

RACS

REFUGEE ADVICE & CASEWORK SERVICE



ANNUAL REPORT

2021-2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Gadigal and Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation, the Traditional Custodians on whose lands we usually work. We pay our respects to Elders, both past and present. We also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the various lands on which many of us are working from, due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. We acknowledge the Darug people in particular, whose land most of our outreach programs operate out of. Sovereignty was never ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.



Artist, Harold Thomas

ABOUT US

WHO WE ARE

The Refugee Advice and Casework Service is a community legal centre that is an independent public voice for the rights of stateless and displaced people, refugees, and people seeking asylum. For 35 years, we've been providing essential legal assistance to people who've been forced to flee their home, fearing persecution due to their ethnicity, culture, religion, political views, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.



OUR MISSION

We work to achieve justice and dignity for and with refugees through dedicated legal services and advocacy.

OUR VALUES

Respect | Integrity | Compassion | Fairness | Empowerment | Perseverance

OUR STRATEGIC GOALS

Accessible Legal Service

We provide life-changing legal assistance to refugees, people seeking asylum, stateless and displaced people.

Refugee and Community Empowerment

We empower our clients and communities to engage with issues that impact them.

Thought Leadership

We drive systemic change by leading public discourse on refugees and related issues.

People and Partnerships

We value our people and our sector peers, nurturing strong partnerships and collaborating to effect social change.

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WHAT WE DO

OUR SERVICES

RACS supports individuals and families seeking asylum in Australia, by providing critical free legal advice and representation. Our services include supporting people to:

- Apply for protection visas and re-apply for temporary visas
- Apply for work rights and permission to travel
- Apply for family reunion so loved ones who've been separated for years can be reunited
- Lodge appeals if people have been refused protection by the Government
- Lodge complaints regarding mistreatment or rights violations to the Commonwealth Ombudsman, the United Nations, the Australian Human Rights Commission or the Red Cross
- Assist new-born children to access citizenship or protection visas
- Assist with challenging the Government's decision to detain a person

WHO WE SUPPORT

RACS assists financially disadvantaged and vulnerable people from all nationalities, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientation, and gender identities, who have been forced to flee their home countries as a result of persecution feared due to their race, religion, nationality, their identity or political views.

RACS is there to assist anyone forced to flee. The people we support can include:

- Women who have experienced or fear domestic, family, gender-based or sexual violence
- Members of the LGBTIQ+ community
- Stateless people
- Children who have been separated from their parents
- Refugees separated from family members who are hoping to reunite in Australia
- People in detention



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

In yet another challenging year, RACS has persevered and continued its dedicated efforts to support courageous people from all corners of the world who have walked through our doors after being forced to flee their home country.

Now in our 35th year of providing critical legal services to people seeking asylum, displaced peoples, and the refugee community, RACS remains a beacon of hope for some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia.

We are the only dedicated provider of legal support to people seeking asylum in NSW, and the sheer volume of people reaching out is astonishing. Yet, a committed team of solicitors, support staff, volunteers and pro bono partners are working to achieve justice and dignity for refugees.

While we've seen a change in government and are hopeful that a change in Australia's refugee and immigration policies will follow, currently Australia's justice system and treatment of refugees remains the same. That is why, RACS is continuing to play an important role in policy development, advocating for the rights of refugees and driving legislative change to end Australia's cruel and unfair treatment of people seeking asylum.

RACS has played an important role in the refugee community for 35 years, and as such is recognised as a strong national voice for people seeking asylum and their families. In 2022 RACS launched its five-year Strategic Plan, aimed at strengthening our efforts to deliver a world in which no person is denied their right to seek asylum and live a life of dignity, free from fear of persecution.

We are committed to delivering effective, accessible and timely legal assistance to those most in need by ensuring they are informed about the legal issues, processes, and their own rights and responsibilities.

RACS will also continue to work with community partners to address the holistic needs of our clients, mobilise the broader community and empower those with lived experience to engage with refugee issues.

As a result of the generosity of our donors, RACS was able to raise funds essential for keeping our programs running, including Family Reunion, the Afghanistan Crisis Response Clinic, Women at Risk, Stateless Children, Legal Help for Refugees Clinic, and Community Outreach.

I would like to thank all of our generous major donors, the University of New South Wales, pro bono partners, volunteers and individual supporters. Most importantly, I'd like to thank again the staff at RACS for their tireless work advocating for and assisting some of the most vulnerable members of our community. RACS is only able to continue to provide vital services to the refugee community as a result of your kindness, compassion and dedication.



Chris Yoo
RACS President

CENTRE DIRECTOR & PRINCIPAL SOLICITOR'S MESSAGE

It has been another tough year for refugee communities in Australia and displaced peoples all over the world, and in times of crisis, RACS has continued to rise to the many challenges that have come our way. I have been humbled by the generosity of our philanthropic community and that of our pro bono partners who have also risen to support this community during the most critical time of need.

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, RACS immediately became a crisis response centre, fielding hundreds of calls from people within Australia as well as those in Afghanistan. We were a sector leader during this crisis, collaborating with other community organisations and standing with the community leaders from Afghanistan, advocating for #ActionForAfghanistan, in order to bring people to safety, while establishing a legal assistance task force to support thousands of people affected.

With the invasion of Ukraine, RACS was there to respond to calls for help from the Ukrainian community here in Australia, who were looking to find safety for themselves and their families that remained in dangerous situations in Ukraine.

RACS provided immediate, comprehensive, and dedicated responses to each crisis with telephone advice, community legal education sessions and fact sheets around emerging legal issues translated into languages for the impacted communities.

This year RACS launched our LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices toolkit, which documents what has been shared with us by people with lived experience. Its purpose is to raise awareness and start conversations on how organisations can better deliver their services in ways that are inclusive, respectful, safe, and trauma informed. We hope that this is the start of a journey of practice to see people better supported in their search for safety in Australia, particularly those that fear harm because of diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics.

I would also like to acknowledge that while a change in Government earlier in 2022 has given hope to many that more compassionate treatment of refugee communities was on the horizon, but the fact remains that as of yet, there haven't been any changes to legislation. There is a lot of uncertainty for many people who are living in limbo on temporary protection visas. Offshore Processing and protracted limbo for people who were sent to Nauru and Manus Island, continues without reprieve. Legal services remain unfunded and access to justice curtailed. As part of a sector-wide approach, RACS is advocating for policy changes, and through our coordinated and collective endeavours, we hope to appeal to the new Government to take a more humane approach to the way Australia treats people seeking safety on our shores.



Sarah Dale
RACS Centre Director
and Principal Solicitor

35 YEARS OF CONTINUED SUPPORT

In 1987, 35 years ago, RACS quietly opened its doors with very few staff but with very big ambitions to provide access to crucial legal support for people seeking asylum in Australia.

Over the course of three and a half decades, more than 70,000 courageous people from all corners of the world – more than a hundred countries – have walked through our doors. They have been welcomed and supported by hundreds of committed staff, passionate legal students and thousands of volunteers. Many of these people, recognised as refugees, now live happy and safe lives alongside us as part of our communities.

To celebrate RACS' 35th anniversary, our wonderful community of supporters helped raise more than \$148,000 for RACS's Family Reunion Program dedicated to reuniting refugees with their families in Australia, because all families belong together in safety.



Jeanine had to leave East Africa, fearing for her life, and was separated from her two sons.

She reached out to RACS, needing critical legal support to apply for a protection visa in Australia.

After an anxious wait over several years and bearing the pain of being away from her children, she was granted permanent protection.

Once Jeanine was granted a permanent visa, RACS was able to help her again by navigating a complex legal process to secure visas for her children to come to Australia and be reunited with her.

"In Africa, people struggle for different reasons, some people don't have enough to eat, others can't afford to learn [and get an education]. We could afford these things, but we weren't safe. At least now I know me and my children are safe."

- Jeanine, Assistant Nurse, Proud Mum and Former RACS Client

OUR HISTORY

RACS is the oldest community legal centre in Australia specialising in providing dedicated legal support to people seeking asylum.

RACS opened in Sydney in 1987 and the organisations involved in getting RACS up and running include:

- Refugee Council of Australia
- Amnesty International
- Ecumenical Migration Service
- International Social Services
- Jesuit Refugee Service

In 1989 the environment in which RACS operated began to change very quickly. Several events occurred in quick succession, including:

- the events in Tiananmen Square in China and the subsequent crackdown on dissenters;
- the first boat arrivals in a decade – Cambodians, Vietnamese and Chinese;
- the abolition of the humanitarian stream;
- the increasing xenophobia in Europe, including violent attacks against people seeking asylum, prompted many to go further afield in search of safety.

The sheer volume of people seeking asylum saw the Australian Government stop processing applications, while it radically changed the status determination process.

While the new systems were being developed, processing effectively halted, so that by the end of 1991 there was a backlog of over 24,000 asylum claims awaiting consideration.

Refugee status determination at that time was characterised by:

- Excessive delays of more than 5 years
- Lack of procedural fairness
- Political interference

There was also the introduction of systematic detention of unauthorised arrivals – with Port Hedland being opened in 1991 and a group of Cambodian boat arrivals finding themselves behind barbed wire in Villawood the same year.

Refugee advocates, including RACS, became embroiled in a fight for justice that was rarely fair and often vicious. RACS was no longer just an advice centre. It became a formidable advocate, holding the Government accountable at every turn.

RACS continues this work today, promoting the issues people seeking asylum face by raising public awareness, and advocating for a refugee determination process that both protects and promotes the rights of displaced peoples in the context of Australia's international obligations.

OUR IMPACT AT A GLANCE FOR FY2022

12,788

RACS responded to over 12,788 requests for legal help.

Mo* identifies as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community but could never admit this to his family in Malaysia. Not only would they disown him, but Mo also fears some family members would physically harm him as well.

After visiting his friends in Australia on a tourist visa and openly living as a gay man, Mo knew he could never go back to hiding who he is by pretending to be a heterosexual-identifying man and living this lie. Mo reached out to RACS for help, and we helped him apply for a permanent protection visa to remain in safety in Australia.

There are hundreds of people like Mo who fear persecution for having a diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristic in their home countries.

1,037

RACS provided legal support to 1,037 people looking to reunite with family members, colleagues and community affected by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

“When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, my family and I were terrified. Every day we thought it was the last day of our lives. Because of our connection with Australia, International Organisations, and the Afghanistan government, we were at high risk. My father is an Australian permanent resident, I worked with international NGOs and my brother worked with the former Afghanistan government which put us at high risk to be killed.

RACS helped me to lodge humanitarian visa for myself, my siblings and my mother. Now, all of us are safe in Australia. RACS is also helping me to bring my wife and children to Australia as well. Their application is in progress. RACS is a very professional and supportive organisation. My entire family and I are grateful for the support we’ve received from RACS.”

– Abas* former RACS client

687

RACS lodged permanent humanitarian visas for 687 people, including 397 children, who fled Afghanistan to Australia after the Taliban takeover. 584 were granted permanent residency by the end of the financial year and RACS continues to provide legal representation to the remaining applicants.

“When Kabul was occupied by the Taliban, all my dreams and ambitions collapsed. I was in constant fear to be harmed by the Taliban. I even received death threats from them. I was regularly changing my location, not to be captured by them because I worked with an Australian NGO, and we were in touch with the Australian Embassy and Australian Defense Forces in Afghanistan. In addition, I was active in the media and civil society. This increased the risk for me.

After arriving in Australia, RACS helped me to apply for Onshore Humanitarian Visa. A few days ago, I received my permanent visa. I am extremely thankful for RACS’ help. I am grateful to be in a county where everyone is treated equally, and rule of law exists. The other reason I am really grateful is the fact that my daughter can go to school and pursue her dreams. In Afghanistan she was banned by the Taliban to go to school.”

– Wahid* RACS former client.



272

RACS provided 272 legal support sessions to women who have suffered or are at risk of gender or domestic violence.

Ana* fled Venezuela with her husband and together they sought asylum in Australia. With the support of friends she made in Australia, as well as protection of the police, Ana left her husband, having reported domestic violence and obtaining protection orders from the court. However, Ana's application for protection was refused partly on the basis that the Department did not believe she was at risk of domestic violence.

Ana came to RACS for legal assistance as she was confused about the decision and why her information was not accepted. It was a difficult experience for her to reveal to the Department the years of physical and sexual abuse she had faced. Ana received assistance from RACS' Women at Risk clinic, where a female lawyer and interpreter explained the Departmental decision and advised her on ways she could try to prove her case. At her appeal she was able to produce Australian police reports, witness statements, and court orders, which provided compelling evidence of the domestic violence she had suffered.

182

182 applications were submitted for temporary protection visa holders required to make subsequent applications for protection.

People who arrived in Australia by boat almost a decade ago and have been working, living and contributing to Australian communities for years are still living in limbo on temporary visas. Those that were found to be refugees have to reapply for the same visa, often reliving the trauma they experienced trying to come to Australia. Each time a temporary protection visa application has to be lodged is a moment of anxiety for our clients who worry that there is always a chance it may get rejected and they may be forced to leave Australia and go back to the danger they worked so hard to escape. One such client is Laila* who came to Australia as a child and has since finished her schooling, and now works part time and puts herself through TAFE.

92

RACS attended 92 interviews and tribunal hearings, which are some of the most crucial steps for people seeking asylum.

*Names of our clients have been changed for their protection.

15

RACS lodged 15 applications for citizenship for babies born in Australia to stateless parents.

"Eight years ago, my son was born in a detention centre. His father is Palestinian. My son does not have citizenship from any country in the world. He is stateless. I feel so bad for him. It's very difficult for him and us. He has no future. Now, he's growing up and asks me a lot of questions like, where I belong to? Why am I born in Australia but can't be Australian citizen? He is lost. His dream is to become a police officer. He cries and gets upset about his situation and the fact that he is being treated differently than the other children. RACS are nice. They help us a lot with the paperwork for his citizenship. RACS also helped us when we applied for our Safe Haven Enterprise Visa."

– Jumana* former RACS client.

260

RACS lodged 260 bridging visa applications for people affected by offshore processing after being released from detention.

25,200

RACS was provided with 25,200 hours of pro bono and volunteer legal support from 16 major law firms, 336 incredibly dedicated legal volunteers and 9 passionate secondees.



OUR PROGRAMS

FAMILY REUNION

Families belong together. Many refugees in Australia are separated from their loved ones when they are forced to flee their home countries in search of safety. Even though they have found protection in Australia, the despair and loneliness they feel being away from their families is heartbreaking. Reuniting them is the right thing to do. However, there are significant barriers, particularly without legal support.

Applying for a family visa is legally complex and costly. On top of the cost of health assessments, police certificates and airfares, applications for partner visas cost at least \$8,085. Paying for migration lawyers puts significant pressure on many who are already experiencing immense financial strain. Left with no other choice and in the depths of despair, many people may be tempted to risk engaging with unscrupulous and poorly skilled migration agents often resulting in dire consequences. **RACS is a trusted organisation with a longstanding reputation of providing this dedicated service at no cost – and is often the only safe option available to vulnerable people.**

REFUGEE WOMEN AT RISK

This program provides people who identify as women and girls with access to free confidential legal support in the refugee assessment process. For vulnerable women who are often left disenfranchised and traumatised from experiences in their home country and potentially from violent domestic situations, providing a safe and supportive space where they can discuss their visa and other legal concerns in confidence is crucial.

Refugee women who are victims of violence face additional complications and barriers in accessing services, and often fear that reporting domestic and family violence will have consequences for their protection visa applications or ability to remain in Australia.

As part of our partnership with the Jesuit Refugee Service, this program operates through their 'women only' space, which is the only one of its kind in NSW dedicated to women and children seeking asylum.

LEGAL HELP FOR REFUGEES CLINIC

This program is supported by dedicated law firm partners who provide thousands of hours of pro bono legal services each year. By providing critical legal advice, assistance and representation to financially disadvantaged and vulnerable people seeking asylum, it ensures that all people can make an application for protection, irrespective of whether they arrived in Australia by plane or by boat.

Since Clinic was established in 2014, RACS has helped thousands of people seeking asylum and represented hundreds of vulnerable families and individuals, attending interviews with the Department of Home Affairs, preparing evidence and legal submissions.

Case study

RACS Solicitor Genevieve Howe shares the experience of a person she supported:

With the support of an interpreter, Dalila explained that she fled her home country of Yemen to seek safety in Australia after experiencing gender-based violence from her ex-husband, which escalated after she renounced Islam – punishable by death under Yemen law.*

Dalila started a new life in Australia, remarried and gave birth to a child. Tragically, she was sexually assaulted while working at her part-time job. Fearful of her husband's reaction and with no other support in Australia, she sought assistance from RACS. After completing a check of Dalia's visa, we discovered that it was about to expire. Given her complex social, psychological, and legal needs, we determined that she would benefit from full case-work assistance and allocated her a dedicated lawyer.

We assisted Dalia with lodging an application for a protection visa setting out her fear of harm from her husband, her fear as a separated woman and her fear as a person who has denounced Islam if she were returned to Yemen. With the help of our referral processes, Dalila was able to access legal advice and psychological support relating to her sexual assault. She can now focus on raising her child and feel secure knowing that she has a lawyer representing her in her immigration matters who will also ensure she can access other support services when and if required.



STATELESS CHILDREN PROGRAM

This program supports children born in Australia to 'stateless' refugee parents by providing them with legal services for the child to apply for Australian citizenship.

Without citizenship the children will have no nationality, continuing the debilitating cycle of statelessness. However, if they are born in Australia, even though their parents are deemed stateless, the children have the legal right to apply for Australian citizenship, thus providing them with the opportunity to experience a secure and safe future, bringing an end to intergenerational statelessness.

The process is complex, and information must correlate to the protection visa application of the children's parents. If not, this could jeopardise the parents' refugee status. Legal support in this circumstance is critical.

RACS partners with the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness and the Melbourne Law School at the University of Melbourne to deliver a Stateless Children Legal Clinic.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH SUPPORT

Since 2014, our outreach services in community hubs in Western Sydney have been vital in ensuring that people receive immediate help navigating the overwhelmingly complex legal process of seeking protection in Australia. Western Sydney has the highest number of people seeking asylum in NSW and this drop-in service provides immediate legal assistance to approximately 20 to 80 individuals and families each session.

RACS is there to respond to whatever pressing legal issues people have. Without the need for an appointment, people come with a wide range of concerns including lodging bridging visas, assistance with accessing crucial identity documents, permission to travel overseas to visit family, permission to work, and documents or responses to be sent to the Department of Home Affairs.



Case study

RACS Senior Solicitor Ahmad Sawan shares the experience of a person he supported:

After the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and a long period of providing telephone support, it was great to receive the news that we would be returning to our Outreach Clinic to provide face-to-face support. This outreach enables us to connect with people in person and remain closely engaged with the refugee community.

Returning to Outreach has allowed people to drop in, without an appointment, to a safe and supportive environment to obtain the legal advice or referrals they need. Often, it's difficult to discuss sensitive matters over the phone and people can become overwhelmed with their immigration matters, particularly if they have been contacted by an officer from the Department about their visa.

At Auburn, I met Hussein who came to RACS for the first time. Our legal student volunteer completed a brief intake form outlining his visa situation. When he was a teenager, his family helped him to escape the Taliban. He fled Afghanistan alone and arrived by boat to seek safety in Australia. Due to his past experiences both in his home country and in Australia, he doesn't find it easy to trust organisations or authorities. It was important for him to meet a lawyer in person.*

He told me he is currently on a Temporary Protection Visa but was unsure when it expired. He suffers from health problems and was very worried about not having a visa and losing access to Medicare. I completed a check to verify when his visa expired to ensure he was not unlawful and at risk of being detained. Thankfully, he had a few months until it expired, giving us adequate time to assist him with a re-application. We lodged a Freedom of Information request, advising him to submit a re-application form before his current visa expires. He was extremely relieved to have this support and could finally stop worrying about missing visa deadlines, misunderstanding processes, and the possibility of losing access to Medicare.

*Names of our clients have been changed for their protection.

AFGHANISTAN CRISIS RESPONSE CLINIC: SUPPORTING THOSE IN AFGHANISTAN

RACS' primary work is to support refugees and people seeking asylum who are in Australia seeking protection. Supporting people outside of Australia is not traditionally within RACS' remit, with the exception of Family Stream and Split Family visa opportunities. However, this is a critical emerging need as a result of the crisis in Afghanistan, which allows us to assist people to access Australia's Offshore Humanitarian Program.

Since August 2021, RACS has provided legal assistance for hundreds of people seeking to propose their families, colleagues and loved ones for Humanitarian visas.

We also stepped in as a sector leader to support those from the Afghanistan community in public advocacy, as well as collaborating with other community organisations calling on the Australian Government to bring people to safety through our support of the #ActionForAfghanistan campaign.



AFGHANISTAN CRISIS RESPONSE CLINIC: SUPPORTING THOSE AFFECTED IN AUSTRALIA

Legal Support for recent evacuees

Australia has evacuated more than 5,000 people from Afghanistan since the withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021, many of whom needed assistance to navigate a visa process to have their case assessed. Approximately 30% of evacuees are in NSW and RACS has been assisting people with their visa status and their ability to have their families join them here in safety.

Legal Support for people in Australia

People whose applications were refused but it is unsafe for them to return

Between 2017 and the end of July 2021, more than 300 people in Australia from Afghanistan had been refused protection, many refusals were based on a previous assessment that Afghanistan was considered safe for them to return to.

The fall of Kabul demonstrates that there is no safety to be found anywhere in Afghanistan. This group is among the least supported in Australia and currently most are at risk due to a lack of status in Australia. RACS continues to assist people to request that the Minister for Immigration use their power to allow them to make new applications for protection visas in light of the changed circumstances, as well as continuing to support those still engaged in the protection process.



OUR AMBASSADORS: ZAKI HAIDARI



I was born in Afghanistan, and I belong to the Hazara ethnic group. We, the Hazara, have been persecuted for centuries because of our race, our religion, our appearance, and our beliefs.

I was very young when I was targeted by the Taliban to be killed, and I had to leave Afghanistan in search of safety in 2012.

When I came to Australia, I was only 17 years old. I couldn't communicate very well due to my limited English language skills. And I felt quite fortunate when I came across RACS. They helped me understand refugee laws and explained how to go about seeking asylum and protection in Australia. They helped me apply for a temporary protection visa that allows me to work, study, and live in Australia.

Since my arrival, I feel lucky enough to have learnt English, gained a Diploma in Computing and a Diploma in Graphic Design, and have been able to work for some incredible organisations, championing human rights.

Even though I was recognised as an Australian Human Rights Commission Human Rights Hero in 2020 and NSW International Student of the Year in 2015, I can't forget that I am living and working in Australia on a temporary protection visa. That's 10 years of living with a dark cloud of uncertainty hanging over my head.

There are thousands of people, including two of my fellow RACS ambassadors, facing the same fate as me – an uncertain future.

But I can see the silver lining to that cloud, and that is being able to use my voice to effect change. It's really important to me that I advocate for refugee rights and be a voice for forcibly displaced people all around the world, and especially my homeland of Afghanistan.

When the Taliban took control of Kabul in 2021, I was absolutely devastated for the people of Afghanistan. They have endured so much in the past 12 months – from bombings to earthquakes to senseless death and destruction.

Despite their resilience, people of Afghanistan are suffering even today. It's been over a year since girls were able to go to school. There is widespread poverty, with lack of food and scarcity of resources

that is causing even more conflict. An ongoing drought is creating a shortage of agricultural land, giving rise to the number of people who are driven out of their homes and forcibly displaced.

During these crises, many Afghan people in Australia are trying to bring eligible family over to Australia, away from danger. The RACS' Afghanistan Crisis Response Clinic has been instrumental in people living in Australia from Afghanistan, who are desperate to help their family members that remain trapped there, as well as those recently evacuated and those that remain left behind.

RACS was honoured in 2022 with the NSW Humanitarian Award for Best Project as a result of this work, which continues to this day, because the need is still there. We are also calling for 20,000 extra places for people most at risk from the Taliban. The Australian government has a moral duty to the people of Afghanistan. It's difficult to believe that what was built in the past 20 years fell apart so quickly.

Currently, I work as a Refugee Rights Campaigner at Amnesty International. My mission is to advocate for people just like me who continue to experience rights abuses simply because they are seeking safety on Australian shores.

As part of my work, I am grateful to encounter compassionate Australians who genuinely care about people who had no choice but to leave everything behind or risk losing their very lives.

- Zaki Haidari,

Amnesty International Australia Refugee Rights Campaigner and RACS Ambassador



OUR AMBASSADORS: HANI ABDILE



Photo credit: Aedan O'Donnell

I was forced to flee my beloved home country of Somalia to escape civil unrest in 2014. I was just 16 years old. I spent eight long and treacherous days at sea, and as I was all by myself, I qualified as an 'unaccompanied minor'.

Even though I spent a lot of time during those eight days wondering whether I'd make it, I couldn't let despair drag me down. I just had to keep reminding myself that if I made it, my life could change. And I just had to believe that we would reach safety.

But then, when I reached Christmas Island, I was detained for 11 months. That was tough.

During that time, to distract myself and keep my spirits high, I poured my energy into uplifting other unaccompanied children in detention with me. I also focused on my poetry and writing to calm my emotions and keep my aspirations alive. I even wrote to the Prime Minister of Australia every single day, pleading my case.

Then, I met Sarah Dale, and she and the team at RACS helped me apply for a temporary protection visa. Sarah became like a big sister to me and a mentor.

Even though my future is still uncertain due to the temporary nature of my visa, I remain optimistic that Australia's justice system will treat me fairly.

I am also grateful for the support so many Australian people have shown me over the years. Because every few years, the traumas that I endured catch up with me, but life is full of hope and beauty.

Looking back over the years, I am also proud of how far I've come and everything I've achieved. I am a published poet and a writer. I work part-time to support myself, and I have almost completed my Bachelor of Communications from the University of Technology Sydney. It may not sound humble, but I have to own my achievements as a mentor to youths in refugee communities all around Australia.

I have unintentionally become a bit of a media personality, having made appearances on the ABC's Q+A, The Drum and Radio National Breakfast. I have also featured in several festivals and events to help raise awareness about the issues facing people

seeking asylum. I didn't seek to be a leader in my community, but my wish is that my story and journey will give solace to other young people facing a similar situation. To anyone who is facing hardships, my hope is that you will rise above it. With that, I'd like to share one of my poems with you that I wrote as a tribute to Maya Angelou, originally published in my book, *I Will Rise*.

***You may lock me in detention and damage
my hope
but it's like dust,
and one day, one day I will rise
You may avoid my sadness and send me
to Manu,
but one day, one day I will rise
You may hide the reality and break my heart,
but one day, one day I will rise
Why can't you help me?
Why can't you help me?
I may be a female who needs assistance
from you,
You may send me to other countries, shoot
me with your words
but one day, one day I will rise
You may punish me, punish me by saying lies,
but one day, one day I will rise
You may kill me with your hateful actions but
it's like air,
but one day, one day I will rise
You may never care about my awful past and
enjoy my tears,
but one day, one day I will rise
I may have left, I may have bad memories,
rooted in pain,
but one day, one day I will rise
I may have left a fearful life full of horror,
but one day, one day I will rise
Does my mind upset you, so full of thoughts?
I am an asylum seeker, who seeks freedom,
and doesn't have anywhere else to go,
Does it come as a surprise to you that no
matter what you have done to me, I will
forgive you?
Wherever you send me, as long as I see the
sun rise and the moon come up,
I will rise
I will rise
I will rise***

- Hani Abdile,

*Poet, Artist, Journalism Student and RACS
Ambassador*

OUR AMBASSADORS: MOHAMMAD SAKHVIDI



Photo credit: Charlotte Curd

I have been in Australia since 2013. Originally from Iran, I had to flee the country on my own at the age of 16 when it became unsafe for me to remain there any longer.

Having arrived in Australia by boat, I am no stranger to fearmongering stories circulating in the media and the politicisation and dehumanisation of thousands of people like me who had no choice but to embark on difficult journeys in search of safety.

However, during my time in Australia, I have been fortunate to meet many empathetic people who see through false and misleading news stories and understand that nobody leaves their entire lives behind to make a precarious journey to another country, if they had a choice. Nobody would leave the comfort of their home and put their life at risk if they had a choice.

I always ask people this question: **Would you leave your family, country, friends, and relatives, and risk your life to jump on a small fishing boat to go to a different country, if you could avoid it?**

Their response is always the same, a firm 'no'.

Then I instantly ask the following: **What is so different about us refugees that you think we'd jump at the chance of risking our lives and leaving our loved ones behind, if we could avoid it?**

Nobody chooses to be a refugee. A refugee is someone who has had their choice taken away from them.

Since arriving in Australia, I am grateful for all the opportunities that have come my way. But they have not been without challenges. Like everyone else, we need to work hard and earn these opportunities.

I have had to work hard to rebuild my life and forge a path for myself. I have been very fortunate to have graduated with a Bachelor of Civil Engineering from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) as their first humanitarian scholarship recipient.

I am currently working on a number of large projects for Transport for NSW as well as my own social enterprise, TQN Personnel, which enables refugees to gain employment opportunities in the construction industry. TQN is currently contracted

with some of the major tier-1 construction businesses and operates in NSW and Victoria. What we do at TQN is simple, we show refugees the sky is the limit, and they can reach their full potential despite going through a very unjust and challenging journey.

I am also an advocate of refugees and of the firm believer of 'paying it forward' by giving back to the community. As such, I am committed to my role as Equity Ambassador at UTS that involves mentoring other humanitarian scholarship recipients, as well as my volunteer role as an ambassador for RACS, where I use my voice to draw attention to issues affecting refugees.

I wish to be a role model to all the young people out there who are in a similar situation to me, whether they came to Australia as unaccompanied minors or stateless children, and whether they have come by boat or plane – I want them to know that they are not alone. People like me and those who support organisations like RACS care about them, their safety and their well-being.

And now, with the Australian people electing a new Government, we are advocating for a change in legislation to create fairer and more just policies for refugees – something that RACS has been championing for a long time.

I am still on a temporary protection visa that I obtained with legal assistance from RACS. This means that while I have built a life for myself in Australia, I still live with uncertainty. But election promises must be kept, and together with the refugee sector, RACS is applying pressure on the Department of Home Affairs to make safety and certainty for people seeking asylum a priority.

I would like to conclude with a quote from, a 13th century Persian poet:

*“Human beings are members of a whole
In creation of one essence and soul
If one member is afflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain
If you have no sympathy for human pain
The name of human you cannot retain”*

~ Saadi

- **Mohammad Sakhvidi,**

Civil Engineer, Entrepreneur, Mentee, Mentor and RACS Ambassador

OUR AMBASSADORS: DOROTHY HODDINOTT



Like most Australians, I have not had personal experience of being a refugee, although many Australians are the descendants of displaced people. More than three quarters of a million people have entered Australia as refugees over the last seventy years.

My experience has been as a teacher, working with children who have lost almost everything on their journey to life in Australia except their hope for the future. My task as a teacher was to help them establish a new life in their new country, to restore trust and optimism, and through education, give them the means to participate fully in the Australian community.

I heard things from those children that none of us would ever want children to have known or experienced, and stories of great courage and resilience and determination and the stoic endurance of suffering. Some of those young people have become my friends and I have followed their lives with great interest, their successes confirmation of the transformative power of education.

As principal of Holroyd High School, in Sydney's Western suburbs, a school where almost sixty percent of all students were of refugee background, I became an advocate for my students and their families. The most vulnerable were those seeking asylum and the most vulnerable within that group were the unattached minors, children who had lost their families and were alone in the world. The school became their family.

I became an Ambassador for the Refugee Advice and Casework Service after I retired from teaching in 2018.

It is a great privilege to be a RACS Ambassador but what does that mean? I am not a lawyer, after all. My role is not to provide legal assistance to people seeking asylum, that is the role of the legal experts who give their time so generously to RACS. My role is to help the community, particularly the education community, engage with the issues facing refugees, to help drive change in community attitudes to refugees through open and frank discussion of those issues, discussion that will hopefully lead to better policies regarding refugees, consistent with Australia's international human rights obligations.

RACS does such essential work, such as supporting stateless children and women at risk, and helping reunite families, and helping refugees who have been lost for years in the limbo of offshore processing.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continued to devastate people's lives and livelihoods. Many people from refugee communities who lost their employment were not eligible for any financial support from Centrelink. A rapid response to ease their financial strain was needed, and RACS rose to the significant legal challenges that people faced, including:

Advocating for expedited visa processing to secure essential rights.

Providing dedicated assistance for Temporary Protection Visa and Safe Haven Enterprise Visa holders trapped overseas.

Lobbying government on a range of critical issues including access to health services, financial support, and release from immigration detention.

Outside of this work and addressing crises such as the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, RACS' day-to-day work has continued with support from generous pro bono partners, volunteers, staff and donors.

RACS has provided thousands of people with legal assistance. This includes, but is not limited to, running clinics to help people apply for renewal of their temporary protection visas so they can remain in safety, running community legal education sessions for different communities to provide essential information on what restrictions apply to their visas in terms of working, studying, and travelling, and supporting people from a range of diverse backgrounds through our program work.

All this on the proverbial shoestring, so another part of my role is appealing for donations to help RACS in its work. Helping RACS help refugees is one way we can all contribute to a fair and just and better Australia.

Dorothy Hoddinott AO,

Australian Human Rights Medallist 2014 and RACS Ambassador



PRO BONO SUPPORT

RACS is honoured and humbled by the trust that so many generous law firms put in us to do this important work, and in turn provide us with thousands of hours of pro bono support. We are grateful for their continued commitment to supporting people seeking asylum.

Thank you to pro bono lawyers from the following law firms:

- Allen & Overy
- Allens
- Baker McKenzie
- Barry Nilsson
- Dentons
- DLA Piper
- Gilbert + Tobin
- Hall & Wilcox
- Herbert Smith Freehills
- Hicksons
- King & Wood Mallesons
- Lander & Rogers
- McGrathNicol
- Norton Rose Fulbright
- NSW Bar Association
- Slater & Gordon
- Wotton & Kearney

Before commencing work, pro bono lawyers receive dedicated training from the RACS legal team covering the complexities of immigration law and how to provide professional support to vulnerable, and often traumatised, people in what can be a confronting space to work. Once pro bono lawyers have completed training, RACS continues to supervise them, ensuring comprehensive support for people seeking asylum.

RACS is also extremely grateful to the following secondees and their law firms who generously provided placements of varying lengths from one day a week for three months to five days a week for six months.

In addition to being hugely beneficial to RACS, having a secondee placement at RACS enables solicitors or graduates in the early years of their careers to provide essential support to people seeking asylum whilst also growing their skills and confidence, and gain on-the-ground experience working for a community legal centre.

Thank you to our secondees:

- India Bennett, Norton Rose Fulbright
- Erick Culala, Barry Nilsson
- Albert Gillies, Gilbert + Tobin
- Ed Lyons, Lander & Rogers
- Renee Magee, Wotton & Kearney
- Rohan Simpson, Allens
- Kristin Stanton, Gilbert + Tobin
- Madeline Verge, Gilbert + Tobin
- Michelle Wang, DLA Piper



wotton
kearney+

“Wotton + Kearney is immensely proud of its longstanding pro bono partnership with RACS. It has been such a privilege to work alongside RACS to help refugees and people seeking asylum apply for protection visas, provide representation in judicial review claims and assist those seeking much needed family reunion. Our pro bono work and secondment opportunities with RACS have provided our staff with invaluable and rewarding opportunities to develop new skills and expertise, become advocates for change and to contribute to our community in an impactful way.

The passion and dedication of RACS’ staff to their clients is truly inspirational, their expertise invaluable and their training and support excellent. We look forward to continuing to support the work RACS does to make a meaningful difference to the lives of individuals and families who have sought refuge in our country.”

- Angela Tan, Pro Bono Special Counsel, Wotton + Kearney



NORTON ROSE
FULBRIGHT

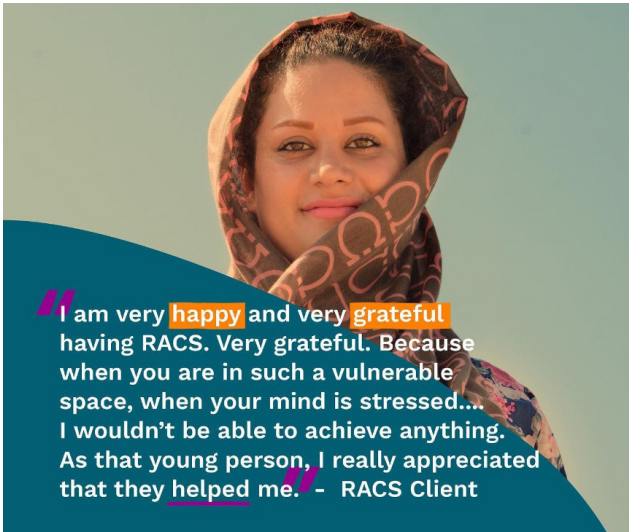
India Bennett was seconded to RACS from her firm, Norton Rose Fulbright, for 6 months full-time. India chose RACS because of her interest in refugee law and policy. Having studied refugee and human rights law at university, India did her thesis on Australia’s framework for the guardianship of unaccompanied children seeking asylum, which has been published in the Journal of Refugee Studies.

“I had done some pro bono work with RACS and I was really keen to come to RACS full-time to get a better understanding and working knowledge of refugee and migration law, and the work that RACS does.

My experience so far has very much exceeded my expectations. The work that the RACS staff do is remarkable, both in quality and quantity. The impact that RACS’ assistance and support has on clients who are often in extremely vulnerable and precarious situations cannot be underestimated, even where the outcome ultimately isn’t favourable.”

- India Bennett, Solicitor, Norton Rose Fulbright

VOLUNTEERING AND EDUCATION



Approximately 15 legal student volunteers supported RACS each day, and 51 Practical Legal Trainees from 14 universities supported RACS this year. That amounts to over 13,200 hours of critical front-line support, which helped us reach as many people as possible.

In return, RACS ensured that the next generation of legal practitioners had the opportunity to build their skills and experience, gain invaluable insight into working in a professional legal practice and better understand careers in social justice and human rights.

We are incredibly grateful to each and every one of these volunteers and the following universities, which support these vital placements: Australian Catholic University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, Monash University, University of Montreal, University of Newcastle, University of New England, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, Western Sydney University, and University of Wollongong.

RACS is extremely grateful to our Major Supporter, the University of New South Wales, who have provided free office space to RACS for over half a

decade, and whose students complete placements in RACS' Legal Student Volunteering Program.

We also appreciate the numerous law societies who have chosen to support RACS with fundraising and awareness-raising events.

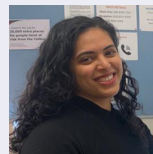
"UNSW Law & Justice is so proud to support RACS and its valuable work in assisting those who so desperately depend on it for critical advice and advocacy."

– Professor Andrew Lynch Dean, Faculty of Law & Justice UNSW Sydney



"I initially joined RACS to gain legal work experience and stayed for the wonderful culture and supportive mentors. I would highly recommend that you come and volunteer at RACS. It will be a refreshing change away from your structured university studies, and a unique opportunity to learn about refugee and asylum policies from some of the most highly skilled and passionate lawyers. Not only will you get personal fulfilment, but you'll also gain practical work experience, and meet wonderful people."

– Ren, RACS student volunteer



OUR PEOPLE

The team at RACS are dedicated and committed individuals, who work tirelessly to advocate for people seeking asylum and refugees. RACS' role is to support people through their migration process as they navigate the complex and stressful process of seeking protection in Australia, and have their families join them in safety.

RACS MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Chris Yoo, President
Daniel Ghezlbash, Vice President
David Wiggins, Treasurer
Lachlan Murdoch
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Susan Cowden
Tim Gonski

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The Honorable Michael Kirby AC CMG
Professor Edward Santow
Alice Spigelman AM

RACS AMBASSADORS

Hani Abdile
Zaki Haidari
Dorothy Hoddinott AO
Mohammad Sakhvidi

LEADERSHIP TEAM

Sarah Dale, Centre Director & Principal Solicitor
Arif Hussein, Acting Supervising Senior Solicitor
Ben Lumsdaine, Senior Supervising Solicitor
Alison Ryan, Senior Supervising Solicitor
Kerrith Sowden, Finance & General Operations Manager
Shauna Wolifson, Fundraising Manager

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Sharara Attai, Senior Solicitor
Shaun Butta, Submissions Coordinator
Vicky Chen, Solicitor
Danielle Cooper, Senior Solicitor
Dominic Dietrich, Solicitor
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Hannah Gray, Senior Solicitor
Amanda Hall, Clinic Coordinator
Genevieve Howe, Solicitor
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Jasmine Joyan, Paralegal
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Mursal Rahimi, Paralegal
Nabilah Reza, Senior Solicitor
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Emily Taylor, Solicitor
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THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS AND PARTNERS

Our dedicated partners and donors supported our work and made it possible for us to reach people seeking asylum who critically needed legal assistance in their search for safety.

Major Supporter

The University of New South Wales

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Our special friends

Abbas Nazari - Author
Amir Kamrani - Filmmaker
Andrew Taylor - Filmmaker
Ben Doherty - Journalist
David Marr - Journalist
Jan Fran - Journalist
Rashida Yosufzai - Journalist

Donors and Volunteers

Thank you for supporting the work we do. There are far too many of you to name, but please know that we are incredibly grateful for your support. Whether you donate your time and skills or funds, you are making a huge difference and will always be a cherished part of the RACS family.

Pro bono Barristers

Matthew Albert
Conor Bannan
Elizabeth Esber
Philip Boncardo
Julian Brezniak
Natalie Campbell
Jason Donnelly
Anna Garsia
Julian Gormley
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Kathleen Heath
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Nick Poynder
Greg Schipp
Lauren Sims
Kon Stellios
Rhea Thrift
Stephen Tully
Andrew White
Naomi Wootton

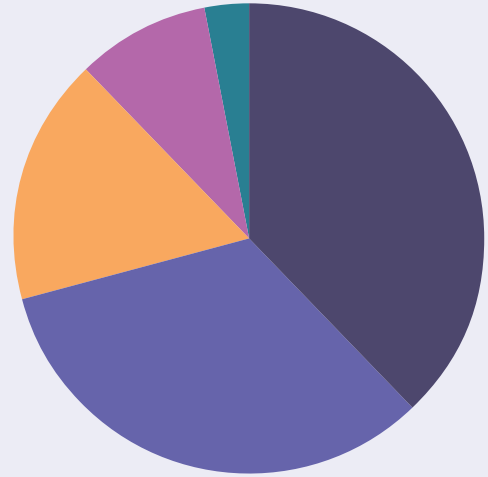
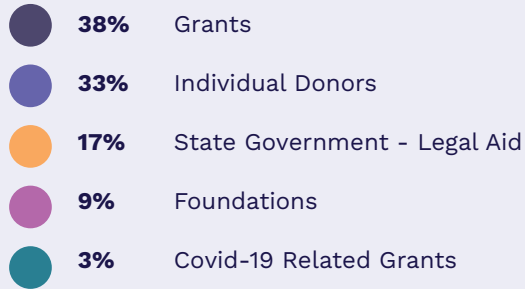
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Unico Community Fund, subfund of ACF
Vikings Sports Club
Wenty Leagues
West's Ashfield Leagues

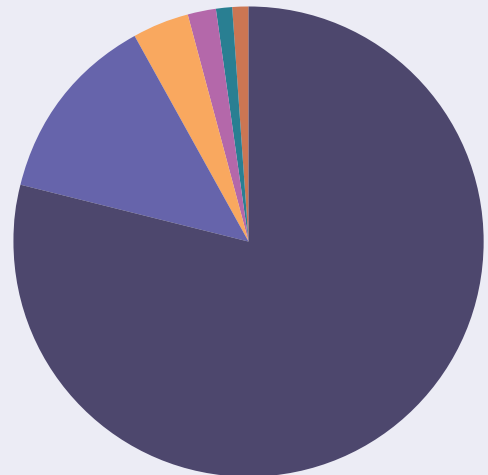
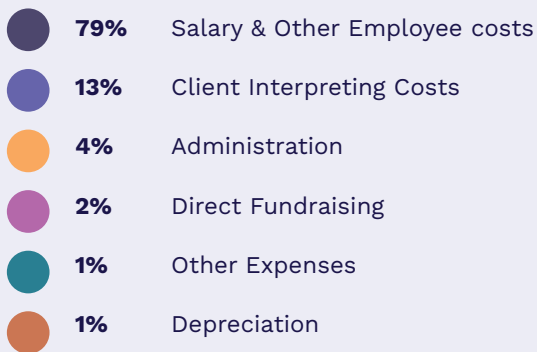


HOW RACS FUNDS THE WORK WE DO

WHERE THE FUNDS COME FROM



WHERE THE FUNDS ARE ALLOCATED



For our complete financial statement for the year ending 30 June 2021, please visit www.racs.org.au or visit www.ACNC.gov.au

RACS

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