

02 October 2023

### **Finally, a glimmer of hope in this 33 years+ long tunnel**

It is difficult for me not to begin this brief overview of ASST's year 2022/2023 by acknowledging that we - as a community of members, supporters, advocates, donors, funders, asylum seekers and convention refugees that make up ASST - are elated by the light we have seen at the end of the 33-year tunnel of challenging advocacy for improvement of conditions of asylum seekers in Aotearoa NZ. A number of positive actions taken by the government from 2019 have led me (and the many others) to this excitement. These include the 2019 Review of the Processes and Proceedings for making Refugee and Protection Determinations (Casey Review One); the 2022 Review of the law and processes for the detention of asylum seekers in NZ (Casey Review Two); and the 2022/2023 constructive review of the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy. These steps taken by the government have been and will continue to be significant in improving the experiences of asylum seekers in NZ. A lot of these changes have occurred due to tremendous pressure from many benevolent Kiwis and from civil society organisations, but ASST has also been at the centre of it all.

Last year in particular, we saw, after a very long time, INZ holding a meeting specifically with asylum seekers and convention refugees to hear their voices and perspectives regarding the review of the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy. Simultaneously, INZ has also been holding ongoing meetings with ASST and other civil society stakeholders as it implements the recommendations from Casey Reviews One and Two. Several of the positive changes INZ has made following the Casey reviews have been positively transformational. These include the review of the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy to include convention refugees, and the provision of one million dollars in funding for the next two years to ASST for staffing and other overheads involved in supporting asylum in NZ. Sue Elliott ONZM, one of our Board members who has advocated for better conditions for asylum seekers and convention refugees in NZ over the last 33 years with little or no movement from successive governments, described these changes, especially the funding, as "a miracle".

Before this moment, the ASST Board and management were in a very delicate situation because of under-resourcing. Lack of financial resources last year meant staff retention was

an unattainable goal, resulting in loss of very good, knowledgeable staff. And this year, when the government announced it would significantly increase the salary of social workers in the public sector, this put us again on edge, because ASST was unable to match the new salary scale for social workers. The Board and Management began exploring whether it could get more funding from ASST's main supporters, Foundation North and J R McKenzie Trust, before the government made the turnaround to fund ASST in its mahi of supporting asylum seekers, at least for the next two years. The direct implication of the government's support is that ASST can now pay its social workers and other staff at market value in the next two years and cover the costs of running an office. It also means our funders will have some support in the funding of ASST during the next two years. The ASST Board and Management will engage and discuss with all of our funders in the next few days to chart our way forward in light of this new development with government funding.

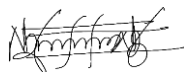
Aside from these changes, ASST has been in a much better position in terms of governance, management, staffing and service delivery, thanks to the dedication and contributions from the following persons who sat on the Board in 2022/2023: Rebecca Kingi, Maithili Sreen, Susan Elliott (ONZM), Imogen Mclvor, Baptist Lobo, Inura Fernando, Patricia Ernestina Brevis, Andrew Barron, Yusrin Salleh, Hannah Ryder (Secretary), Judy Wilford (Vice Chair), and Bernard Sama (Board Chair).

In the course of the year, the Board also hired Dawit Arshak (a former refugee and social worker with a rich history of advocacy and support for refugees and asylum seekers in the community) as the new General Manager, replacing Mustafa Debershi MNZM, who departed the role in early 2023. Dawit has an awesome ability to forge strong relationships, and strong integrity and hard work. We are pleased to welcome him to ASST. Dawit is supported in the role by Christina Webb (Client Services Manager), and both have built a supportive team of staff made up of May, Shilear, Michael, Annie, Vijitha, Feras, and Kidist (a social work student on placement). They are also supported by a passionate team of volunteers: Jen, Nickie, Hannah, Minky, Deigo, Jim, Amar, David, Christina and Colin, Michael and Fiona, and Pam. Thanks to this passionate workforce, ASST has been able to bear the pressures that have come with an increase in numbers of people seeking asylum since the reopening of the border, and from working for an under-resourced organisation.

It is worth noting that support for people seeking asylum in NZ still remains in a delicate balance against an uncertain future in light of the government's funding, which is limited to two years from now, and especially with the uncertainty that looms around the election. The current funding by the government also does not cover other critical areas, for instance, accommodation for asylum seekers generally, and community accommodation alternatives for asylum seekers needing restriction of movement. We are also still on edge with the government's proposed law change concerning the detention of asylum seekers, which seems clearly at odds with the findings and recommendations by Casey Review Two.

In all, we see the steps taken by the government as the first steps in the right direction. ASST will continue to advocate and engage the government in areas in which it is failing to meet its obligations to people seeking asylum in NZ. Our special appreciation goes to our members, supporters, donors, funders, and all involved in this mahi of improving the conditions of asylum seekers in NZ.

Thank you,



Bernard Sama (Board Chair of ASST)