Throughout 2019-20, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) engaged in hundreds of direct lobbying meetings with key decision-makers – federal and state MPs and senators, key government advisors and senior officials of the Department of Home Affairs – to promote more humane refugee policies. During this period, we organised four delegations – consisting of member organisations and refugees speaking from lived experience – to meet with a diverse array of politicians and bureaucrats, including meetings with senior advisers to the Prime Minister and Immigration Minister.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have communicated on multiple occasions with Australia’s 227 federal and 611 state and territory parliamentarians and met with key ministers. We have repeatedly drawn attention to the human and public health impacts of failing to address the risks associated with overcrowding in immigration detention and the destitution of temporary visa holders left with no financial safety net. Over 100 MPs have responded directly to our correspondence and we continue to lobby for policy change on this issue.

This year, we regularly convened the Fair Process Working Group to further develop our strategic plan to achieve a range of important changes for people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary protection visas. The group is led by RCOA and is made up of more than 40 refugee support organisations from across the sector. Together, we are working towards three priority issues for the next 1-3 years:

- Establishing a pathway to permanency for temporary protection visa holders.
- Achieving access to family reunion for temporary protection visa holders.
- Ensuring baseline support for people seeking asylum on bridging visas – access to Medicare, work rights and a valid bridging visa.

We organised two delegations to Canberra – comprising of people on SHEV visas and member organisations – to meet with parliamentarians, senior parliamentary advisors and senior officials of the Department of Home Affairs to discuss these concerns and advocate for change. This work paved the way for the Nobody Left Behind campaign, RCOA’s biggest and most ambitious to date.
As COVID-19 rocked the world, we made sure that refugees and people seeking asylum were not forgotten in the conversation. We acted promptly to convene emergency meetings with our members and key service providers to understand the main issues facing people seeking asylum and refugees as a result of COVID-19. We developed a key priorities document which we used in our lobbying and to design a campaign that sought to ensure there is #NobodyLeftBehind in Australia’s response to the pandemic and recession.

We led 216 organisations in an open letter to launch the campaign, calling on the Federal Government to extend financial, legal and medical support to people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas. Since then, we have coordinated lobbying by eight medical groups and a public statement signed by 38 mayors to back the call. We have also led over 700 teachers, students and parents in calling for support to be extended to the 16,000 affected children and their families who are seeking asylum, now at risk of homelessness and destitution.

We have worked with people affected, to safely tell their stories to the media, leading to high profile media coverage with the ABC, The Saturday Paper, The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph, The Advertiser (Adelaide), Channel 9’s The Today Show and more. Our advocacy has yielded results at the state level and at the time of writing, we continue to actively lobby the Federal Government to step up. For more information, visit www.nochildleftbehind.com.au or www.refugeecouncil.org.au/nobody-left-behind/

In August 2019, the PNG Government arrested and detained a total of 53 people, who were subject to Australia’s offshore processing policy, but remained in PNG without refugee status. They were held in Bomana Immigration Centre in appalling conditions, with no access to visitors or any form of external scrutiny. In response, RCOA:

- repeatedly raised concerns through eight face-to-face meetings and teleconferences between August and December 2019 with senior Australian Government officials at the Australian Border Force, the Department of Home Affairs and Department of Foreign Affairs.
- visited Port Moresby for three days in late November 2019. RCOA President Phil Glendenning, CEO Paul Power and senior policy officer Sahar Okhovat met with the head of PNG’s Immigration and Citizenship Authority, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the head of the Port Moresby bureau of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, senior officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the New Zealand High Commissioner to PNG and senior officials of the Catholic Church (including the Apostolic Pro Nuncio and the Archbishop of Port Moresby), as well as the men who had recently been released from the detention centre.
- maintained constant contact with the UNHCR regional office in Canberra, who were working hard behind the scenes to push for alternatives.
- worked closely with other advocates, including a Catholic church team headed by Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen of Parramatta who visited PNG in early November, legal representatives for the detained men and other NGOs including Amnesty International Australia.

The men were then released from the detention centre over a four-month period, ending on 23 January 2020 with the release of the final 18.
RCOA convened a national roundtable on immigration detention in March, which connected 30 representatives from 17 organisations to discuss how to work together more effectively to address issues related to onshore immigration detention, including advocacy for the release of people in long-term detention in Australia. Prior to the roundtable we produced a detailed document that mapped the various advocacy efforts in relation to this issue in the past ten years. We did so to ensure better coordination and higher impact.

The roundtable, which occurred just before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was fully felt in Australia, developed a strategic response based on:

- gathering information to identify individuals and groups most affected by long-term detention
- working with mental health, medical and legal specialists on strategic advocacy
- taking concerns to official scrutiny bodies including the Commonwealth Ombudsman’s Office, Australian Human Rights Commission and Australian Red Cross
- undertaking direct advocacy with the Department of Home Affairs, relevant ministers and parliamentarians
- promoting public scrutiny through the Senate Estimates Committee and processes associated with the Optional Protocol on the Convention Against Torture.

While continuing to oppose the offshore processing policy, RCOA has advocated for durable solutions for refugees held in this system.

In 2019-20, we joined up with Canadian organisation MOSAIC to launch Operation Not Forgotten, supporting the resettlement of refugees in PNG and Nauru to safety in Canada. With your support, we were able to raise funds for the lodgment of 133 applications for the Canadian private sponsorship program, which provides a pathway to permanent resettlement. MOSAIC has since been invited to lodge another 58 applications, with another 130 likely to be allocated in January 2021. This is an excellent option for people who otherwise have no safe alternative.

In addition, we have:

- supported efforts to promote the maximum take-up of the United States’ resettlement offer. This included advocating directly with the US State Department and Australia’s Department of Home Affairs to expand eligibility, seeking clarification of questions raised by refugees and encouraging organisations and advocates in our network to discuss the US option positively with people who may be eligible.
- worked behind the scenes to support UNHCR Canberra’s efforts to find resettlement options in other countries for small numbers of people, raising the cases of people at greatest risk for UNHCR to consider and using the sidelines of the Global Refugee Forum to discuss the need for support with government and NGO leaders from key resettlement countries.
- lobbied hard to try to prevent the repeal of the Medevac legislation, coordinating a public petition and NGO advocacy with MPs and senators in the lead-up to December’s parliamentary vote. Unfortunately, the repeal was passed with one vote, but hundreds of people were brought to safety in Australia during the eight months this legislation was intact. To date, these people remain in Australia.
- convened the cross-sector Offshore Detention Working Group to strategise effectively, build collaboration and coordinate advocacy across the refugee movement.

Advocating for durable solutions for refugees in PNG and Nauru

While continuing to oppose the offshore processing policy, RCOA has advocated for durable solutions for refugees held in this system.
1st National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group

As the driving force behind the first Asia Pacific Summit of Refugees in October 2018, RCOA has continued to support the network which developed from that summit, the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR). The board of APNOR asked RCOA to be the auspicing body for its successful funding application to the Open Society Foundations. We are now working closely with APNOR’s new coordinator and consultant. APNOR has conducted consultations with refugee communities across the Asia-Pacific region and is very active in international advocacy on the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking at global and Asia-Pacific meetings hosted by UNHCR and highlighting the positive contribution of refugees through its #RefugeesRise campaign.

Throughout 2019, we provided practical support for the development of the new National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG), the first of its kind. NRAAG which is made up entirely of people with lived experience of seeking refuge – aims to amplify refugee voices and first-hand representation across refugee advocacy.

RCOA funded and supported NRAAG’s inaugural National Dialogue in Brisbane in February, bringing together 55 people of refugee background from around Australia. At this event, delegates formalised the group, elected the leadership committee and developed strategies for community consultation and advocacy.

Since its formation, NRAAG has:

• conducted a nationwide consultation with refugee communities to inform NRAAG’s foundation and inclusive representation, and on issues affecting diaspora communities
• made a parliamentary submission from these findings
• responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, by:
  – consultation with refugee communities across Australia about how they are affected
  – published a report on the findings
  – written to federal MPs regarding including refugees and people seeking asylum in the Government’s COVID-19 response
  – actively participated in the #NobodyLeftBehind campaign
  – submitted a report to the Senate inquiry into Australia’s response to COVID-19.

2020 saw the launch of Australia’s first ever digital Refugee Week, from 14-20 June. Despite the varying lockdown restrictions in place, people from all around the world took part in an incredible array of online events and initiatives, in the world’s longest-running national celebration of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Members of Australia’s refugee communities offered up their talents to help launch an exciting week of digital entertainment. The week kicked off with an insightful discussion between people from Indigenous and refugee communities around Australia about the meaning of ‘welcome’. Other official events during the week included a poetry night, panel sessions, global storytelling and a movie night and the launch of the first ever RCOA e-cookbook. We formed new partnerships with SBS Food, Melbourne’s Wheeler Centre, and Refugee Week UK, rendering it a truly international celebration.
During this period RCOA’s research and policy team has published 9 reports, providing new and crucial information to the public about the impact of Australia’s refugee policy, with key recommendations for improvement. These included:

- The impact of COVID-19 on people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas (commissioned by RCOA and written by John Van Kooy)
- Leaving no-one behind: ensuring people seeking asylum and refugees are included in COVID-19 strategies
- A report from the April resettlement working group on the impact of COVID-19 on global resettlement numbers and efforts
- (Major contribution to) the report on the implementation of OPCAT* in Australia, by Australia’s OPCAT network
- The use of non-judicial accountability mechanisms by the refugee sector in Australia (a collaboration between La Trobe University and RCOA)
- A new opportunity for global leadership: Options for Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program in 2019-20
- An unnecessary penalty: economic impacts of changes to the Status Resolution Support Services

* Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Our annual Movement Networking Day was held in Brisbane in February on the eve of our Refugee Alternatives conference. This event brought together 70 people from across Australia to share information, and to plan and strategise on collective challenges including:

- building more effective collaboration between advocates
- how best to frame our advocacy for refugee rights
- gaining greater access to government decision-makers
- supporting refugee-led advocacy
- engaging people in regional Australia
- mobilising public support.

The feedback from the event was very positive, with delegates confirming that it was useful and productive and that they would attend similar events in future.
The Refugee Alternatives conference in 2020 was attended by 480 people. This included 70 speakers, 40 volunteers and hundreds of participants from across the country. This was RCOA’s fourth national conference and was held in partnership with the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane. Seventeen diverse sessions took place across two days, covering topics such as unpacking lived experience leadership, regional communities, mental health and wellbeing, resilience, education, advocacy, and unity.

In 2020, over 60 per cent of speakers and moderators had lived experience of seeking asylum, living as a refugee or as a stateless person. Over 35 per cent of all conference participants identified themselves as either a person from a refugee background or seeking asylum. This participation and contribution across the multiple tiers of engagement continued to reinforce self-representation as fundamental to improving policy practice, partnerships and public support.

“The Australia I dream of is that our young people from our most marginalised communities will be able to dare, to dream… it is about changing the story and providing something for us to dream about.” Speaker, Refugee Alternatives 2020

Since 2014, RCOA has been bringing refugee speakers to schools to share their stories as part of our Face-to-Face Schools and Community Program. With COVID-19 restrictions making school visits impossible or impractical, we extended the delivery method of the Face-to-Face Program to a digital platform. This meant that schools all over Australia could learn about the refugee experience directly from people who have lived it. For the first time this year, we also opened the program up to workplaces and community groups.

At the end of each session participants are asked to rate the presentations delivered in relation to various areas ranging from the most enjoyable part to lessons learned. 82% of participants claimed that the Refugee Story was the most enjoyable aspect of the presentation.

“I learned so much from this presentation. Before listening, I had very little understanding of what the majority of refugees actually experience. I was really moved by the way people fought for their rights and never gave up.” – Year 10 student

“In the last year alone, 68% of all inquiries resulted in a booked and delivered incursion for our Face to Face program. Since the establishment of the program in 2014, RCOA has measured the program’s effectiveness in raising awareness about refugees and people seeking asylum.

“The Refugee Welcome Zones initiative has been joined by 167 local government authorities from across Australia, making a public commitment to welcome refugees into their community, uphold the human rights of refugees, show compassion, and enhance cultural and religious diversity in their communities.

This year, we established a Refugee Welcome Zone Leadership Group, through which representatives of Refugee Welcome Zone councils work with RCOA staff to drive the strategic direction of the initiative and provide added value for councils and the communities they serve.

“Excellent excellent and excellent. Amazing work. Please stop them from going to a special island.” – Year 5 student

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It was a great start to 2020 for us at RCOA, ringing in the new year as official charity partners of the City of Sydney New Year’s Eve celebrations.

Over 1,500 Australians commit to 12 welcoming actions in 2020

To mark the occasion, we launched 2020 as the official “Year of Welcome”, asking people to commit to take 12 easy, but meaningful, monthly actions to welcome refugees and people seeking asylum to the Australian community. More than 1,500 Australians made the commitment, which has so far seen people recording messages of welcome, offering free classes to new arrivals, raising their voices for refugee rights and much more.