

July 2020

Trent Zimmerman MP

Member for North Sydney

Dear Trent

Re: Emergency support required for asylum seekers in the Australian community as a result of COVID-19 and Governments' response

We are contacting you on behalf of the Nangami Peace and Justice Group at the parish of Our Lady of the Way, North Sydney, to request an on-line meeting with you for a discussion on this topic.

You may recall meeting with a delegation from our group last September about the cuts to the Status Resolution Support Scheme (SRSS). Our (Jesuit) parish continues to provide significant ongoing financial and volunteer support to the Jesuit Refugee Service (**JRS**) for the support of asylum seekers worldwide. This includes on the ground support for asylum-seekers in Sydney.

We look overseas and are grateful for the Federal Government's sure footed and competent response to the COVID-19 pandemic for the benefit of its citizens and permanent residents.

However the COVID-19 pandemic (and the state and Federal Governments' response) has put asylum seekers in the Australian community, and the organisations that help them, in a crisis situation.

Those who have lost employment, who have already gone through their savings and who are unable to access any form of government assistance, need urgent financial support.

The number of asylum seekers presenting to JRS in situations of crisis continues to rise. Since 1 April 2020, JRS saw a 224% increase in the average number of weekly referrals compared to Q1 2020.

JRS inform us that, as a result of the pandemic and the Governments' response, 43% of those assisted through their employment program in 2019 have lost their employment or have had their hours reduced. Those affected cannot keep up with rent and other essential costs.

Food insecurity has become a real issue. Over April and May 2020, JRS food bank services reached 3,756 people. In contrast, the number of people served by its food bank in the whole of 2019 was less than 2,000.

Many who present to JRS are in significant rental arrears. The majority of these clients had only enough superannuation to last them more than 4 – 6 weeks of rent. Some are being threatened with eviction (despite the moratorium), while others have already vacated their homes and now live in overcrowded dwellings, in vehicles, or on the streets.

Even those who have paid taxes for years have been excluded from government support when they have needed it the most.

JRS caseworkers are reporting a significant spike in anxiety, suicidality, and other mental health symptoms. Most conversations with its casework team since 1 April 2020 have included references to hopelessness, self-harm, or suicide.

We would like to meet with you, remotely if necessary, to present further information to you of asylum seekers' experience of COVID-19 and the Federal Government's response.

We look forward to hearing from you.