

- It is important to recognise that the work of CRS can only be undertaken if we are a trusted organisation. My assessment is that CRS continues to be highly regarded in the community and continues to attract widespread support. In the reporting period members of the Committee have held discussions with politicians and public servants to progress issues and to make representations on behalf of clients.

CRS Position on Asylum Seekers

- As the national debate around asylum seekers and refugees has developed over the reporting period the committee of CRS came to the view that we needed to articulate a view on some policy issues. This led to the formulation of the following statement:

Preamble:

CRS supports the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

CRS Position:

1. One specific group of Asylum Seekers (eg 'Boat People') should not be demonised because of the mode of transport used to reach Australia.
2. Any policy directed at deterring or processing Asylum Seekers, whatever the mode of transport, should be humane.
3. Once protection is requested, Australia should process any request in accordance with its obligations as a signatory of the Convention.
4. Australia should not "trade" one group of Asylum Seekers for another group of Refugees. This is unconscionable and appears to be using one group of people as a deterrent to others who might use boats to come to Australia.
5. Australia should not pass Asylum Seekers to countries who are not signatories to the Convention.
6. If Australia has the capacity to accept a further 4,000 Refugees then they should be processed independent of other factors.
7. CRS does not support mandatory detention of Asylum Seekers nor do we support the detention of children.

Media

- In 2011 CRS has formed a partnership with the University of Canberra to produce a series of refugee related stories that will be broadcast in late November 2011.
- The Committee has taken the approach that it is important to make a contribution to the public debate on asylum seekers and refugees. In particular the committee has concluded that CRS should present some of the positive aspects of the story as it is so often an emotional and negative portrayal.

Conclusion

- CRS continues to receive public acknowledgement that our work and contributions are valued and relevant. Recognition for our assistance to individual cases, our scholarship program, our role in the Calvary Refugee Mentoring Program and our contribution to policy development is widely acknowledged. These are important indicators that we should continue to contribute in these areas.
- In the future, as the circumstance and issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees change, CRS will need to continuously review and adjust to remain relevant. This is primarily the responsibility of the Committee but individual members are also encouraged to contribute in any way they can.

Geoff McPherson
President
Canberra Refugee Support