

How Canberrans and ACT organisations help refugees | Refugee Week 2023

By [Steve Evans](#), Canberra Times

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Kwadwo Owusu from Vinnies, Kathy Ragless of Companion House, and Doug Hynd from Canberra Refugee Support. Picture by Keegan Carroll

There are a host of quiet people out there who step forward to help some of the most helpless people in our land - and this is the week they should be saluted.

It is Refugee Week, a week when its organisers say the aim is "to raise awareness of the issues affecting refugees".

Canberra has a particular stake in the issue because of the number of embassies, according to Kathy Ragless, the director of Companion House whose remit is to "work with adults and children who have sought safety in Australia from persecution, torture and war-related trauma".

When regimes turn from bad to worse, people from the embassies often decide not to return home. They, therefore, find themselves adrift in a strange land.

Ten years ago, people sought asylum in Australia from Zimbabwe, Kathy Ragless said.

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) followed. Afghanistan has increased the supply of the fearful. So has the war in Somalia. And, of course, Ukraine.

The reasons for staying are multiple - gay people risk death in Iran, for example. There was a rush of asylum applications, according to Ms Ragless, after the same-sex marriage law was passed in 2017.

Students from repressive regimes like China have tasted freedom of speech in universities here. They may have shown dissent which is noted back home so they fear for their safety if they return.

Women who have fled from Saudi Arabia and its utterly repressive regime have been helped.

Companion House works with two other organisations to help refugees and asylum seekers in Canberra. They are Vinnies and Canberra Refugee Support.

Canberra Refugee Support was set up to provide good neighbourliness to asylum seekers - to help find rented accommodation, for example, pay bills where necessary, organise transport - do all those things a good neighbour would do.

The three organisations came together because they realised the task would overwhelm each of them individually. They spend around \$360,000 a year, half from donations from the public and the other half from the ACT government.

They reckon 350 volunteers help 2000 people a year. There are currently 40 families on their books.

Sometimes volunteers give time and effort and sometimes volunteers give cars!

"This community has been incredibly generous in lots of ways," Doug Hynd, the president of Canberra Refugee Support said. "We've got people who've got cars they want to donate."

The University of Canberra waives international fees for asylum seekers, charging the same, lower fee as for Australian students. Companion House sometimes picks up the bill of around \$40,000 per student.

Schools in Canberra, like Marist College, offer bursaries to refugees. Vinnies runs a special program for children, according to Kwadwo Owusu who coordinates its programs in Canberra. It helps kids integrate, including by learning English.

Vinnies also provides emergency relief to cover food, accommodation, transport, medical and utility costs, as well as a lot of information so people can find their way through the maze of bureaucracy.

The aim of the three groups is to help people keep their heads above water until they can make their own way.

When money is given to families, the amounts are small, according to Kathy Ragless, far less than the level of Centrelink benefits. "We are just making sure that people aren't on the street," she said.

Putting people on their feet can take years. She said that some of the people who arrived by boat are still awaiting permission to stay, after 10 years.

The delay presents continuing problems: "Because of the length of the asylum-seeker journey, their health suffered. Long-term uncertainty messed with people's mental health," she said.

Others adapt quickly. Kathy Ragless said that the people who fled Afghanistan often adapted quickly and got jobs.

The people who run the three groups praised the community spirit in Canberra. They also praised the ACT government for its willingness to help. Nobody was expecting the demand for their services to fall. War and tyranny will not be abolished.