

Armidale Sanctuary

President's Report – December 2023

News:

Armidale Sanctuary topped the November poll for a share in \$5000 in the Greater Bank's Community Funding program. That means we receive \$3000 to support our continuing work with Armidale's growing refugee population. Many thanks to all of you who voted (some repeatedly) and especially to our Treasurer, Maurice Anker, for this initiative.

Projects and activities:

Community Sponsorship of Refugees: Good news and bad news

Good news:

Thanks to the hard work of the Armidale Sanctuary Community Supporter Group (CSG), and generous donations of money, furniture, bedding and general household goods from Sanctuary members and the wider Armidale community, the Issa Family arrived in Australia on 23 November. (The photo was taken at Sydney Airport by Pam Watson, who speaks Arabic and travelled down to meet them). They had been refugees from the war in Syria for 12 years, living in Lebanon. They now have the opportunity to begin a new life in our country.



After arrival in Armidale, the family moved into short-term accommodation, a furnished house kindly provided for rent by Settlement Services International. (Plans were in place to find long-term accommodation later.) In preparation for their arrival, members of the Sanctuary CSG had cleaned the house, provided towels and bedding (and made the beds), stocked the house with additional crockery, cutlery and utensils, and bought food and other necessities for a week. They had also found a GP for the family, and set up various appointments with schools and Centrelink.

During their first week or so in Armidale, a "core group" of the Sanctuary CSG showed the Issa family around Armidale and helped family members to start bank accounts, register with Centrelink, attend appointments at Armidale Secondary College and Drummond School, go to the Mosque, do shopping and learn how to use Australian currency. Many Arabic-speaking members of Armidale's Muslim and Ezidi communities visited the family to make them welcome. Under the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement (CRISP) program, the Sanctuary CSG was also responsible for buying a mobile phone and plan for the family, and providing financial support equivalent to two weeks of Centrelink payments.

Bad news:

The family announced soon after arrival that they wanted to move to Shepparton, where their close friends from Syria, who had been with them in Lebanon, had just arrived. This was a hard blow for the Sanctuary CSG, who had worked so hard, and upsetting for the schools and service providers who were so helpful and welcoming. We liaised with Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia, who are administering the CRISP program, to line up support for the family in Shepparton, and paid for train tickets for their travel. They left Armidale on Wednesday 6 December.

Since August 2022, 60 refugee households have arrived in Australia under the CRISP program. This was only the 8th case of a household leaving the primary settlement location in less than 12 months.

Considering this, and the fact that we still have about half of the approximately \$18,500 provided by Sanctuary and donated by the Armidale community, plus all the furniture and other household donated and purchased for the long-term accommodation, the Armidale CSG decided to support another family – but not until the end of February next year. [Donors who do not wish their donations to go to another family can ask for them to be refunded or returned.] Some donors have agreed to keep furniture until then; We are paying for other furniture and household goods already received to be stored in a commercial facility, as no other option was available.

Disappointing as this experience has been, we have to remember that our primary goal included supporting the CRISP program, and enabling a refugee family to start a new life in Australia, when otherwise they would have had no chance to do so. And we are fortunate that we are equipped to enable another family to do the same, but this time, hopefully also settle in Armidale and make a contribution to our community.

Meetings:

Multicultural Framework Review, 11 Nov. I was interviewed by Christine Castley, one of the 3 people appointed by the Federal Government to conduct a review of multiculturalism in Australia and support a cohesive multicultural society. She travelled to Armidale to conduct interviews. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-framework-review>

Joint Regional Forum, Multicultural NSW, 15 Nov. This was an online forum on Mental Health and Well Being, organised by the NSW Community Development Team. There was a presentation by the Transcultural Mental Health Centre: “Keeping well: Supporting the well being of culturally diverse communities”. They have a Transcultural Mental Health Line providing information in various languages and tele-health support: 1800 648 911, Mon–Fri, 9 am–4.30 pm.

Humanitarian Settlement Program Network (HSPN), 30 Nov. Reports from the following:

SSI (Settlement Services International):

- several families arrived in Oct/Nov; 28 individuals are expected in Dec.
- SSI has 16 on-arrival houses; it is getting much easier to find long-term accommodation; there are good relations with real estate agents, as Ezidis are considered good tenants.

STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors):

- 2 vacant positions, still no permanent counsellor (difficult to recruit in regional areas; counsellors visit from Coffs Harbour and Newcastle, and there is tele-consultation.

..CRISP (Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot):

- presentation on the program by a representative of Home Affairs.
- I spoke on Armidale Sanctuary’s experience in the program and made some recommendations for its improvement.

Farhan Almito (SSI) spoke on concerns in the Ezidi community: (1) the Hamas-Israel war, and the fear that airports will be closed preventing refugees from travelling to Australia; (2) the 18th Dec election in Iraq; (3) Ezidis in Iraq and Turkey still feeling unsafe and trying to flee to other countries.

The CEO of STARTTS (visiting from Sydney), Jorge Aroche, reported on “Witness to War”, a free, confidential multilingual telephone hotline for people in Australia affected by overseas conflicts, launched by the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT).

The number is 1800 845 198. More details at <https://www.fasstt.org.au> .

*Heartfelt thanks to all Armidale Sanctuary members for your support and efforts this year.
All best wishes for an enjoyable festive season and a happy new year.*

*Jeff Siegel
President*