

Introduction

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees, supporting and empowering people at the most critical junctures of their journey. The ASRC is based in Melbourne with two locations in Footscray and Dandenong. Our services include our community food service, housing, healthcare, legal, casework, education, employment and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change with refugees to ensure their human rights are upheld.

The ASRC welcomes the opportunity from the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee to provide a submission regarding the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. The ASRC has expert knowledge of the impact of food insecurity on people's health and wellbeing, especially due to the poverty and additional barriers that refugees and people seeking asylum experience. The ASRC Community Food Service offers a Foodbank service providing access to culturally appropriate food and essential items and a Community Kitchen that serves hot, nutritious meals.

The ASRC initially started as a foodbank in 2001 to respond to food insecurity that people seeking asylum and refugees were facing. Sadly, the demand for our foodbank services persists 23 years later.

With the magnitude of challenges that people seeking asylum face, food security is one vital part of supporting their wellbeing. The lack of food security causes a vicious cycle and exacerbates a person's poor health and creates vulnerability. The ASRC Community Food Service, provided at our locations in Footscray and Dandenong, empowers people seeking asylum to access their basic human right to food and to live with dignity, which enables them to focus on other parts of their lives including their health, family, and protection visa application process.

The Federal Government must urgently address the underlying causes of food insecurity for people seeking asylum, including access to work rights, Medicare and education, lack of an income safety net, and prolonged insecure visa status. Additionally, increased State Government funding for organisations such as the ASRC to provide food relief is required to provide temporary food security to some of the most marginalised people in the community in Victoria during the current economic crisis. Whilst some of the recommended policy reform in this submission is within the Federal Government's remit, the Victorian Government has a key role to play in advocating for change to Federal laws and policy to improve food security for people seeking asylum who are part of the Victorian community.

The ASRC has also signed on to the OZ Harvest submission to this Inquiry, and endorses the recommendations in that submission.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increase Victorian State Government funding to food relief organisations, in particular those that do not receive any Federal Government funding.

Recommendation 2: Provide access to public and community housing and crisis accommodation for people seeking asylum.

Recommendation 3: State Government to advocate for policy change at a Federal level to:

- A. Provide ongoing work rights and study rights for people seeking asylum on bridging visas for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits and judicial review stages.**
- B. Provide ongoing access to Medicare for people seeking asylum for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits and judicial review stages.**
- C. Refund Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) to pre-2016 levels of \$300 million and immediately expand SRSS eligibility.**
- D. Provide people seeking asylum access to mainstream social support services, including Centrelink programs such as Special Benefit, for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits review and judicial review stages.**

Greater demand for access to affordable food

Every day at the ASRC we witness first-hand the devastating impact of food insecurity for people seeking asylum and refugees. In the last 12 months:

- the ASRC Foodbank has supported 1,568 households with food and groceries, making up 3,769 individuals, of which 37% are children;
- the ASRC has spent at least \$10,000 a month on rice alone;
- our Community Kitchen has served more than 9,600 meals; and
- over a two-week period on average, 17% of households that the ASRC supports had three or more children.

With the cost of living crisis, the ASRC has seen an increase in demand from people seeking asylum and refugees requiring access to our Foodbank. **From October 2023 to May 2024, there has been a staggering 43% increase in the number of people that rely on the ASRC Foodbank for support.**

Case study

Lakshmi¹ is a 47-year-old woman who arrived in Australia in 2019 with her husband and two children after escaping family violence in India. She found it very difficult when she arrived due to English language barriers, not knowing anyone in Australia and a lack of community, and the cost of living. The pressure of the situation led to the breakdown of their marriage.

When the ASRC opened a Foodbank at the Refugee Resource Hub (RRH) in Dandenong, Lakshmi began to access this service. Lakshmi expressed a feeling of shame when she initially came to the Foodbank: "I felt like a beggar to ask for food when I first came but everyone at ASRC is very kindly and very helpful and never angry. It makes me feel happy."

Lakshmi stated that the thing she likes most about the RRH Foodbank is the range of fresh fruit and vegetables, which is not generally available from other food support services - or only in very small amounts. She said the fresh fruit is very helpful for her children's school lunches, as well as the biscuits and other snack foods. In India, Lakshmi used to cook everything from scratch and does not like processed food so is very happy that the Foodbank provides wholefoods. Some of her favourite items from the Foodbank are basmati rice, dried lentils, besan flour, spices and eggs. The range of spices and fresh produce allows Lakshmi to cook recipes from her culture such as mung dahl and pakora. Without the support of the Foodbank, Lakshmi fears she would not be able to pay her rent and bills or to purchase essential items for her children, particularly with the huge increase in the cost of groceries.

¹ All case studies in this submission are de-identified to protect clients' privacy.

Financial strain on food relief services

Organisations providing food relief during this economic crisis are facing financial strain in meeting the growing demand for services while donations are declining. **In the 23/24 financial year, the ASRC saw a 45% decrease in the number of in-kind donations to our centre, compared to the previous financial year.** Although one of the ASRC's key priorities is to increase in-kind donations, this has been difficult as our donors from the wider Australian community are also facing hardship due to the rising cost of living. Despite years of work to improve the ASRC Community Food Service's sustainability and reduce our expenses, including strategies to increase donations, establishing partnerships with corporate organisations and other food relief organisations, and engaging with wholesale suppliers, the ASRC Community Food Service's budget is under significant strain. This potentially impacts the ASRC's ability to provide nutritious and culturally appropriate food for the community that we serve. Further, as an organisation that does not accept Federal funding in order to maintain our independence, the ASRC is not able to access certain funding to support our clients.

The challenges of providing a financially viable food service are also being experienced by other food relief organisations. Due to the cost of living crisis and the impact on Australians, new food relief organisations are being established and organisations who were not previously providing food relief are now doing so to respond to the need from the community. With little funding, more organisations are turning to places such as Foodbank Victoria for support, putting greater pressure on already scarce resources. Concerningly, Foodbank Victoria has recently announced that they are unable to meet demand and are holding emergency food drives to help to restock their shelves.² In addition to supporting more individuals and their families, the ASRC now has to purchase staples that we have not previously been required to, such as tinned tomatoes, which places further strain on our organisation.

As people seeking asylum and refugees are displaced from their homes, it is paramount that the ASRC provides food that is nutritious and culturally appropriate. Our Foodbank provides food that people seeking asylum are familiar with, so they can cook meals which bring a much-needed connection to home and culture. After being forced to flee their home countries and resettle in a foreign place, food plays a crucial role for ASRC's clients in providing social and family connection and contributing to people's overall health and wellbeing. However, consistently being able to provide culturally appropriate food for the people we serve can be challenging due to the high costs of food items, which has been exacerbated by the rising cost of living.

State Government funding for food relief organisations is urgently required to ensure people in our community, including refugees and people seeking asylum, do not experience hunger and poverty, and are able to access culturally-appropriate food whenever possible.

² Foodbank Victoria, Foodbank Victoria's Emergency Food Drive, August 2024, <https://www.foodbank.org.au/emergency-food-drive/?state=vic>.

Recommendation 1: Increase Victorian State Government funding to food relief organisations, in particular those that do not receive any Federal Government funding.

Barriers for people seeking asylum and refugees to access food

The current economic crisis is impacting all aspects of Australian society, and people seeking asylum and refugees are no exception. In addition to the trauma from persecution in their country of origin and the process of seeking asylum, refugees and people seeking asylum experience additional barriers regarding food security due to the Australian Government's laws and policies, which prevent them from financially supporting themselves and force them into poverty. In 2023, the ASRC published a position paper, [Poverty Through Policy](#), which provides a detailed analysis of how intentional government policy has caused people seeking asylum to experience poverty and food insecurity. We highlight the key themes of our findings below.

Access to housing

People seeking asylum are excluded from accessing supported or transitional housing. Consequently, they are not eligible for the State Government waitlists for public and community housing, such as the Victorian Housing Register. Even where people seeking asylum fulfil the criteria for priority access to public housing and support for longer-term housing, they are excluded from accessing this accommodation due to their visa status.

Affordable and sustainable formal tenancies are often the best housing option. However, paying the bond in order to secure a property is a major challenge without secure work and mainstream social support. This often means that it is not possible for many people seeking asylum to find housing without reliance on charities.

For those who need to access emergency or crisis accommodation, the situation is dire. Often people seeking asylum cannot access emergency accommodation because they cannot be transitioned into longer-term accommodation due to their visa conditions. This leaves organisations in a difficult position where the already stretched crisis accommodation providers cannot afford people staying for long periods, which means that people with a clear pathway to sustainable housing are prioritised over people seeking asylum due to their insecure visa status.

Without access to public or community housing and limited access to crisis accommodation, there are few housing options available for people seeking asylum. In 2022-23, the ASRC provided over 66,000 nights of shelter for people seeking asylum, which was significantly less than the demand for housing support. Enabling people seeking asylum to access more affordable accommodation options that do not discriminate on the basis of visa status will mitigate the risk of people seeking asylum experiencing poverty and food insecurity.

Recommendation 2: Provide access to public and community housing and crisis accommodation for people seeking asylum.

Access to work rights and study rights

There are currently thousands of people seeking asylum in Australia who cannot work due to their visa status, which places them at greater risk of food insecurity. This is despite people seeking asylum in Australia being ready to work, contribute to the community and rebuild their lives. There is no clear data on how many people seeking asylum in Australia currently have work rights. However, **the ASRC estimates that as many as 20% of people seeking asylum on bridging visas at any given time are without work rights.**

Additionally, ineffective decision-making at the Department of Home Affairs and review stages of the protection visa application process has contributed to people seeking asylum being subjected to living on short-term bridging visas with limited rights for unacceptable periods of time. For example, in 2018-2019 the average time to process a Permanent Protection Visa was 334 days at the Department of Home Affairs, however, by 2022-2023 the delay had more than quadrupled to 1,076 days.³ In the experience of lawyers at the ASRC, it also takes up to three years for a protection visa applicant to be invited to a Department interview. Even when a person is found to be owed protection, it can take another year for the visa to be granted. There has been a similar blowout in wait times at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal for merits review, which went from an average application processing time in the Refugee Division of 217 days in 2017-18 to 1,638 days in 2023-24.⁴

Case study

Benjamin arrived in Australia on a student visa after fleeing his country of origin, facing serious harm because of his sexuality. He was unaware that he could apply for a protection visa on these grounds in Australia. Benjamin's mental health declined due to past experiences of trauma and ongoing threats he received from his ethnic community in Australia. He was unable to meet his student visa requirements and his student visa was cancelled.

Benjamin experienced homelessness, was extremely unwell and unable to seek legal assistance. He was taken into detention and at this time he was connected with the ASRC who advised him about his legal rights and he applied for a protection visa.

Due to Benjamin's circumstances, he managed to access Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments and received housing support, however, this was often insufficient to meet all of Benjamin's expenses. Benjamin was ready and willing to work and could have supported

³ Budget Estimates, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, OBE22-180, 2022.

⁴ AAT Caseload Report, 2017-18,

<https://www.aat.gov.au/AAT/media/AAT/Files/Statistics/AAT-Whole-of-Tribunal-Statistics-2017-18.pdf>; AAT Caseload Report, 2023-24, <https://www.aat.gov.au/AAT/media/AAT/Files/Statistics/AAT-Whole-of-Tribunal-Statistics-2023-24.pdf>.

himself through his protection visa application process if he had work rights, but he was prohibited from working.

Benjamin waited over five years for his protection visa to be granted and could not work during this time. He was unable to access Medicare despite his complex health conditions and he could not access timely healthcare through SRSS, which exacerbated his poor health.

Further, short-term bridging visas, which often last only for six months before renewal is required, are a disincentive for employers to hire people seeking asylum. Also, study and work rights are sometimes mutually exclusive conditions on bridging visas, meaning people cannot upskill or participate in training to effectively contribute to their workplaces and further their careers.

The lack of work and study rights and prolonged insecure visa status regularly prevent people seeking asylum from financially supporting themselves to avoid poverty and food insecurity for themselves and their families.

Access to healthcare

People seeking asylum are often denied affordable healthcare, which exacerbates their health conditions and increases the likelihood of them experiencing food insecurity as they must choose between paying for healthcare or food. Medicare is one of the few protections that the Federal Government nominally offers people seeking asylum in Australia on bridging visas; however, this is limited with **an estimated 20% of people seeking asylum on bridging visas not having access to Medicare at any given time.**⁵ Currently, 80-90% of people accessing the ASRC's GP clinic do not have access to Medicare. In 2022-23, the ASRC provided close to 5,500 health appointments for people who had been denied access to Medicare.

Deliberate choices by the government to revoke Medicare access as well as refusing to grant work rights, which are a prerequisite to a person accessing Medicare, are key reasons for people seeking asylum not having access to healthcare. The constant requirement for people seeking asylum to renew their bridging visas also causes people to lose access to Medicare. Concerningly, this loss of healthcare can occur at critical times, with the ASRC seeing people losing access to Medicare during pregnancies. There are also other issues such as delays in issuing Medicare cards and a lack of straightforward procedures to apply for Medicare that prevent people seeking asylum and refugees from accessing affordable healthcare.

Even for those with access to Medicare, the lack of a robust social support system means that urgent medical needs are not met. These issues include the falling rate of doctors that bulk bill, lack of access to medical services and an inability to afford medication.⁶ It is common for a person seeking

⁵ Rick Morton, *Asylum seekers and Medicare access*, The Saturday Paper, (2021) <http://bit.ly/42Nipok>.

⁶ Anthony Galloway, *Falling rate of bulk-billing sparks urgent call for overhaul of Medicare*, Sydney Morning Herald, (2023) <http://bit.ly/3Ke1lv6>.

asylum to wait long periods to see a doctor who bulk bills, only to be prescribed medication that they cannot afford. The government has created a system where even people who can attend medical appointments are prevented from accessing affordable medicine, which has resulted in the ASRC providing nearly \$50,000 in pharmacy bills to clients in 2021-22.

Case study

Ahmed has been in Australia for a decade on a Bridging Visa E. He fled his country of origin and sought asylum in Australia by sea in 2012. He does not have Medicare as he is waiting for his bridging visa to be renewed and assumed that because of this he could not go to a hospital for treatment. This is despite suffering from numerous mental and physical health issues, including lack of immunisations, PTSD, tooth decay and diabetes.

The ASRC, the local council and other medical charities supported his immediate medical needs, providing access to dental care and immunisations (noting that dental care will not be covered when Ahmed's Medicare access is restored). However, after being rejected from accessing Status Resolution Support Services and being too unwell to work, Ahmed will not be able to afford ongoing medication even with Medicare.

If Ahmed received ongoing Medicare, mainstream social support and a concession card linked to these supports, he could have received medical care for health conditions before they reached a crisis point. Instead, Ahmed was subjected to a decade of deteriorating health from which the recovery will be protracted and needlessly difficult.

Precarious and inconsistent access to affordable healthcare results in people seeking asylum and refugees experiencing food insecurity because they are unable to pay their medical bills as well as grocery bills, and sadly for some people without access to Medicare their health deteriorates to a point where they are unable to look after themselves and obtain food.

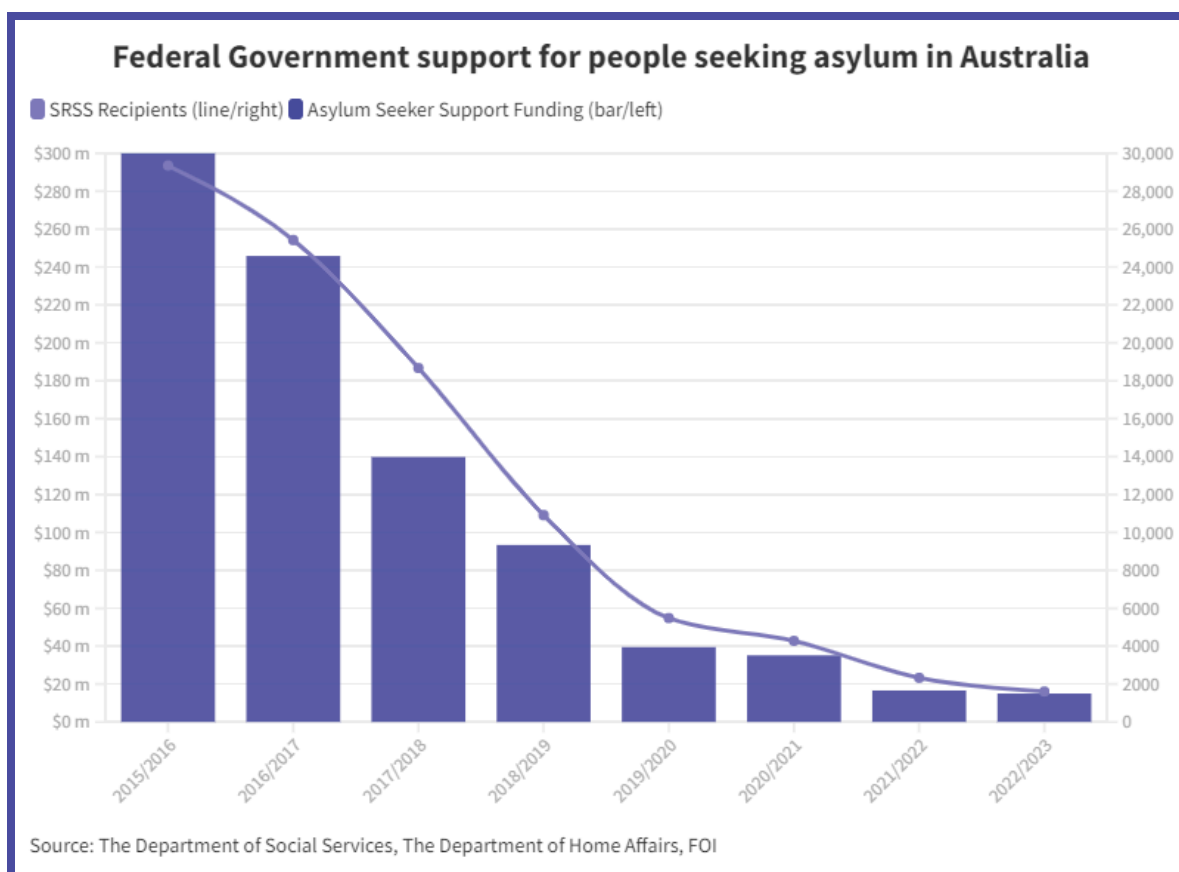
Access to safety net

Over the past decade, the Federal Government has largely withdrawn from its crucial role in providing a safety net to people seeking asylum in Australia. With the current rise in the cost of living leading to increased service delivery costs and decreased funding, the unsustainable approach of relying on charities to fill the vacuum has become untenable.

People seeking asylum wait years for their protection visa applications to be processed, and are excluded from mainstream social support during this time. Minimal financial support can be provided through the Government's Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), yet continued cuts to funding and hardline eligibility criteria meant only 1.2% of the 88,500 people seeking asylum were able to access any sort of payments in 2022-2023. However, even this is insufficient given that SRSS payments are only 89% of the rate of mainstream support. While people seeking asylum should

have access to the same safety net that everyone in the Australian community relies on when times are tough, an immediate expansion of eligibility and funding for SRSS is required.

Over the past nine years, the Federal Government has cut its budget of support for people seeking asylum in the Federal Budget by 95% from \$300 million in 2016⁷ to \$17 million in 2024-25.⁸ Concerningly, the estimated expenditure on support for people seeking asylum was only \$16.4 million in 2023-24, which is less than half of the \$37 million allocated in last year's Budget.⁹ Cuts to funding and eligibility for SRSS have resulted in a sharp decline to only around 1,500 SRSS recipients in 2023, which is a reduction of around 25,000 people from 2015.¹⁰



The decline in people’s eligibility for SRSS is due to numerous reasons, which includes the mutual exclusivity of the right to work and SRSS. The ASRC has seen numerous examples of people receiving SRSS who are unable to make ends meet. To cover basic costs for food and housing, people might work for a rideshare app or food delivery company for a few hours, only to have their entire SRSS support cancelled. Similarly, people seeking asylum who are studying full-time are ineligible for SRSS.

⁷ Federal Budget 2016/2017, Social Services Portfolio: Budget Related Paper No. 1.15B, 2016.

⁸ Federal Budget 2024/2025, Social Services Portfolio: Budget Related Paper No. 1.14, 2024.

⁹ Ibid; Federal Budget 2023/2024, Social Services Portfolio: Budget Related Paper No. 1.14, 2023.

¹⁰ Supplementary Budget Estimates, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, OSE23-738, 2023.

Case study

Maryam is a single woman from Bangladesh seeking asylum in Australia and is a victim-survivor of family violence. Maryam lodged her protection visa application as a dependent on her husband's application. Their protection visa application was refused and her husband appealed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT).

Maryam did not have work rights or access to SRSS while at the AAT and was unaware that she could apply for it. Her husband knew about her work rights options but withheld this information from her, and was perpetrating family violence throughout the 6 years that the Department of Home Affairs and AAT were assessing their visa applications.

After the AAT refused their application and Maryam and her husband lodged at the Federal Circuit Court (FCC), Maryam was connected to a family violence service by a friend. Maryam separated from her husband and sought independent legal advice while at the FCC.

Unfortunately, because she did not have work rights on her bridging visa prior to lodging at the FCC, Maryam is unable to obtain work rights while her application is considered. She lodged at the FCC almost 3 years ago. During this time, she has relied on organisations such as the Red Cross and the ASRC for assistance with her basic necessities such as food, housing and medical care. However, this support was often insufficient.

Applying for SRSS is a convoluted and time-consuming process, particularly for people with English language barriers. The process for accessing SRSS must be streamlined and designed for people seeking asylum. This would involve presenting clear guidelines about eligibility and how to apply, removing onerous requirements (which can endanger the people applying) and providing updates about the application as it progresses. The lack of any review process or transparency about decision-making to refuse access to SRSS is deeply concerning and must be rectified.

Recommendation 3: State Government to advocate for policy change at a Federal level to:

- A. Provide ongoing work rights and study rights for people seeking asylum on bridging visas for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits and judicial review stages.**
- B. Provide ongoing access to Medicare for people seeking asylum for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits and judicial review stages.**
- C. Refund Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) to pre-2016 levels of \$300 million and immediately expand SRSS eligibility.**

D. Provide people seeking asylum access to mainstream social support services, including Centrelink programs such as Special Benefit, for the duration of their protection visa application process, including merits review and judicial review stages.

Conclusion

While there is an urgent need for funding for organisations such as the ASRC to provide food relief, this measure only provides temporary food security. Lack of access to food for refugees and people seeking asylum is a consequence of punitive visa conditions that make it difficult for people to work and access social support systems. The policies implemented by successive governments have denied people seeking asylum and refugees access to work and study, affordable housing and healthcare and access to a safety net, which has prevented them from the stability to rebuild their lives. In this context, people are being forced to choose between paying for their rent, bills and medicine or putting food on the table for themselves and their families. **If people seeking asylum had access to their basic rights during their protection visa application process, the risk of them experiencing food insecurity would be significantly reduced.** The ASRC urges the Victorian Government to adopt the recommendations in this submission, including to advocate for the Federal Government to implement the recommendations within a federal remit.