



2019 ANNUAL REPORT

Since its inception in 2001 RAR has developed into a network that is recognized and respected in rural communities for

- commitment to supporting people seeking our protection,
- determination in pursuing justice
- advocacy for human rights.

At the 2018 National Conference five important priorities were identified.

- Advocacy for a humane policy on people seeking refuge and asylum
- Public awareness and education about refugee related issues
- Local support for refugees and people seeking asylum in our community
- Resettlement and sponsorship
- The Wodonga Statement advocating for a Charter of Human Rights.

People Seeking Refuge and Asylum

The policy on People Seeking Refuge and Asylum along with the RAR ten point plan promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 as a guiding principle in framing refugee policy in addition to the UN Refugee Convention 1951. These statements have provided guidance for meetings with government and opposition members of parliament and for the priorities of the national RAR Campaign Committee.

Joy Connor chairperson of the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group and the RAR president met with Liberal, Labor, Greens and Independent members of parliament to explain the RAR position. The following points were emphasised; the closure of Manus and Nauru, all children and their families to be released from both onshore and offshore detention, the restoration of Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), that people seeking our protection never be deported to danger.

Examples of the unacceptable conditions imposed on visitors to onshore detention facilities and the lack of dignity and cruelty imposed on detainees were also raised. We were frustrated by the lack of support from government members for the men on Manus. More favourable responses were received when it was advocated that people being resettled in Australia have the opportunity to access appropriate housing, appropriately paid employment and community support.

RAR was invited to parliament for the presentation by Andrew Wilke MP of the Refugee Protection Bill. This Bill provided for a sustainable, equitable and humane response to the protection and processing of asylum seekers and refugees in the Asia Pacific Region.

Human Rights

Participants at the conference agreed in the urgent need for an Australian Charter of Human Rights which recognises that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights and committed to work together as one until this is achieved.

One of the most important issues for RAR membership is the recognition of the rights of refugees and children born in Australia of refugee parents RAR president and Marie Bonne from Bendigo met with members of government and their advisors to advocate for a Charter. We recognise this will be difficult to achieve in the current political climate therefore careful planning is essential.

RAR has participated in regular meetings with advocates from the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) and representatives from every State and are currently participating in strategic planning aimed at developing public awareness and support.

Successful and well attended public forums organised by RAR branches in partnership with HRLC in Wangaratta (Vic) and Redlands (Qld) were held this year and more are planned in Shepparton and Bendigo in Victoria and the Southern Highlands and Armidale in NSW.

RAR and the HRLC also plan human rights workshops via teleconference with RAR branches over the next 12 months.

RAR Membership

RAR has currently 90 branches across Australia some branches are large with in excess of 400 members and very large Facebook/email membership while others are small with 10 to 12 members.

Regardless of size all groups actively support refugees with material and financial support. Hamilton and RAR Mid North Coast RAR hold English speaking coffee mornings, Armidale collects and repairs bikes for young refugees. Driving lessons and events including lunches, films with a refugee focus, vigils outside politicians' offices, and on main highways, letter writing and stalls at farmers markets are popular.

Bendigo RAR introduced Business and Employee Recognition Awards with a presentation ceremony and dinner during Refugee Week. This is an excellent model for larger groups.

Refugee Week was widely supported with the screening of *The Staging Post* receiving full houses throughout rural and regional Australia. In Griffith, Bowral and the Blue Mountains over 500 school students attended the film in each centre. Photo exhibitions, book and poetry reading, art shows, an exhibition of portraits in Kerang, *a cuppa for compassion* in Hamilton and Dunkeld, Noosa a film festival, Cairns a welcome to the *Sail 4 Justice Freedom Flotilla* going to Manus and in Alice Spring the *Safe Harbor Project* where members of the community made small wooden boats to sail on an 'artificial' sea in the community centre. The Port Macquarie region hosted a picnic for Tamils.

Both Mansfield and Bellingen have active Youth for Refugees groups. Both groups have musicians who perform in concerts in aid of refugees.

The activity in branches fluctuates from year to year depending on the motivation of the membership and local leadership. Approximately half a dozen of our branches are finding difficulty continuing due to the long term struggle for success in bringing the support to refugees in detention, the criticism of conservative communities and the intransigence of the government in listening to requests.

These groups need support and inspiration from neighboring groups and national RAR leadership. Ideally each state or territory should have at least two groups responsible for membership support and recruitment.

New groups which have been established during the last twelve months are Warragul/Drouin, Youth for Refugees Mansfield, in Victoria; Corowa, Griffith, Shoalhaven, Social Justice Advocates of the Sapphire Coast, Hawkesbury in New South Wales; Southern Downs Refugee and Migrant Network Inc in Warwick, Redlands for Refugees, Noosa Welcomes Refugees and the Sunshine Refugee Action Network in Queensland.

RAR has a number of supporters such as other refugee support groups and individual members who are interested in starting groups. RAR has been requested to accept affiliate organisations who do not have voting rights. Our rules accommodate associate members who are linked to RAR but without voting rights. Consideration should be given to defining 'associate' member to enable these supporters to have status in RAR.

RAR Finance

The current financial year to date has seen RAR's revenue marginally exceed our expenditure. During the year RAR National continued to arrange a public liability insurance scheme for RAR and affiliated groups. Also, several Governance issues have been addressed. The emerging financial issues for RAR relate to considering the establishment of a Training Skills Fund for refugee and asylum seekers and whether RAR should pursue Deductible Gift Status which has been requested by several branches.

Campaigning

The National Campaign Group emerged following the 2018 Conference with members volunteering to form committee with the view to organise a rally in Canberra. The group comprises up to three representatives from each State and Territory. Nominations will be called following the AGM and RAR representatives on the committee will communicate with branches in their state/territory to elicit their views.

RAR campaigns are developed in accordance with RAR priorities and the RAR ten point plan.

The National RAR Campaign Group will make recommendation to the RAR National Executive relating to:

- Campaigns organised by other organisations in the refugee sector
- Campaigns devised and recommended by RAR members
- Campaigns designed specifically for RAR
- Campaigns relating to Federal elections.

Currently representatives on the RAR Committee are from Armidale, Southern Highlands, Blue Mountains, Cairns, Redlands, Sunshine Coast, Alice Springs, Whyalla, Cygnet, Bendigo, Mansfield and Denmark in WA.

Barbara Walton from the Southern Highlands has been attending teleconferences hosted by the refugee council of Australia (RCOA) on status

resolution support services (SRSS) and providing reports for the Committee and the Update.

It is invaluable having members volunteer to be involved in these external committees and report back to RAR as it shares the workload and increases information throughout our organisation.

Campaigns have been organised around the Kids Off Nauru Campaign including a Rally in Canberra in October 2018 with members travelling from as far as Ballarat and Aireys Inlet in Victoria, Cairns in Queensland, the Riverland, Blue Mountains, Hunter Valley, Southern Highlands, Bega and Eurobodalla and all places in between. RAR had excellent support from members in Queanbeyan and Canberra refugee support groups.

Medevac Bill.

A letter writing campaign, letters to local papers, media interviews and contact with local members of parliament were features of this intensive campaign. Members of parliament and organisations in the Refugee Sector contacted branches to elicit their support in lobbying members of parliament. The Independent Member for Indi Cathy McGowan requested a meeting with RAR prior to the final vote in the House of Representatives.

The Shadow Minister for Home Affairs Kristina Keneally has kept RAR up to date on the latest moves on the Migration Amendment (Repairing Medical Transfers) Bill 2019 – the legislation to repeal Medevac. This legislation was introduced by Peter Dutton on July 4 in the House of Representatives. The Bill seeks to repeal the Medevac amendments passed in February and to clarify the Minister's powers to remove people back to a regional processing country brought to Australia under the Medevac legislation.

The Bill has been referred to a Senate Inquiry by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislative Committee. The deadline for submissions to the inquiry is 16 August 2019. **The Committee is due to report on Friday 18 October, which means the Senate will not debate the Medevac repeal legislation until the November sitting period.**

This decision ensures that Medevac can continue to operate for the next four months without threat of repeal by the Government.

Sharing Skills and Networking

Aireys Inlet RAR have an active letter writing team who have gained a large membership following. The team draft a letter each month about key issues such as the cost of offshore detention, conditions in onshore detention, children in detention etc. The team researches the issue, provides references and circulates draft letters or points for information to branches who have expressed interest in letter writing. Postcards are also being designed and are available on the website. Postcards are in demand on market stalls. Thank you Cecily Mason and team for your contribution.

The *Open Letter* to the Prime Minister or Immigration Minister from Bellingen Nambucca Heads has been a feature over the last two years. Thank you to Mike Griffin for drafting the letter, collecting and posting them to the appropriate Minister or Leader of the Opposition.

Recently Cairns had concerns regarding the sudden removal to Adelaide of a mother and young child who were in Cairns from Nauru for medical reasons. Within a few days we had discovered through Circle of Friends in Adelaide the location of this person and support was provided by our Adelaide affiliates.

A refugee call for support for a sick child from central New South Wales was answered following contact with two groups closer to Sydney and travel and medical assistance was provided.

Emerging out of these issues has been a National Detention Committee comprising members and affiliates from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. These members visit the detention centres in their capital cities every week and provide valuable support to detainees in these centres in spite of the complex scrutinizing they must endure to visit. They are able to exchange information regarding conditions in these centres and advice regarding the movement of refugees being detained. This information is important for support of detainees particularly those being suddenly moved but support for one another and up to date advice for RAR, and the Sector more broadly.

Website and Social Media

Thank you to Linda McNeil from Castlemaine RAR and Peter Sobey Bellingen/Nambucca who have provided valuable management of the RAR website who have completely revised the site.

The media has discovered the value of the website by using it constantly to enquire the best place to source a story on refugees. Contacts from international

press resulted in a story from Griffith about a café managed by an Afghan refugee. Ballina was sought out for their Homestay program, Grampians/Gariwerd for their camping weekend in the Grampians, Swan Hill, Shepparton, Armidale, Toowoomba, Townsville and Hamilton for resettlement stories. While not all these stories made it through to publication it demonstrates the growing awareness of RAR and our support of refugees.

Thank you to the RAR Facebook team coordinated by Caitlin Rowe for vigilance and daily provision of posts and to the dedicated tweeters and keeping our followers up to date with events and news.

The new national committee could give consideration to additional information on the website regarding contact to RAR committees.

RAR 2020 Conference

The bi-annual RAR Conference will be held at the Springwood Hub, on 3rd – 5th July, 2020, hosted by the Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group. Under the leadership of Kathie Herbert, an enthusiastic group is working on the many aspects of the Conference – the program, accommodation, catering, grants and sponsorship.

Through the Conference, we aim to build skills and knowledge of RAR members around issues affecting refugees and people seeking asylum, resettlement and sponsorship and ways we can be most effective in our work. Connecting with RAR groups and sharing ideas and experiences is a key aspect of the Conference. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth and scope of RAR groups and our impact as a grass-roots organization.

RAR groups have been asked to have input into what they want from the Conference. Please let the organizers know your ideas, to help shape the program.

Program details will be circulated in the new year. Groups are encouraged to consider having some members attend the Conference and be inspired and energized by this event. It's also a great opportunity to spend time in a beautiful part of New South Wales, the Blue Mountains!

Attached to this report are 3 reports.

- **Vice President Margaret Rasa's Report on Resettlement and Sponsorship**
- **Ruth Fluhr's Report on Home Hosting**
- **Jan Govett's Report on the Welcome Scroll**

- **Dawn Davis' Report on the RAR Membership Survey**

Thank you to Margaret, Ruth, Dawn and Jan for these reports and to the members of the RAR National Executive Penny Vine, Secretary, Margaret Rasa Vice President, Phil and Chris Buttner joint Treasurers, Kathie Herbert, Ruth Fluhr and Gerry Gillespie Committee Members for your commitment and work in support of RAR.

To the new Executive team you have the privilege of leading an organization whose members aspire and are totally committed to a society which is just, tolerant and welcoming; where innocent children are not held on isolated islands or where Australian detention centres deprive children of the joys of childhood or adults of fulfilling lives. RAR members want the leaders in this country to be visionary and just and not punish men, women and children for seeking our protection.

The new Executive faces many challenges in the next 12 months the Campaign Team has identified growing out membership, building relationships with faith communities, restoration of the SRSS in addition to safe solutions for onshore and offshore detention.

There are times when we all feel that achieving justice and freedom is beyond us, it is not. We will succeed because what we are seeking is right.

Marie Sellstrom
RAR President
July 27, 2019