



**COVID-19:
ONE YEAR ON** The impact of your support
on people seeking asylum
through a global pandemic

Acknowledgement of country

The ASRC would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation as traditional owners and custodians of the land on which the ASRC stands. We acknowledge that the land was never ceded and we pay our respect to them, their customs, their culture, to elders past and present and to their emerging leaders.

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A note from the CEO



Prior to the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, punitive government policies were already continuing to impact people's ability to survive and live independently as they navigated the arduous and uncertain process of seeking protection. But by March last year, as COVID-19 began to take effect across our community, the refugee story I've spent my life encouraging people to empathise with - the grief of family separation, uncertainty for the future, and loss of

freedom - suddenly became relatable for everyone. And it impacted no one more greatly than people seeking asylum.

That's why, throughout the last year we've continued to keep our doors open. And it's why, thanks to the generous support of so many people and organisations, we could continue to be unwavering and fearless, living true to our purpose of helping people when they need it most.

It's important to me and to everyone here at the ASRC that you know how your generosity is invested - we take this responsibility seriously. It's your unwavering commitment that has allowed us to make an unprecedented investment in our frontline services over the past 12 months and into the future, because we know that people seeking asylum may be the last to recover from this pandemic.

This report is just one part of the ASRC's story as we recognise our 20th year of operation in June this year. But nonetheless, it's an important one. I'm grateful to our staff, volunteers and board for their perseverance and courage as we navigated many unprecedented moments together.

Most importantly, I'm humbled by the people we're so fortunate to stand alongside. The story of people seeking asylum is one of strength, resilience and hope - all of which was in abundance more than ever before in the last 12 months.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kon Karapanagiotidis". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Kon Karapanagiotidis OAM
CEO

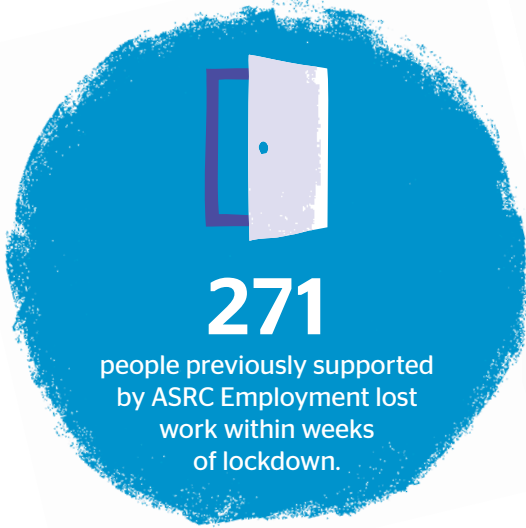
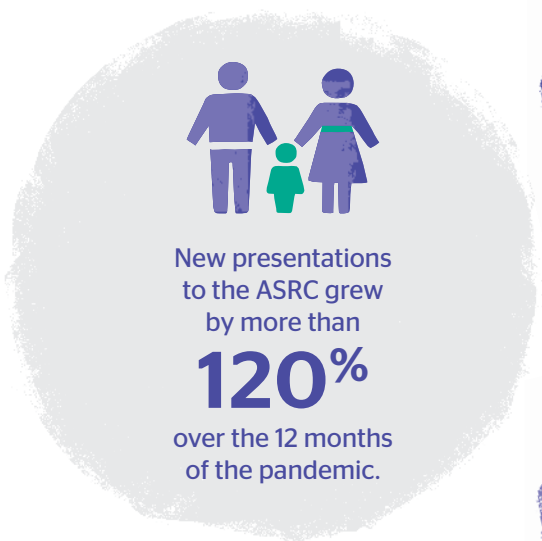
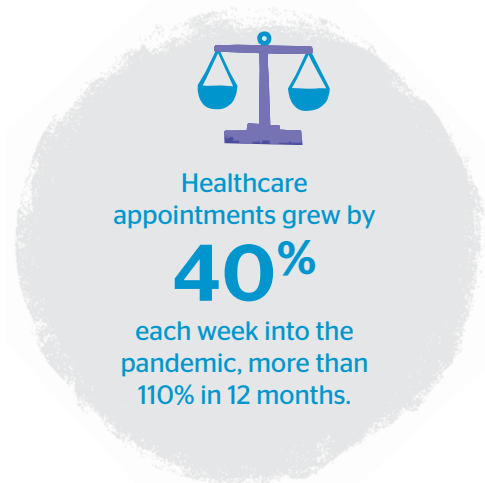
The impact of COVID-19 on people seeking asylum

In normal times, people seeking asylum are among the most vulnerable in our community; many cannot access Centrelink, Medicare, or other social security benefits that allow them to live independently in the community. This already challenging environment was exacerbated by COVID-19. After March, the pandemic exposed people to even greater risk of destitution and loss.

While the Government acted swiftly to introduce a COVID-19 financial safety net, this did not extend to people seeking asylum and refugees. They were not eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments or other income support mechanisms available through Centrelink. This is despite a significant number of people being gainfully employed across Australia, paying tax, and running successful businesses, until COVID-19 struck and cost them their independence.

The result was unprecedented: we saw a three-fold increase in requests for assistance overnight. When many other service providers were forced to close, we remained open so that members could continue to access the services and programs that meet their diverse and often complex needs.

While our focus on delivering services didn't waver, the pandemic significantly affected our operating environment.



Strength and resilience – Ali and his family

When Ali*, a 34 year old father, lost his work as a taxi driver due to COVID-19, keeping his family from sleeping on the street seemed impossible. Like most people seeking asylum, Ali is ineligible for any form of Government support such as Job Seeker. Ali, his wife Fatima and their nine year old daughter Kayla, share a two bedroom apartment with another family under an informal rental agreement. When they fell behind on rent their landlord threatened to evict them and since they had no formal tenancy agreement, Ali knew they could be forced to vacate at any time.

With their case for asylum still pending before the Federal Circuit Court and with no income or means of financial support the family were at significant risk of homelessness and destitution. Fortunately, a friend of Ali's told the family about the ASRC and suggested they might be able to get help for their situation. When Ali

talked with James at the front reception of the ASRC, he knew he had come to a safe place and felt hopeful that things would be ok.

When people first come to the ASRC they are greeted by our team of caring and compassionate reception staff, like James. For some people seeking asylum,

this is often their first interaction where they feel truly heard and seen since arriving in Australia. For many, this is the first time that they have had someone on their side who is willing to do everything they can to fight for their rights.

Ali and Fatima's assigned caseworker organised for their rent to be covered for the next two months and linked them to our Foodbank services where they received an emergency food relief package and will receive ongoing support in the months ahead.

Ali has since been referred to our employment team for support in getting him back to work and in the months ahead he will work closely with our team to develop a plan that will provide a pathway to more stable work. Ali's wife Fatima has never spoken with a mental health professional regarding the traumas of leaving her home so the family's caseworker will soon schedule a time for her to meet with someone from our Health Clinic so she can do a mental health assessment and get a referral to a psychologist. Finally, their daughter Kayla recently went for a check-up with Ellen in our Health Clinic and the family now has a pre-paid prescription for medication to help her better manage her acute asthma.

Because of you, the ASRC was able to be there for Ali and his family when they most needed support.

This is the difference your donation makes.

It's a long road ahead for Ali, Fatima and Kayla, but with your support families like theirs are able to rebuild their lives in safety here.

*Names and image changed for privacy reasons.



Left: Ali, Fatima and Kayla outside the ASRC .

Keeping people connected

Our casework programs, New Presentations and Client Services, are the very backbone of our organisation’s critical care and immediate response work, with a caseload of more than 1,700 and 600 people, respectively. Their primary role is to help existing and newly presenting clients through the process of seeking asylum and gain them access to support services, here at the ASRC as well as from sector partners.

Each program has seen a rise of more than 200 - 400% in the volume of enquiries and new presentations throughout the pandemic, which has often seen services at breaking point. Requests for support amongst existing clients who are assigned to the Client Services Program rose by 518% during the pandemic, with monthly requests growing from approx 220 per month - to more than 1,300 in 2020.

Specifically, within New Presentations, the number of people presenting continued to grow month on month from 160 in January to a peak of 324 in July which saw the overall demand more than double. On average, a further 40 people, including many families, presented to the ASRC for the first time for the remainder of 2020, totalling 997 new presentations during the pandemic. This trend continues in the early months of 2021.

In total this meant that during the pandemic, our new presentation social workers made more than 7,300 follow up calls or appointments with the people they support.

By supporting the ASRC’s work in 2020, you allowed us to invest in a specialised and dedicated team of social workers who conducts an initial needs assessment and connect people with short-term support, including emergency food, housing, pharmacy waivers, or external services to meet their unmet needs.

This team is often the first point of contact for people when they arrive at the ASRC, and they’re also the team who will conduct follow ups for referrals and emotional support, which was in high demand due to the impacts of social isolation.



Above: Our casework staff conducting assessments and follow up calls and check ins.



More than **2,300 casework clients** supported during the pandemic



Provided access to short-term supports such as food, medication and housing for **997 new people**



Managed more than **10,000 follow ups, referrals or outreach activities**, including emotional support in times of social isolation

Keeping people safe

The number of people seeking asylum who experienced, or continued to be at risk of homelessness has increased dramatically as a result of the impacts of COVID-19. As people move through the refugee determination process, concerns over destitution and a lack of income support and safety net are already significant. During the pandemic, the need for safe and secure housing continued to be at the forefront of people's minds and was self-rated amongst their highest needs when presenting to the Centre.

This is further exacerbated for people who were able to secure temporary accommodation prior to the pandemic, who may have subsequently lost their employment or income. They are likely to join a large cohort of housing insecure people who have been accumulating debt whilst the moratorium on evictions has been standing. At the ASRC, we are expecting a surge in members in crisis seeking urgent assistance when this eviction protection is lifted in late March 2021.

This has led to the ASRC making its most significant investment in a homelessness response in its history, with \$4 million budgeted to ensure more than 420 people can be housed on any given night, including more than 150 children. At the height of the pandemic, thanks to your support, some 13,000 nights of housing were provided each month.

Out of COVID-19, our homelessness and basic needs response was focused on meeting people's various needs, as quickly as possible, in three distinct ways:

1. Rent Assistance

The ASRC provides ongoing or time-limited support to pay rent in formal or informal leases. This predates COVID-19 and is designed to support people to achieve financial independence, where possible, as well as to provide a continuing safety net for people seeking asylum who have ongoing barriers to financial independence and safe and secure housing. During the pandemic, the need doubled in this area, to more than 180 people each night.



2. Crisis Accommodation Brokerage Model

This model provides flexible and discretionary one-off approvals for support to keep shelter for people who are currently homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. This model grew in delivery by almost 175% across 2020.

3. New Presentations Crisis Accommodation

This model supports people presenting to the ASRC who are homeless, sleeping rough or are in a dangerous arrangement who are not yet

members of the ASRC. This stream provides immediate short-term crisis accommodation in the interim, whilst the person presenting is transitioned to the most appropriate ASRC stream, or referred on to other available services. During the pandemic, our investment in this area grew ten-fold.

While people recover, stable housing solutions are important to provide security and freedom for people to participate in the employment market and gain independence.

During the pandemic, this is what you made possible:



\$4 million invested into long and short-term housing solutions



On any given night, more than **420 people** were provided housing during the pandemic



Each month, we provided more than **13,000 nights of shelter**, and will continue to in 2021

Access to healthcare

The ASRC Health Program has been offering health services to people seeking asylum in Victoria since 2002 and is the largest facility of its kind in Australia. It provides a range of primary health services for people seeking asylum living in the community and prioritises people without access to Medicare. It plays an important role in upholding health as a human right.

The right to healthcare was never more important than during the pandemic, where the Health Program continued to operate, managing both an onsite clinic and telehealth consults via phone and online services. Ensuring continuity of service is critical for those without access to Medicare, and the Health Program saw its monthly appointment numbers reach almost 600 within months of the pandemic's forced lockdown in Victoria, an increase of more than 110% - this increase remained steady into early 2021.

The healthcare needs of people were complex during the pandemic. These included healthcare issues, mental health challenges and an increased need to access medication subsidies due to loss of work and income. It's during this time that the ASRC saw increased response rates for its mental health supports, with

the Mental Health Clinic (delivered via telephone) growing in response rate by 40%.

The Health Program continued its normal immunisation services throughout the pandemic, with more than 300 people receiving an immunisation, which included an annual flu vaccination program for members.

During the pandemic, access to medication is paramount and it's why the ASRC maintains strong relationships with local chemists to support our pharmacy waiver program. Your support makes it possible for the ASRC to provide medication to those who are vulnerable, with no Medicare or income support. In this time, the ASRC invested more than \$80,000 into medication payments and subsidies.

During the pandemic, this is what you made possible:



Access to healthcare services for almost **1,000 people**



Medication subsidies supported, to the value of **\$80,000**



Immunisations provided to **320 people**



“Thank you for not forgetting us” said Sanjeep*, as Ellen, an ASRC Health nurse, handed him a waiver to cover the costs of his blood pressure medication.

“I think he said that because he, like many of the people we are working with, are feeling forgotten by being excluded from the COVID-19 safety nets,” said Ellen.

Providing food security

The ASRC's Community Food Program, namely the Foodbank, Community Meals and Harvest of Hope has been providing food security for refugees and people seeking asylum for almost 20 years – in essence, it's where the ASRC all began. The Program's efforts extend further than just ensuring people have access to food – it's a service focused on ensuring food is culturally appropriate, is diverse in its offering of healthy choices and ensures equitable access for all.

During the early stages of the pandemic, food insecurity, vulnerability and destitution were prevalent in large cohorts of people, which included many children. A continual rise in the volume of people accessing food supports who had no income at all was seen – equating for up to 97% of people accessing food at any one time – a rise of more than 20% pre-pandemic.

Most importantly, thanks to your generosity, the ASRC was able to respond to an increase of almost 200% in requests for basic food supplies from existing cohorts of people we support, as well as people accessing our services for the first time, at the height of the pandemic. At any given time, this was up to 40 new people per week.

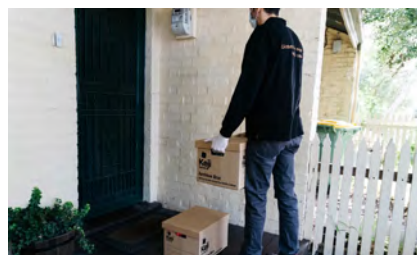
This means that since the pandemic began, you've made it possible for just over 35,000 non-perishable and fresh food boxes to be delivered, to up to 700 families per week.

How people were provided food security

During Stage 4 lockdown in Victoria, the ASRC adapted to public health and safety measures by pivoting food relief efforts to a remote service delivery model and adapting to a contactless distribution system that allowed for a level of interaction between the ASRC and our members, while keeping everyone safe. During the pandemic, 95% of food was home-delivered and was supported by the investment of the community into delivery trucks, drivers and offsite, COVID-safe facilities.

We continued to provide access to food support from our Footscray Centre, where people presenting for the first time in need could also obtain an emergency food relief pack. As our Community Food Kitchen was shut due to the pandemic, ASRC Catering, our social enterprise made some 4750 take-away meals for distribution, so that no one went away hungry.

Thanks to the generosity of philanthropic partners and in collaboration with the State Government, the ASRC's Foodbank Plus is a refugee food sector service that leverages the ASRC's operational capacity to support a wider network of refugees and people seeking asylum who may be experiencing food insecurity. During the pandemic the ASRC partnered with agencies to deliver food packages to them that would then reach a further 500 households, representing 1,125 people.



During the pandemic, this is what you made possible:



Across all Foodbank operations, more than **1,500 people** were supported with food each fortnight



\$100,000+ of food vouchers were provided to families



More than **35,000 food packages** (and counting) were distributed to families



Foodbank Plus supported a further **1,150 people**

“I want to say one million thank you for the food we get delivered, it is so precious, my family and I live for delivery Mondays! It is like Christmas every other week.”

- An ASRC Foodbank member

Championing justice and advocating for change

COVID-19 has severely impacted the economic security, health and legal rights of people on bridging and temporary visas and we know that in many cases, they'll be the last to recover.



While our work providing basic needs to help people survive the pandemic continues, over the last 12 months, the ASRC was also focused on ensuring a spotlight was shone on punitive Government policy that was putting people at risk of destitution and putting at risk their health.

We know that it's only through systemic policy change and law reform coupled with community mobilisation that long term change can be realised.

COVID-19 and Law Reform

During the height of the pandemic, our Human Rights Law Program and Campaigns and Advocacy staff developed a submission to the Select Committee on COVID-19, highlighting the extreme vulnerability that the pandemic and subsequent Government policy was placing upon people, including families. The submission highlighted the role movement restrictions was having in people struggling to apply for their visa and being left without work rights, which means losing work rights and Medicare in global health emergencies.

Despite the public health crisis, the Government attempted to pass numerous laws which would have a

devastating impact on people seeking asylum including removing mobile phones from people in detention which would remove vital access to lawyers, medical professionals and loved ones during the pandemic. We were able to secure opposition to this bill (and others) by providing written and verbal parliamentary submissions, lobbying remotely and mobilising tens of thousands of people.

Mobilisation of Media

Getting media attention during COVID was a challenge. However, through creative storytelling and a compelling narrative, we gained significant coverage of the impact of the pandemic on people living in the community and those in detention while also highlighting the Government's poor response was critical to ensuring people seeking asylum were not forgotten in 2020. The ASRC's media efforts saw more than 40 key pieces of coverage across primetime TV, radio, print and editorial, with stories syndicated nationally. This included coverage on the impact of the pandemic on people's employment, food insecurity, risk of destitution, an unfair legal process and highlighting the need for the immediate release of all people from detention.

#NobodyLeftBehind

The emergency of COVID-19 was a turning point in advocacy efforts for people seeking asylum. The ASRC was a part of a number of national campaigns calling on the Government to extend a safety net to people on temporary visas, including refugees and people seeking asylum. This included working with refugee communities, frontline services and peak advocacy organisation coordinating a response to the most pressing issues facing people during the pandemic - no safety net such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker, poor access to healthcare and an even more unfair legal process than before.

Legal Advocacy

The legal process for people seeking protection did not relent during the pandemic, or while people were in lockdown. During this time, the work of our Human Rights Law Program continued, providing 594 people with legal assistance via phone and online, despite the challenges of the digital divide, including a further 50 legal clients in detention.

(COVID-19) Detention Advocacy & Casework

A key focus of the ASRC's advocacy efforts has been demanding the release of all people from detention centres into the community to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. With little to no access to appropriate sanitisation, an inability to socially distance, no access to masks and more than 100 rotating shift staff across facilities, the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak was high. The ASRC, along with a coalition of sector partners and medical experts continued to lobby the Government Minister for Home Affairs to release people. This lobbying was coupled with strong media coverage and increased public pressure.

As of January, 2021 more than 120 people who were medevaced to Australia for treatment have now been released into the community on bridging visas.

Helping people to recover and thrive

We know people seeking asylum will be one of the last groups to recover - which is why we're committed to be here now and into the future, to support people's pathway to recovery and their journey to independence.

During the pandemic, this is what you made possible:



A commitment of **\$700,000** in emergency relief for people released from detention



105 people seeking asylum employed via Working for Victoria Initiative



70% of all Working for Victoria employees have gone on to obtain ongoing work



Investment in more than **\$60,000** of ICT equipment to remove the digital divide

Your continued support has allowed us to make key investments in services that will help people thrive.

Education

With the onset of lockdown in March 2020, the Education Program continued operations through remote English learning classes, conducted one to one in an online environment, with up to 20 people at any given time. These preparatory classes, in line with the Program's English for Work activities, are focused on reducing the digital divide which was exacerbated for vulnerable groups by social distancing requirements and closure of many facilities that provide connection. The classes provided equipment and training to support people who would otherwise not be able to engage in ongoing activities and suffer from isolation.

'Last night I prayed that somehow I could keep studying English and now today you are calling me. You're the only person I talk to in all the week'

- ASRC Education Program member

Working for Victoria Initiative

In collaboration with the State Government, our Employment and Human Resource Programs successfully administered a 6-month employment program for 105 people with lived experience of seeking asylum. Many of this cohort had lost work due to COVID-19 already and were placed into meaningful roles across the organisation including Foodbank, Fundraising, Social Enterprises and the Empowerment Program. Such has been the success of the program's capacity building, more than 70% of the cohort have gone on to secure ongoing work.

Detention Rights Tangible Support

When people began to be released from detention centres across Australia, we wanted to be able to help where it was needed most - it's why we spoke with sector partners, community advocates and people recently released from detention to understand how we can best help. What came out of these discussions was that the most pressing concern was the need for secure and safe housing when Government-funded support comes to an end.

In response to the emerging situation, the ASRC has created the Preventing Homelessness Fund to support people transferred under Medevac when released from detention facilities. This is an investment of \$500,000 in housing solutions to support people who are the most vulnerable and at risk of homelessness. A further \$200,000 (\$1,000 per person) has been made available to support people to get back on their feet when released.

Social Enterprise Employment Guarantee

At the height of the pandemic, our social enterprises had lost significant volumes of work. However, instead of reducing staff hours, knowing this could lead to destitution for 70 staff with lived experience, we committed to an employment guarantee for all staff. Catering and Cleaning staff were redeployed across our Foodbank Warehouse Project, reception, and the community meals kitchens to help meet the increased demand in these areas. During this time, ASRC Catering also launched its new meals service, and delivered more than 5,000 meals to the Flemington Towers lockdown in July, 2020.

Proudly, our social enterprises are now on the road to recovery.

Our financials and the future

In April 2020, the ASRC launched an Emergency COVID-19 Appeal, raising \$3.17 million thanks to the generosity of individuals and organisations. In the preceding financial year (FY 20/21), the ASRC has committed to a record investment in frontline services (operational expense and staff expense) to fully expend these funds, and is projected to administer a deficit budget of \$2.5 million as investment in services outpaces future fundraising activity. This encompasses maintaining services in Education, Employment, Human Rights Law and Empowerment at their existing service capacity, where the most significant investment of your generosity is in the specialised expertise of the staff in these areas.

Where the money goes

The below table displays the ASRC's investment in key humanitarian services prior to the onset of the pandemic, our investment to date during the pandemic and the planned investment to the end of the 2020/21 financial year in response to the increased demand for support.

	FY 2019/20 Investment	July 2020 to February 2021	Projected FY 2020/21 Investment
Investment in Community Food	\$976,590	\$1,761,078	\$3,222,895
Investment in Homelessness and Basic Needs Support	\$1,242,220	\$2,523,575	\$4,651,227
Investment in Casework and Client Services	\$1,397,070	\$1,098,278	\$1,827,023
Investment in Healthcare	\$575,653	\$507,153	\$679,171
Investment in Detention Advocacy and Support	\$577,702	\$695,547	\$1,182,989

*This includes portions of support from the State Government in response to COVID-19

As we reflect on COVID-19, one year on, we know that the road ahead will continue to be complex, just like the path the people we serve have walked over the past 12 months. People seeking asylum will continue to be subjected to punitive Government policy, and the road to recovery will be long for some. But thanks to you, we can continue to be there. This report only tells the story of some of what we do in support of people seeking asylum - we're their supermarket, pharmacy, local GP, and the roof over their heads right now.

But we're also proud to be in the halls of Parliament lobbying the Government for fairer policies, and in the courts, upholding thousands of people's right to justice each year. And we're grateful to be able to work with people in their journey to independence through education, employment, empowerment and through our burgeoning social enterprises.

In June 2021, the ASRC turns 20, and soon after that we will launch our new, three-year strategy, our most ambitious yet. We'll continue to be accountable

for what we say we're going to do, and transparent in how we go about it.

As always, our values guide our decision making and hope for the future leads our way.

Thank You

Thanks to you, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre has been able to provide safety, sanctuary and support to more than 7,000 people through the pandemic, while continuing to campaign and advocate for fair policies that provide a safety net to the most vulnerable in our community.

As people begin their recovery, we'll be there to provide support at their most critical junctures and this is all made possible by your continued generosity and unwavering commitment.

"When I first arrived in Australia,
After a long deeply tense feeling of being horrified,
After my suspicion of no peace and safety in life,
In ASRC I started my recovery back to humanity.
In ASRC I started forgetting my melancholy.
Now after I have been granted my protection visa,
To this gracious country, I am proud to belong."

- A poem by Mohammed Sharabah

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