

ACT Budget submission 2026-27

Acute Rental Support Coordinating Committee (ARSCC): a partnership comprising Companion House, Canberra Refugee Support and the St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra Goulburn

Category: Community Services and support for families

Re: Community Services Directorate: Office of Multicultural Affairs

Funding: Humanitarian Funding Program

The purpose of this submission is to seek an allocation of **\$135,000** in discretionary funding to assist destitute asylum seekers in the ACT Budget for FY 2026-27.

Background

Commencing in 2021-22 and in each subsequent year the ACT Government through the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), has provided what is now termed Humanitarian Funding Program (HFP) for asylum seekers who were eligible for and in possession of the ACT Access Card and were not in receipt of any other income. This was administered through a grant mechanism based on applications from agencies on a two monthly schedule. Prior to this Discretionary Funding of \$15,000 per annum had been provided through OMA to support asylum seekers resident in the ACT.

Prior to the 2024-25 Budget the ACT Treasury sought a consultant's report on what was originally termed the Discretionary Funding program and its rationale. Following this report, funding of \$150,000 was provided by the ACT Government in the 2024-25 and then in the 2025-26 Budget. In 2024-25 OMA introduced a simplified arrangement for the distribution of the funding, which reduced reducing the administrative costs for both OMA and ARSCC. This was continued in 2025-26 when OMA again entered into a Deed of Agreement with Companion House for the dispersal and reporting on the funds. Companion House in turn has a Memorandum of Understanding with St Vincent de Paul and Canberra Refugee Support on governance of ARSCC, which now covers implementation of these financial arrangements. A copy of both the Deed of Agreement and the Memorandum of Understanding are provided as **Attachment B** and **Attachment C** respectively.

Program design and purpose

The Discretionary Funding program was initiated by the ACT Government on the advice of the RASH (Refugee Asylum Seekers Humanitarian) Committee, now the Humanitarian Coordination Committee. The program was a response to problems created by Federal Government cuts to funding and the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS). The background to, and implications of this policy shift are set out in the discussion on the SRSS by the Refugee Council of Australia: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss/>.

Because 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 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 payment. The St Vincent de Paul Society also supported these proposals at a national level. Unfortunately, the Federal Government made no commitment to easier access to or increased funding for SRSS in its 2023-24 Budget, nor has it in subsequent budgets given any indication of providing a financial safety net for this extremely vulnerable group.

The Federal Government has not taken any action on this issue and shows no sign of doing anything to extend the scope of SRSS to cover the asylum seekers that ARSCC has been supporting. Discretionary Funding, as it was originally entitled, existed prior to its expansion in recent years in recognition of the vulnerability of asylum seekers and that vulnerability has only increased since then given increases in the cost of living, not least rent in Canberra. Any increased Commonwealth contribution to SRSS does not mean that Discretionary Funding would not be needed. A reduced amount of funding would still be required.

However, there has been some improvement. Since late 2025 there has been an increase the number of asylum seekers on bridging visas being granted permanent visas, who now no longer need assistance from HFP.

Humanitarian Funding Program 2025-26

The Discretionary Funding this financial year have been used for asylum seekers with an Access Card who have no income. 31 households (5 families with a total of 17 children, an older couple and 25 unaccompanied people are being assisted, as at the end of January 2026. This includes 10 people who do not have work rights.

CRS, Companion House and St Vincent de Paul are in addition providing support from their own donor funds for asylum seeker families and individuals, including those who are not eligible for support from the Discretionary Funds because they are earning some income, usually from irregular casual work.

The three organisations will have spent **\$75,130** from Discretionary Funds on rents and living expenses for asylum seekers without income in the four months from September 2025 (when the funds became available under the negotiated Deed of Agreement) until the end of December 2025. Before those funds were received the financial support was provided from funds raised by the three agencies.

For the remaining six months of 2025-26 we expect a need for a similar rate of Discretionary Funding (\$75,180) over the 6 months January-June for total of **\$150,000** for the financial year. Expenditure in the second half of the financial year is a little slower due to the increase in numbers of people being processed and granted refugee status, this welcome development is reflected in the slightly lower bid for funding made in this submission for 2026-2027.

In addition to Discretionary Funding expenditure the three organisations anticipate spending another **\$136,260** from our own donor funds on rents and living expenses for asylum seekers across the current financial year. This includes asylum seekers who because of earning some income were not eligible to participate in the Humanitarian funding Program. This amount is in addition to the discretionary fund payments for the financial year 2025-2026. This includes spending for the four months before the funds under the Humanitarian funding program were received.

As noted in previous years the three agencies cannot guarantee that we can maintain the current level of financial support that would be needed to meet this total. CRS for example does not make commitments more than two months in advance and only does so when it is confident that it has the money in the bank to meet those commitments. The three agencies have so in combination with Humanitarian Funding

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Program managed to juggle resources to meet the needs of asylum seekers. We note however that many agencies in other areas of social welfare provision are reporting difficulty in meeting fund raising budgets given cost of living impacts on family budgets of those who have been regular donors. We see no reason why agencies supporting refugees and asylum seekers such as ours will continue to remain exempt from those trends despite the generosity of the Canberra community over the past five years. Current expenditure raised from donations will be very hard for all three organisations to sustain. A crisis in ability to provide support is rarely more than a couple of months away for any of our agencies.

Humanitarian Funding Program 2026-27

ARSCC is seeking \$135,000 for 2026-27 financial year for the Humanitarian Funding Program. Whilst it is exceedingly hard to determine what the numbers of asylum seekers with need might be this estimate is based on ARSCC being required to support 28 households, a reduction of 10%.

As noted previously not all destitute asylum seekers are eligible for the Humanitarian Funding Program because they are earning some income from casual work. This income is generally not sufficient to meet both rent and living expenses. We support these families from donations from the community to help meet the shortfall in rent and living expenses.

Although we are seeking a *reduced funding* level for the Humanitarian Funding Program, we would point out that there is the very real possibility of *some increase* in claims for protection lodged within Australia above conservative estimates on which we have based our request. We note that in Canberra applications from embassy staff are common in the event of changes in political circumstances in the home country. Significant recent developments affecting options for potential asylum seekers that could result in increased numbers of applications for protection include:

- Effective abolition of the US refugee program of 125,000 pa and the general closing down of the US borders to people from a wide range of countries, particularly Africa, Central America and the Middle East. A further development has been the hold placed by the US on assessing claims for protection in countries that are major sources of claims for asylum.
- Creation of instability and possible regime change in South America, most notably Venezuela arising from US military activity.
- Claims for asylum from citizens or persons with some form of permanent residence in the US.

Case studies

Attachment A provides a number of de-identified case studies of families and individuals supported by the three agencies through Discretionary funding along with donated funding that give some detail of the situation of those being assisted through this funding and the impact that it has.

In conclusion

We want to acknowledge that the ACT role in supporting asylum seekers over recent years through the Humanitarian Funding Program, Emergency housing support through the Pathways program and the ACT Access Card has been critically important for a very vulnerable group of people. The three elements form a reinforcing tripod of support. To withdraw one of those elements, in this case Discretionary funding would be to make

the other elements less effective. The ACT in partnership with support agencies has been innovative in developing a network of support for asylum seekers which is not matched elsewhere in Australia.

On behalf of Acute Rental Support Coordinating Committee:

Kathy Ragless
Director
Companion House

Dr Tim McKenna
Vice-President, Caritas Christi Conference,
St Vincent de Paul Society, Canberra-Goulburn

Dr Douglas Hynd
President Canberra Refugee Support

18 March 2025

Attachment A: Case Studies

Attachment B: Deed of Agreement – held by Multicultural ACT (not attached)

Attachment C: Memorandum of Understanding – held by Multicultural ACT (not attached)

Attachment A: 2025/26 recipients of Humanitarian Fund grants through CRS, St Vincent de Paul or Companion House

1. TW: Unaccompanied man

TW arrived as an asylum seeker by boat in 2013. He was still an asylum seeker until very recently. TW is a torture survivor who has also experienced war, dangerous flight, and long-term marginalisation and separation from family.

TW is diagnosed with severe depression and PTSD, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes, and struggles with suicidal ideation.

TW worked consistently since he gained work rights in 2015 and worked regularly in a variety of roles including as a factory worker, laying the NBN and kitchen hand. However, he lost his work rights in 2024.

Since then, TW has not been well and has lived in poverty.

TW lives in supported asylum seeker housing in the Pathways program. He was granted a small living allowances from the Discretionary Fund over 2025 to cover medical expenses, food, transport and phone.

TW had very recently been offered a pathway to a permanent refugee visa by Australian authorities and will soon have a substantive visa and be eligible for mainstream services. His access to small living expenses has been fundamental to his ability to maintain his health and dignity over the last year.

2. NSP: Unaccompanied man

NSP has been an asylum seeker since 2012. He has a severe mental illness and spent some years homeless, living on the streets of Canberra. He is not well enough for shared housing so could not join the Pathways Program. Companion House organised paid accommodation and pay for this from donations to the organisation. Importantly, NSP also received a living allowance from the Discretionary Fund over 2025.

The living allowance was crucial to ensure he could purchase medication, food and transport. It allowed Companion House the ability to cover his accommodation and pay for legal assistance for his migration case which had lapsed for many years due to his illness.

Close collaboration with ACT Mental Health and lawyer has slowly built some new pathways and hope for NSP, alongside the living allowance he receives. NSP himself identifies the living allowance as the most important contribution to his dignity and well-being.

3. KT: Single parent family

KT is an energetic and intelligent 37-year-old asylum seeker and sole parent of three children. She speaks English and has consistently maintained employment over her last five years as an asylum seeker in Canberra, at the same time as fulfilling her role as single parent.

KT unfortunately found herself unemployed after a period of ill health and pain associated with a knee injury. She could not pay her rent or grocery bills and sought help with emergency relief and food.

KT was offered a living allowance whilst she reestablished her health and new employment pathways. She did some new training and worked with Multicultural Employment Service to make new connections and pathways to work.

Within two months KT was independent again.

4.AN: Single parent family

AN is an energetic 35-year-old single parent of two children. She had worked as a professional in country of origin and speaks English. Nonetheless, AN struggled to find employment. She lived with her children in a crowded boarding environment. A small living allowance allowed her to remain in her current accommodation because it meant she had funds to contribute to the household she and her children had joined.

AN embarked on study at the Canberra Institute of Technology seeking to build on her skills base and make a foothold in the employment market. She worked hard to juggle childcare and study, also participating in work experience and vocational training.

AN's refugee protection case was recently resolved and she and her children granted permanent protection status. AN has found employment and the family are in a good position to build their future in Canberra.