

15 July 2020

Zali Steggall OAM, MP  
Member for Warringah, New South Wales  
Parliament of Australia

Dear Zali,

**Re: The need for support for asylum seekers in the community during COVID-19: Request for an on-line meeting with you for a discussion on this topic.**

We are contacting you on behalf of the Nangami Peace and Justice Group at the parish of Our Lady of the Way, at North Sydney, in response to your recent newsletter requesting constituents to voice their concerns about issues that should be raised in Parliament

Our church community has, for a long time, been concerned about the plight of asylum seekers, and in 2018 formed a Peace and Justice group, Nangami,, <https://www.nangami.org/> which welcomes and includes people of other faiths. We were very glad to have the opportunities to meet with your staff Louise Hislop and Peta Garrett, and following that, directly with you, in 2019, to express our concerns on the impact of cuts to the Federal Government Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program.

The Federal Government continues to deny many asylum seekers in the community the support under SRSS that they previously had as a safety net, and the COVID-19 pandemic has now put these asylum seekers, and the organisations that help them, in a crisis situation.

**More support is needed:** In the absence of Federal Government support, the State Governments have recognised the perilous position of asylum seekers in the community, and have separately introduced programs of financial assistance. However, the emergency is such that much more support is needed, as their programs *are not on-going, and will amount to a very small sum per head*. In New South Wales there are over 40,000 people currently seeking asylum, so the NSW State Government's allocation of \$1.5M in emergency relief amounts to a one-off allocation of \$37.5 per person.

**Crisis response:** The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) community centre in Westmead is now closed to community activities and face-to-face appointments, and instead is operating in crisis response mode providing casework, employment support, and emergency relief over the phone, and home delivery food bank support.

**Some statistics:** A comparison shows the impact of COVID-19 on people supported by JRS:

- Over all of 2019 JRS supplied Food Bank parcels to just under 2000 people
- For 2020, JRS supplied Food Bank parcels to 3,756 people in the first three months.

Statistics for June 2020 illustrate the current situation:

- Deliveries: JRS is doing over 250 deliveries each week, which reach more than 750 people.
- Waiting list: As of June 19, 174 families and individuals are on JRS Australia's waiting list for support with food, rent, medications, and psycho-social support

**The current situation is going to result in increased homelessness and ill health.** The costs of dealing with lack of health care, housing and social services are very much greater than the costs of providing those services in the first place.

- For example, the AHURI study (Reference 1), carried out in Western Australia in 2016 found direct calculable government costs savings in preventing homelessness. The peer reviewed detailed study concluded this saving is between \$4800 to \$13,000 per person in health care costs to government.
- The study “The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia” (Reference 2) estimates the cost per person to be \$9000 in health and justice services.

**Special problem for women:** JRS works with many women who are seeking asylum in Australia and has found that this group of women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence and face significant barriers to accessing appropriate support services.

JRS in its report (Reference 3) recommended:

- Targeted funding allocated to women seeking asylum, so that they are not disadvantaged by domestic violence service funding models.
- Access to social security payments for women seeking asylum who have experienced Domestic and Family Violence, regardless of their visa status.
- Employment assistance specifically for this group.

**Approach to Federal Parliament:** In light of the findings of these studies, we ask you to raise in Federal Parliament the urgent need to restore the SRSS program support to asylum seekers in the community at a level tied to the new JobSeeker allowance, with specific provisions for women seeking asylum.

**Possible Zoom meeting:** Members of the Nangami group would be very grateful for an opportunity to meet with you on line via Zoom at a time that your office can arrange to discuss this urgent issue.

With kind regards,

Joseph Fernandez  
 Dr Anne Noonan  
 Professor Bridget Wilcken AM, MD, FRACP

## References

1: What are the health, social and economic benefits of providing public housing and support to formerly homeless people?

[https://www.ahuri.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/8526/AHURI\\_Final\\_Report\\_No265\\_What-are-the-health,-social-and-economic-benefits-of-providing-public-housing-and-support-to-formerly-homeless-people.pdf](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/8526/AHURI_Final_Report_No265_What-are-the-health,-social-and-economic-benefits-of-providing-public-housing-and-support-to-formerly-homeless-people.pdf)

2: The cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia

<https://www.csi.edu.au/research/project/cost-youth-homelessness-australia-final-report/>

3: Jesuit Refugee Service Australia report “Free from Violence against Women and Girls”

<http://www.jrs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Free-from-Violence-Against-Women-and-Girls-VAWG-Report-8.pdf>