

# YOUR VOICE

The latest news from the Refugee Council of Australia · Spring 2023



Refugee Council  
of Australia



Sidiqa Faqih,  
RCOA National Refugee Ambassador  
Image credit: Damon Amb Photography

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Paul Power with some of the refugees resettled to Vancouver through Operation Not Forgotten.



Foreword from Paul Power, CEO of Refugee Council of Australia (ROA)

Myo Win at MOSAIC's arrival accommodation in Vancouver



# Your voice changes lives

**I first met Myo Win in Sydney in 2021, just after he had been released from Villawood Immigration Detention Centre following 8 years of detention in Nauru.**

A member of Myanmar's stateless and oppressed Rohingya minority, Myo's need for refugee protection had been recognised in Nauru but his status in Australia was temporary.

In July, 2 years after our first meeting, I caught up with Myo in Vancouver. He's now a permanent resident of Canada and will soon be reunited with his wife, son and daughter, for the first time in 10 years.

Myo's new life in Canada and his impending reunion with his family has been possible because of generous donors like you who supported Operation #NotForgotten (ONF). With your support, we established this crucial partnership in 2019 with MOSAIC in Vancouver and Ads Up Canada Refugee Network to sponsor refugees who were sent to Nauru and Manus Island and left without resettlement options.

At the time of my visit, 41 refugees had resettled in Canada as part of ONF, another 10 were due to arrive imminently and 75 more had applications being considered. If all are accepted, 109 immediate family members, separated from their loved ones for more than 10 years, will arrive

later under Canada's generous family reunion provisions.

One of our current priorities is ending barriers to family reunification for refugees here in Australia, through expanding the current Humanitarian Program.

Crucial advocacy work like this is only possible with the support of people like you. ROA receives no government funding for our policy and advocacy work, so your contributions, as always, are absolutely vital.

I thank you for standing with us as we work towards creating a fairer, more compassionate Australia for people seeking protection on our shores.

Warm wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul".

**Paul Power**  
CEO, Refugee Council of Australia



# Face to Face: Schools and Community Program update

**Thanks to those who supported our Christmas appeal, we're proud to announce that 19 new National Refugee Ambassadors have joined our Face to Face: Schools and Community program.**

This inspiring program connects refugee speakers with communities across the country, giving them the opportunity to share their story in schools, organisations and workplaces. In doing so, they are breaking down harmful stereotypes and allowing Australians to gain empathy for the lived experience of a refugee.

With our new speakers recruited and trained, our National Refugee Ambassador program has expanded to include 38 people – the highest number on record since the program commenced. Our new ambassadors originate from countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Ukraine, Bosnia, Turkey, Iraq and Sri Lanka.

Sidiqa Faqih is one of our newest National Refugee Ambassadors, and a Project Officer for

RCOA's Face-to-Face: Schools and Community program. Sidiqa was born in Afghanistan, and belongs to the Hazara ethnic group who continue to face systematic discrimination and persecution. In 2013, she made the difficult decision to leave her homeland with her mother, grandmother and 6 siblings, seeking protection in Indonesia.

"My refugee journey was filled with uncertainty, hardship and challenges, but what kept me going was my resilient spirit and my ever-present hope for a better future," she says.

The support of people like you means that Sidiqa and her fellow ambassadors can continue sharing their refugee journeys, while continuing to shift and educate the culture towards a more humane and inclusive Australia.

## Face-to-Face: Schools and Community Program impact in numbers:

- 19 new speakers trained
- 38 National Refugee Ambassadors active on the program
- 175 enquiries submitted for a F2F presentation (from schools to local council and community groups) and 80 presentations delivered during financial year 22-23



Scan here to book a National Refugee Ambassador to speak at your workplace or school in 2024.



Read more about Sidiqa's inspiring journey from Afghanistan to Indonesia, and on to Australia.

# Family reunion still out of reach for refugees granted permanent visas

**Many Australians have welcomed the end of the cruel and unnecessary policy of temporary protection. But even with a permanent visa, there's still a vast chasm between refugees and the families they left behind.**

As a loyal supporter of the Refugee Council, you will have shared our relief on hearing that refugees on temporary protection visas would at last be given permanent visas.

After years of uncertainty, the government's move to grant permanent visas means that thousands of refugees finally have hope of laying down roots in Australia. They can also get a loan, attend university without paying international student fees upfront, and access options for family reunion.

The Department of Home Affairs has committed to transitioning over 19,000 people holding Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) to a permanent visa by February 2024.

So far, less than 25% of people have had their SHEV visa or TPV converted to a permanent Resolution of Status (RoS) visa. Unfortunately, around 10,000 people are excluded from this process altogether, including:

- 1,500 people who are still waiting to be assessed as refugees
- 600 people whose refugee claims are under review by the Immigration Assessment Authority
- 5,000 people who are challenging their refusal in the federal courts
- Those seeking ministerial intervention

These people have had their claims rejected through the FastTrack system, a process the Australian Labor Party (ALP) admits “does not provide a fair, thorough and robust assessment process for persons seeking asylum.”



Nithi Kanakarathinam and his wife, Jano Pakkiyarasa at their cultural wedding ceremony in January 2023. Image supplied by Nithi Kanakarathinam.

After more than a decade of separation, even a RoS visa doesn't guarantee that refugees can reunite with their loved ones. People like Nithi Kanakarathinam still face many barriers in bringing family members to Australia.

Nithi is a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee who came to Australia by boat in 2012. After more than a decade on temporary visas, Nithi was finally able to transition to an RoS visa in June 2023. But his partner still remains in Sri Lanka.

Most refugees rely on the overloaded Special Humanitarian Program to sponsor their family members to come to Australia. At present, it will take more than 13 years to complete the current backlog of applications – and more are being submitted every week.



Unfairly, this program isn't available for refugees, like Nithi, who arrived by boat, even former TPV and SHEV holders. Instead, they must rely on the complex and expensive Migration Program.

Sponsoring a family of 3 through this program costs the family around \$22,000 in visa charges and other expenses, including biometric tests, police checks and a range of other documents, which can be difficult for those fleeing war-torn countries to provide.

Children over 23 are also no longer considered dependent under this program, meaning they can't be included in the same application as their family. This can force many families into making the heartbreaking decision to leave their older children behind – often in unsafe conditions. In many cases, children who were very young when their parents left home to find safety in Australia “age out” of the process over many years of forced separation.

Thanks to people like you, RCOA can continue calling for reforms to the family reunion system. With your support, we're advocating for reduced costs, greater flexibility around documentation and the removal of barriers that prevent family members from being reunited.

Together, we can urge the Australian Government to introduce concessions that grant refugees better access to the Migration Program, and expand the Humanitarian Program to include all refugees.

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**It makes me upset that some people get visas, and some don't. They need it just as much as I do. They have been working, paying their taxes, being compliant - they should be treated with humanity.”**

# Refugee Week 2023: A celebration of “Finding Freedom”



Adam Liaw and Oliver Slewa on  
*Adam Liaw's The Cook Up*.  
Image credit: Jiwon Kim @jiwonkaeshoots



*Watandar, My Countryman*, Q+A session with  
photographer Muzafar Ali, moderated by Elly Kohistani.  
Image credit Jolyon Hoff

**Thousands of people across Australia joined us for another successful Refugee Week in 2023, gathering to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions to our communities made by refugees and people seeking asylum.**

As both coordinator of Refugee Week and the national umbrella body for refugees and the refugee sector, RCOA is guided by the voices of those with lived experience. Our theme for Refugee Week 2023, Finding Freedom, was developed through a public vote involving members of the diverse refugee communities.

Every day, millions of people across the world embark on dangerous journeys for the sole purpose of finding safety and freedom. Throughout Refugee Week, we shared “Stories of Freedom”, a series of portraits featuring what freedom means to former refugees now living in Adelaide. We encouraged the public to examine their own version of freedom and reflect on what it would be like to live without fear of war, live in equality and have your basic human rights

upheld. The portraits were taken by Muzafar Ali, a Hazara refugee from Afghanistan, in collaboration with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre.

From 18–24 June, communities and organisations across the country explored the meaning of finding freedom through a range of events, such as the launch of the “Billion Dollar Benefit” report by our event partner, Settlement Services International (SSI), screenings of Muzafar Ali’s new film, *Watandar, My Countryman*, awards nights, panel discussions, training sessions and sporting events.

Our partnership with SBS Food continued with two Season 5 episodes of *The Cook Up with Adam Liaw*, featuring our National Refugee Ambassadors, Abang and Oliver.



Violet Roumeliotis speaking at the World Refugee Day Fair  
Image credit: Danish Ravi

“

For me, freedom is not just the absence of violence. It has a much deeper meaning. Freedom is belonging. Australia is my home and I “belong” here now. Freedom is the agency I have to do whatever I want to do, to practise my culture and religion, and to express my opinion without fear of persecution.”

— Ackim Mulumba, member of the Congolese community in Adelaide.

From humble beginnings in the 1980s, Refugee Week has grown to be an international movement. It is Australia’s peak annual activity to promote greater awareness of refugees, the issues they face and the contribution they are making to the Australian community.

Our National Refugee Ambassadors were in high demand during this time, delivering 38 presentations to more than 4,100 people across the country.

Throughout the week, we were proud to receive more than 97,000 visits to the Refugee Week website, 602 mentions of Refugee Week in the media and 6,200 downloads of our resources, including editable Refugee Week Canva templates, along with our Event Resources and Teachers Resource Kits.



This year’s Refugee Week celebrations would not have been possible without the incredible support of our Sponsors.

Find out more about how to become a Sponsor of next year’s Refugee Week.



You can read the full Refugee Week 2023 report here.





# Safety net urgently needed for people seeking protection

**NSW emergency funding for people seeking asylum has ended. It's time for the Federal Government to step up and provide a critical safety net for the 15,000 people living in deep poverty.**

Of the 70,000 people seeking asylum in Australia, around 15,000 are living in deep poverty.

The only Federal Government support people seeking asylum can apply for is the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program. With strict eligibility criteria, the SRSS program offers a basic living allowance of \$45 a day.

Over the last financial year, our budget analysis has revealed that SRSS payments made through Services Australia totalled just \$15 million. That's

less than half of the \$36.9 million which was budgeted for the period.

In less than a decade, spending on this vital program has been cut by 95%. The SRSS program, which once supported 29,000 people, now supports fewer than 1,600 people – but not because there is less need.

With your support, we have been pushing for an expansion and reform of the eligibility criteria for this program in the following ways:

## 1 Federal level

Working alongside our members, who provide frontline services to people seeking asylum and living in poverty, we're urging the Department of Home Affairs and the Federal Government to expand SRSS eligibility.

With your backing, we were able to facilitate a national consultation process between the Department of Home Affairs and civil society groups.

We've also supported several workshops which have included discussions about changing

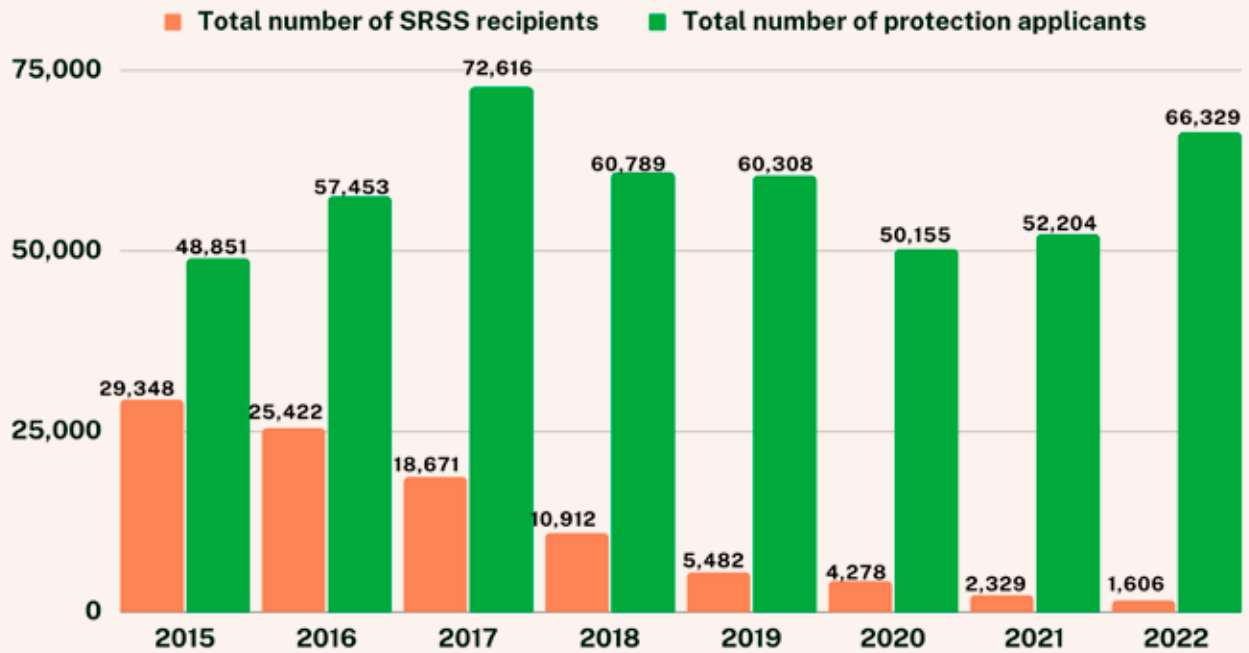
rules related to remittances, medical evidence, transparency, and procedural fairness.

At the time of writing, we are working with the Co-Chairs of the Parliamentary Friends of Refugees Group to organise a Parliamentary briefing to be held during Homelessness Week in August.

We are also working with our members in NSW to organise meetings with NSW Federal MPs who have people seeking asylum – or organisations supporting them – based in their electorates.



## The numbers tell the story...



### 2 Public awareness raising

We have also been working tirelessly to secure media attention about this issue. In the lead-up to the ALP National Conference in August, RCOA ran a public awareness

campaign, mobilising the public to press the ALP to address this issue and help people seeking asylum escape deep poverty.

### 3 State level

In 2020, the previous NSW Government allocated funding for charities to give emergency relief to vulnerable temporary visa holders who were excluded from Federal COVID support. This funding ended on 30th June 2023.

With your support, we teamed up with member agencies to push for this funding to be extended. We also briefed NSW State Parliamentarians on

the issues and the critical reasons to extend the funding.

While individual parliamentarians were supportive of an extension, the NSW Government has sadly not reinstated it. As a result, we are further increasing our advocacy to the Federal Government to step up and take responsibility for providing a basic safety net for those in need.

### 4 Local level

The Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum convenes regularly and includes local governments from Victoria, NSW, and Tasmania. RCOA works with their executive on key issues, including the need for a financial safety net.

Local councils who are part of RCOA's Refugee Welcome Zone Leadership Group have also spoken up about this critical issue and how it impacts residents in their communities.

**Thank you to everyone who supported our recent appeal that made this work possible.**

**Together, we will continue to fight to ensure people seeking asylum are provided with the basic safety net they urgently need.**

Paul Power, CEO of RCOA, speaks about future of CRCP as Australia takes over the chairing role. Photo credit: Louise Olliff



# Australia leads global dialogue on refugee resettlement

**In June, Australia assumed the chairing role of the Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways (CRCP). This dialogue is crucial to closing the chasm between the need for resettlement and what's currently available to refugees.**

The CRCP (known as the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement or ATCR until 2023) brings together states, civil societies, international organisations, and refugees to discuss ways of expanding and improving resettlement for refugees who can't return home.

In 2024, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates 2.4 million refugees will be in need of resettlement. In 2022, only 114,242 refugees were resettled – less than 0.3% of all refugees globally.

Each year, the CRCP is co-chaired by a different country, with Australia taking over from Ireland

## Speaking from experience

This June, Queenslander Beny Bol OAM took part in the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) in Geneva. At this meeting, ATCR delegates voted to adopt a new name – the CRCP – to better reflect the multipartite and expanded focus on complementary pathways. Beny, whose participation was facilitated by RCOA and supported by the Department of Home Affairs, was inspired by a desire to see more concrete solutions for people fleeing conflict who have become stuck in long refugee processes.

“Australia taking on the CRCP chairing role and hosting a meeting in Australia is an opportunity for us to show the world how refugees have shaped our society. We can demonstrate why we should expand resettlement opportunities.”

Originally from South Sudan, Beny came to Australia in 2007 through the resettlement program after spending five years in Uganda as a refugee. He has since earned Master's of International Law, Governance, Development and Public Policy, and in 2021, he also received an Order of Australia Medal in recognition of his service to youth at risk, or in the justice system.

Beny is president of the Queensland African Communities Council, and a Member of the Queensland Parole Board. He's also a Senior Leader at QPASTT (Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma), which supports the health and wellbeing of people in Queensland who have sought safety from persecution, torture, and war-related trauma.



Australian ATCR delegates Sayed Momtaz Shah, Paul Power and Helena Hassani. Photo credit: Louise Olliff

in 2023-24. Leading the dialogue requires collaboration between UNHCR, the Refugee Council of Australia, the Australian Government, and the CRCP Refugee Advisory Group which is made up of representatives from refugee-led networks around the world.

The CRCP is a crucial forum for holding “open and frank dialogue” that finds collaborative approaches to global resettlement. It has also become a place to discuss expanding other migration pathways for refugees through education, employment, community sponsorship and family reunion.

As part of its hosting role, Australia will be hosting a meeting in early 2024 where key voices in resettlement programs around the world can share ideas and learnings on how best to support refugees after their arrival.

Two complementary pathways have been introduced by the Australian Government: the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot and the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot. These initiatives lend greater credibility to Australia’s chairing role.



Beny’s own experiences, as well as his 15 years working alongside diverse refugee communities in Australia, give him a deep understanding of the importance of resettlement.

“We are not just talking about people who have been caught up in recent crises, but also people who have been living as refugees for generations. I still know refugees in Uganda. They were teenagers, like me, when I was there, and now they have their own children who have been born as refugees.”

“  
We need  
action, so  
that the next  
generation of  
refugees is not  
left without  
hope.”



I know first-hand the amount of effort that goes into the work that RCOA carries out,” explains Nirary. “As a social enterprise owner who has refugee employees, I am passionate about ensuring they receive the same rights as everyone else.”

## Change everything – starting with the way you give

**Join Nirary and turn each day into a better day for thousands of people by becoming a champion for refugee rights.**

As Australia’s cruel refugee policies continue to impact the lives of those seeking safety on our shores, our work on advocacy, policy and research is more important than ever.

That’s why our Regular Giving program is so crucial. We call our regular givers “champions of refugee rights” because their loyal support plays a critical part in our day-to-day efforts to protect refugees and people seeking asylum from cruelty.

**RCOA is a non-profit organisation that does not receive government support for our policy and advocacy work. We rely on the generosity of**

**regular donors to provide sustainable funding and to enable us to plan long-term programs that create real and lasting change.**

For Nirary, a refugee who came to Australia in 2015, the decision to become a RCOA champion of refugee rights was simple.

“I know first-hand the amount of effort that goes into the work that RCOA carries out,” explains Nirary. “As a social enterprise owner who has refugee employees, I am passionate about ensuring they receive the same rights as everyone else.”



Turn your passion for fairness, human rights and protection for people seeking asylum into a commitment our refugee community can rely on. Join Nirary today in becoming a champion of refugee rights.

**Scan the QR code to become a regular giver.**