

Canberra Refugee Support Workshop

3rd August 2026

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The Future for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Canberra

Summary

This workshop was convened at the Currie Crescent Community Centre, on the morning of Monday 3 August 2026, commencing at 9.30 and concluding at 1pm. A discussion paper was sent to participants prior to the workshop.

Key themes and discussion points emerged during the morning, including:

- Continued and increased global displacement of peoples
- Watering down of adherence to the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees and its spirit
- Rise of populism and far-right parties nationally and internationally, and increasingly hostile discourse on migration, and especially relating to asylum seekers and refugees.
- The potential for this discourse to shift centrist political parties further from supporting these groups
- Australian Government systems of support for asylum seekers and refugees; necessary but not sufficient to support individual human needs, especially with further flagged 'tightening' across all migration areas
- Importance of organisations such as CRS and its partners – and of individuals who make a difference – in settling and supporting asylum seekers and refugees. This will become more, not less important in the future
- Strong collaboration among CRS and partner agencies in a compact jurisdiction where organisations can work well together, and be effective in advocating to the ACT Government
- Opportunities to strengthen or extend these collaborations into new 'alliances', e.g. with employer or advocacy groups
- The importance of telling, sharing and leveraging asylum seeker and refugee stories – and of moving them up the 'value chain', for example through targeted education, press coverage or social media sharing
- Critical shortage of housing for asylum seekers, refugees and other disadvantaged parts of the community – direct effect on whether and how refugees can 'settle'.
- Whether it is time for CRS to move from its considered decision not to be an advocacy group, or to consider whether partnering to strengthen existing advocacy groups might be a next step.

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Background and attendance

This workshop was convened at the Currie Crescent Community Centre, on the morning of Monday 3 August 2026, commencing at 9.30 and concluding at 1pm.

The workshop was attended by the CRS President Dr Doug Hynd, Deputy President Dr Russell Ayres, two guest speakers, representatives from selected community organisations (Red Cross, Companion House, St Vincent de Paul, ACT Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services and Stepping Stone), and by CRS members and volunteers.

Opening

Russell Ayres opened the workshop, noting that after celebrating 25 years of CRS in 2025, the workshop was an opportunity to consider possible futures in terms of asylum seekers and refugees in Canberra, and what this might mean for the organisation. He noted that the drivers for how many asylum seekers and refugees arrive in Canberra, and how the Canberra community responds may change in the future.

Guest speaker: Professor William Maley AM (Emeritus Professor Diplomacy, ANU)

Professor Maley provided a comprehensive overview of the current world asylum seeker and refugee situation.

The idea of 'border control' is a recent one, noting that the ability to control borders or to distinguish citizens from non-citizens is a product of the 19th century – and therefore not immutable. However, refugees will continue to be a major feature of the global context.

Some 120m people potentially fall with the broad definition of refugees and asylum seekers (including all displaced peoples).

Solutions to deal with this movement of peoples have not proven durable: voluntary repatriation when circumstances are safer is less possible as conflicts become more intractable; while permanent resettlement in nearby, culturally and linguistically familiar countries is often the first preference of refugees, most of these countries are themselves very poor, are unable to provide what the 1951 UN Convention dictates, and are reluctant to grant permanent status; and resettlement to third countries is becoming more difficult, as local populations and politics increasingly tighten arrival, conditions and supports.

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In addition, the UNHCR is increasingly an agency of mass relief rather than protection. This work requires voluntary contributions from member states; the very existence of such international bodies is currently under pressure.

Domestic politics and, in particular, the rise of populist far-right wing parties, poses a threat to the proper exercise of the intentions of the 1951 Convention. Even if far-right wing parties do not gain sufficient electoral support to control political systems, they can and do exert 'gravitational pull' on more moderate parties; something Australia has seen several times in the last 25 years and is seeing again in the current environment. DRAFT 3

In Australia, there is a positive link between 'need' (that is, whether an individual is found to be a refugee under the Convention) and 'mode of arrival': 'boat people' and those in mandatory detention in Australia are *more* likely to be found to be genuine refugees than others arriving or seeking asylum by other means. Those arriving by boat are also a relatively small percentage of those seeking asylum. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of 'boat people' has been amplified, and politicised and Australia's responses have fallen far short of the intentions of the 1951 Convention.

Legislative changes in the 1990s make certain decisions on refugees and asylum seekers much harder to challenge in the courts. The human cost of detention without trial has terrible human costs. These costs appear to have been accepted by successive Australian governments. For example, the Commonwealth did not challenge cases for compensation for mental health and other health impacts arising from detention, indicating this is a cost the Commonwealth is willing to pay.

Structures and norms of behaviours in relevant departments of state appear to reflect an ethos that is primarily about control, rather than respecting the intent of the 1951 Convention. These behaviours have led to rushed responses to complex problems, in ways that have undermined proper governance and probity processes, risking the potential degradation of these processes elsewhere in the polity.

Professor Maley is not optimistic that the Australian polity will be able to move back to the situation that was in place for decades, i.e. that the issue of refugees was not especially politicised. National and international indications are not encouraging.

This makes it very likely that organisations such as CRS will continue to be required within the Australian context, and even more important for CRS and other community organisations to consider the durability and applicability of their own operating models.

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Guest speaker: Hahmoudi Al Saghir (refugee and law student, ANU)

Hahmoudi shared his personal experience as a refugee: from the bombing death of his father in Syria; his family's escape from the Assad regime to Lebanon where they waited for six years for settlement elsewhere; his arrival in Australia as a refugee at the age of 14; the later arrival of other family members, and their moves from Canberra to Newcastle to Shepparton; his own later move to Benalla, to his current studies at ANU. Hahmoudi noted that sharing traumatic experiences like these is less difficult in the atmosphere of CRS member generosity.

During his talk, Hahmoudi noted that repatriation to Syria was not possible, given ongoing conflict, that his Sunni Muslim family was very unwelcome in Lebanon (to which they first fled), and how long and torturous the process to be resettled in Australia ended up being. These all reflect the lack of 'durable solutions' to which Professor Maley referred.

Once in Australia, Hahmoudi and his family faced further problems. While the Red Cross supported his family in Canberra (their first location), an inability to secure stable housing meant they felt they were unable to stay in Canberra. Newcastle housing proved similarly expensive. Their next location – regional Shepparton – offered reunion with other members of the family, but was a very hostile environment for Hahmoudi, with relentless bullying at school, including from those from non-Sunni backgrounds. Hahmoudi also noted that support from Red Cross ended at the two-year mark – but he was still far from 'settled' and was at risk of leaving school in Year 9.

Hahmoudi's fortunes changed through a serendipitous interaction with a single individual. That interaction led to Hahmoudi receiving a free and supportive education at a small Catholic school in nearby Benalla, boarding with a generous farming family in the district, and being supported by numerous local organisations including Rotary. With these individual and local supports, Hahmoudi thrived, became captain at his school, commenced studying at ANU – first Criminology and then transitioning to Law – gained significant paralegal experience at ACT Legal Aid, and has just completed a contract with the Commonwealth Ombudsman. He now has a clear professional career path – after just a few short years from coming close to dropping out of school, and only eight years since arriving in Australia.

Hahmoudi drew out a number of lessons from his experience: that Australia's social welfare system is necessary but not sufficient to support the complex needs of asylum seekers and refugees; that the role of individuals and community organisations is essential

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to fill the many 'gaps' between what our social welfare systems offer and what the human experience requires; that none of us can choose the circumstances in which we are born or the crises that may occur in our lives, so we should all care about how we support those in need; and the risks that right wing populism poses to Australia's previously more generous spirit in relation to asylum seekers and refugees.

Hahmoudi noted that public, private and social media comments that suggest that people 'like him' are not welcome in Australia are extremely hurtful, damage the wellbeing of those settling or settled in Australia, and that his personal recourse is to actively seek reassurance from 'born and raised' Australians about how common these views actually are.

Panel

Kathy Ragless AM (CEO Companion House), Dr Kim Huynh (Senior Lecturer ANU), and Dr Doug Hynd (President CRS) spoke about the future for support for refugees and asylum seekers settling in Canberra. Russell Ayres introduced the panel, noting CRS' strength in trying to respond to the individual needs of its clients through the 'good neighbour' model – a contrast to government systems which focus on standardisation and efficiency.

Kathy focused on the strong cross-organisational collaborations that means Canberra can and does respond well, especially in providing support for those with very long asylum-seeking journeys. Kathy saw two major issues that CRS and other similar organisations will need to take positions on. The first is when and how organisations (especially those which are government funded) can and should speak up around the 'hard' questions, and the tensions that exist between ethical responsibilities and trying to find 'ways and means'. The second is the paucity of housing in the ACT, which she described as the number one problem for asylum seekers and many other disadvantaged groups in our society. She describes lack of housing as the 'canary in the coalmine' as it affects the entire community, and believes the situation is getting worse. She was frank in noting that the increasing need for Companion House to focus on asylum seekers necessarily draws them away from other pressing social issues, including housing and vulnerable young people.

Kim – an author and broadcaster about community experiences as well as an academic – focused on the importance of stories both for refugees themselves, and for community organisations' work supporting refugees. Kim made the case that 'simple' stories about

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refugee ‘success’ do not engage the broader community in the way they once did, and that more sophisticated stories are needed (citing Hahmoudi’s experience of being bullied by other refugees/migrants – refugees are not all ‘perfect’). He noted that more subtle and perhaps more ‘ordinary’ stories – refugees do not all become academics, doctors and lawyers! – may resonate with more Australians. Kim asked about whether CRS can help refugees to tell their stories, and can this be done with nuanced, powerful stories that may sway public thinking?

Doug has steered CRS through multiple challenges over many years and reflected on how important geography is in refugee related policy and experience. Canberra has a lot of people with significance ‘social power’ – those who are well educated and well off. This community can lobby and persuade local government in ways that improve the situation for local asylum seekers and refugees: examples include availability of the ACT Services Access Card; and provision some emergency housing; and funding support. Doug noted that CRS has actively decided not to be an active advocacy group, noting that there is a tacit division of work between CRS and the Canberra Refugee Action Committee. Doug asked whether this is still the right decision? Does CRS need to rethink this, (perhaps even at the level of having prepared statements ready to respond to some of the more extreme views being expressed publicly in Australia). Doug echoed Kathy in noting that the ACT is a compact jurisdiction, and there are real strengths in the local environment: high levels of trust and low levels of competition among fellow traveller support organisations. Effective and ongoing connection among relevant agencies allow all organisations to achieve more through combining and optimising available resources. Doug also supported Kathy’s contention that housing is a major issue for asylum seekers, refugees and other disadvantaged groups in Canberra, and noted that even reported ‘softenings’ such as easing of rental prices for apartments is not sufficient to support those CRS aims to assist. On a positive, Doug noted that CRS has not encountered the fall-off in volunteering that other community organisations have encountered.

Discussion

Lively discussion followed the panel, with CRS members and representatives of all attending organisations speaking from the floor. The points raised by participants revolved around a set of themes and suggestions.

Amplification of racial discrimination: what appear to be generational increases in racial discrimination itself, willingness to publicly discriminate against or vilify specific groups;

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the utilisation of discrimination against minorities to amplify bids for power; the rise of anti-migrant narratives across the world is real; political discourse that ‘essentialises’ communities rather than seeing their internal diversity; we can only change the way that our organisations work together, and to project the ‘good we see’ in engaging with community organisations.

The importance of stories: reiteration of the importance of sharing the stories of refugees, along with the need to be proactive rather than reactive with storytelling, to create more space for more nuanced stories, and how to move beyond individual stories to a more compelling narrative around human empathy and the ways in which our society is enriched through diversity.

Stories to education: how to move from stories to more directed education (e.g. those with lived experience receiving training to shape their stories and honorariums to share them in schools); how to provide more stories to different parts of the press, including social media; uplifting existing community knowledge about ‘stretching’ to accommodate newer migrants; need for stories and education to be part of the everyday experience, not confined to Refugee Week (when those who do not want to listen will choose not to).

Stories to mentoring: the potential for former asylum seekers to be supported to mentor newer arrivals (noting that most clients CRS engages with are the parent generation raising children, with little time for assisting others).

Engaging the young: younger asylum seekers and refugees often adapt better, and are more able to advocate for themselves and their families; young people in the general community are very purpose driven and listen to each other on major issues – can this propensity be tapped; can those younger asylum seekers, refugees and those now in the community be encouraged to share their stories via social media?

The importance of training and employment: need to educate employers about the availability and value of trained asylum seekers and refugees; strengthen the network of businesses who value this and are willing to provide training to strengthen future work options.

Strength in collaboration and building new alliances: significant strengths in current collaborations; opportunity to build stronger alliances, e.g. with Canberra Refugee Action group (previously a compartmentalised relationship; is it time to change? Opportunity to

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share CRS success stories for advocacy purposes); more collaboration with employers willing and able to participate in training and successful advocacy with other employers.

The criticality of housing: all speakers focused on the critical need for housing in Canberra, well beyond the asylum seeker and refugee community – can the participating agencies be more effective in advocating for the need to significantly increase housing options for many disadvantaged groups in Canberra?

The case for advocacy: a theme running throughout was whether CRS needed to step further into the advocacy space, e.g. by supporting advocacy groups by sharing and shaping stories; potential for CRS and partners to form a slightly more formal ‘refugee chapter’ and consider a ‘charter’ for asylum seekers and refugees prior to the next federal election.

Close

Doug Hynd closed the workshop, noting that he hoped that some themes and priorities have emerged for all organisations, as they have for CRS. He thanked all participants for giving their time – especially those from service agencies and guest speakers, describing this as a gift to CRS. He thanked Russell Ayres for convening the workshop and invited all participants to continue conversation over lunch.