

## Chairperson's Report 2019/2020

Asylum seekers are people who, because of fear of persecution in their home countries, have crossed international borders in search of protection. No-one chooses to be an asylum seeker.

**Our vision:** A New Zealand where asylum seekers and convention refugees are welcomed, supported and thriving.

**Our mission:** ASST supports people who come to NZ seeking asylum, and a safe and peaceful life, by providing critical humanitarian services to those in need. ASST advocates for legally compliant and compassionate treatment of our clients and all who seek asylum.

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The year which ended on 30 June 2020 was one in which the capacity, capability and outcomes achieved Asylum Seekers Support Trust grew considerably. Under the very capable leadership of General Manager Tim Maurice and Client Services Manager Freyja Stoker, ASST was able to augment and increase services to our clients in numerous ways.

Some of the highlights are below:

- Increased the available hours of staff to work with clients one on one by a factor of 0.9), with 137.5 hours now available per week for both social work and general support for clients.
- Continued with our community engagement program, and in particular the weekly Tuesday Outings and Friday night meals at the hostel, which allows our clients to come together
- Successfully advocated for 11 asylum seekers who had been housed (without cause) at Mt Eden prison to be allowed to live at our hostel instead
- Increased the housing available to asylum seekers by 10 beds taking on 2 additional rental properties, taking the number of beds we offer to 40, over 6 properties
- Introduced a microfinance, loans scheme to allow our clients to access interest-free loans for critical purchases (a car to get to work, residency applications etc). To date more than \$12,600 has been loaned to 23 clients
- Expanded the services offered by our volunteers to include X
- Enjoyed a visit (and shared a meal) at the hostel from Auckland Mayor Phil Gough to enable to him to meet with our clients and community
- Worked with clients from over 52 countries, help in total more than 288 people

However 2020 also brought many challenges to our organisation and our clients. ASST, like most organisations, was forced to adapt quickly to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The team did a brilliant job of shifting to remote work and remote client engagement and also carried out essential in person contact during 'lockdown' periods. The impact of the coronavirus has however been keenly felt in the following ways:

- WINZ support for our clients became almost non-existent. WINZ online services have not been offered to our clients, which cut them off from support when WINZ offices were closed and call centres ill-equipped to handle customers with more complex support requirements.

The impact of this was numerous clients being denied the financial support and assistance they are legally entitled to leaving many destitute and extremely anxious.

- The social isolation which resulted from lockdown was very challenging for the overall health of many of our clients – many rely on community for social support and had significant fears for the lives of extended family overseas. Numerous clients also lost employment as a result of the economic impacts of the virus
- Donations to ASST dropped considerably in the last quarter of the financial year – this is thought to reflect economic hardship in the community and a sharpened focus on domestic issues
- Lead times to have claims heard and visa requests processed extended out further leaving many clients uncertain about their future and unable to work (and earn an income) while waiting for claims to be considered. This was a result of some MBIE departments being predominantly organised for in person or ‘on site’ service delivery rather than remote solutions.

In addition to the challenges of the pandemic our clients and asylum seekers and convention refugees in the community continue to face systemic disadvantage due to government policies and practices. Most critically:

- Some asylum seekers are detained at Mt Eden prison for long periods often without explanation - this is extremely traumatising and often dangerous for detainees. ASST emphatically calls for an end to any asylum seeker being detained for a period beyond 28 days
- Asylum seekers are denied work rights, the ability to provide for themselves and their families, or access any government support.
- Convention refugees are excluded from any meaningful resettlement support, left with only a phone call and a 2 year wait for residency.

The outlook for ASST and our clients over the next 12 months is mixed. We continued to be buoyed by the resilience, talents and contribution to the community of both our clients and our capable team, however we recognise that due to Covid 19 and the upcoming election, the national focus on humane, compassionate and compliant treatment of asylum seekers has waned considerably. Politicians reflect community sentiment which continues, in many places to reflect ignorance, apathy or a negative perspective on refugee and asylum seeker issues. Without any financial support from the government, ASST relies largely on progressive funders to ensure asylum seekers can access shelter, food and social services. However funders and charitable organisations are under pressure as more people than ever seek social, financial or health-related support from NFP organisations as a result the pandemic has had on their lives and livelihood.

ASST will strive to meet these challenges by:

- Continually focussing on diversifying and bolstering funding sources
- Advocating for the rights and services our clients have been granted by our Government but are routinely difficult for our clients to access
- Advocating for a more fair and inclusive Aotearoa, by engaging the community and increasing our active membership base
- Offering our services to all who seek them and improving those services based on the feedback and experiences of our clients

- Developing and supporting our dedicated team
- Become a leading voice in our sector and work to enhance collaboration between all agencies who operate in this field
- Bringing a wider range of experience, skills and capacity to our Board

The work of ASST is truly a collaborative effort with many people and organisations coming together to create the outcomes achieved.

I would like to thank all of the following people for their contribution to ASST during the year:

- General Manager Tim Maurice and Client Services Manager Freyja Stocker
- Other employees who joined ASST during the year: May Eqbal, Shilear Basharati, Munashe Tapfuya, Ibrahim Ossman, Dharini Kasinathan, Hafsar Tameesuddin,
- Our volunteers: 12
- Our returning Board members: Fiona Taler, Anchali Anandanayagam (Vice Chair), Sana Basharati, Bernard Sama, Steve Wilson, Anthony Jeyearajah
- Board members who retired during the year: Tracy Hickman (former Treasurer) and Laura Fear (former Secretary) who both made an outstanding contribution to the Board over many years Govind Shaw (Treasurer),

In addition, I would like to thank:

- All organisations who provided funding - especially Foundation North and JR McKenzie
- Organisations we partner and collaborate with – in particular Refugees as Survivors, Red Cross, English Language Partners, Auckland Family Reunification Trust, Umma Trust, Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition
- Our clients and especially those involved in the ASST Advisory Group

After several years as the Chair of the ASST Board I am intentionally stepping down from this position to allow others to bring new insights and different leadership qualities to our Executive Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to serve ASST to date and seek to remain on the Board to support the efforts of all people who are working to achieve a New Zealand where asylum seekers and convention refugees are welcomed, supported and thriving.

Rebeca Holdsworth

Chairperson

14 September 2020