



JRS Australia's 2020
Spring Link
Special COVID-19 edition

 Pictured is Emilio (our Director's son) who was one of the many volunteers who came forward to help pack food when the JRS Refugee Foodbank was adapted to a COVID-19-safe delivery service. More on volunteering in the pandemic on page 5.

Letter from the Director

When I think about the last seven months and JRS' COVID response, a number of words and emotions flurry through my mind. 'Devastating' 'Resilience' and 'Solidarity' among others.

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations can't be underestimated. It has been **devastating**. In a country like Australia that has displayed a positive response to a global COVID crisis, with timely measures in place and a very generous support package for citizens and permanent residents, it is hard to comprehend why a group of people have been left behind. This has

been the situation for people seeking asylum and temporary migrants who were completely excluded from JobKeeper, JobSeeker and any other support packages from the Federal Government.

The people that JRS serves have been left fighting for daily survival, struggling to bring enough food to the table, to buy basic medicine or to pay a small amount of rent to avoid homelessness (or at least to be able to negotiate with their landlord).

For many people, this time has involved moving from autonomy to dependency. It was with pride that we saw the people we worked with gain employment with the aid of our

programs, such as Empowered To Work. In the crisis, many of these people were the first ones to lose their jobs due to being casual workers. They were independent, worked hard and paid taxes. Now, they are struggling and fully relying on charities, like JRS, for survival.

JRS is currently providing food and toiletries to 840 people on a weekly basis. Since the pandemic hit Sydney, we have more than tripled our emergency relief budget and still have a weekly average of 150 people in our intake system waiting to be supported.

In just a few days, we adapted our services and set up new systems to give people essential, often

cont on p2

cont from p1 lifesaving support. At the same time, JRS lost most of our volunteers who were over 70 years old or had pre-existing health conditions. Casework became a virtual over-the-phone service, and we have set up electronic transfers when possible and kept our women space open for appointments for women on temporary visas survivors of SGBV.

A new COVID-19 safe food delivery system was quickly adapted so that food packs now go to people's homes. New volunteers stepped forward and, at the time of writing, we are in our 26th week of delivering food and toiletries and have not missed a single week, despite the fact that it has been hard to keep up the supply to meet demand.

Resilience has been a definite characteristic of the response. The people we serve are resiliently adapting to a complex situation and finding ways to keep going. As an organisation, JRS has resiliently adapted to new systems, recruiting 120 amazing volunteers and being able to upscale our services to respond to the biggest crisis that we have witnessed in years.

Demand for JRS' services has increased by more than 250% and we continue

finding ways to respond to this situation. Nonetheless, and despite this resilience, the response from NGOs like JRS is not enough for the scale of the situation and systemic change is needed.

Advocating for all to be included has been core to our COVID-19 response and JRS is working closely with other Catholic networks and the refugee sector to advocate for the extension of support to all people affected by the pandemic, regardless of immigration status. After all, COVID doesn't discriminate on the grounds of status, so why should we?

Solidarity has also been a characteristic of this COVID period. This is solidarity from parishes, schools, religious congregations, some private companies, partner organizations and amazing everyday people that have been thinking about those left far behind during this crisis. Many solidarity gestures have made our hearts smile such as food drives, volunteers dedicating hours of their time to the service of others, donations of financial resources for those that need it the most, as well as prayers and kind wishes.

Seven months on, our new systems are working well, even if we don't know for how long. This response would not have been possible without the amazing dedication and commitment of every single staff member at JRS, without a fantastic board that has also volunteered during this time, and without our wonderful volunteers (both old and new). It also would not be possible without JRS' broader community - people like you, who have stood with the most marginalised in our community throughout your ongoing support for JRS in a very challenging year.

What is needed now is systemic change. That's why we continue prioritizing our advocacy efforts. It is simply unjustifiable that NGOs (JRS and others) take on the responsibility of the government in the light of a global pandemic. An effective response demands that no one is left behind and that public health concerns and the upholding of basic dignity should also be prioritised.

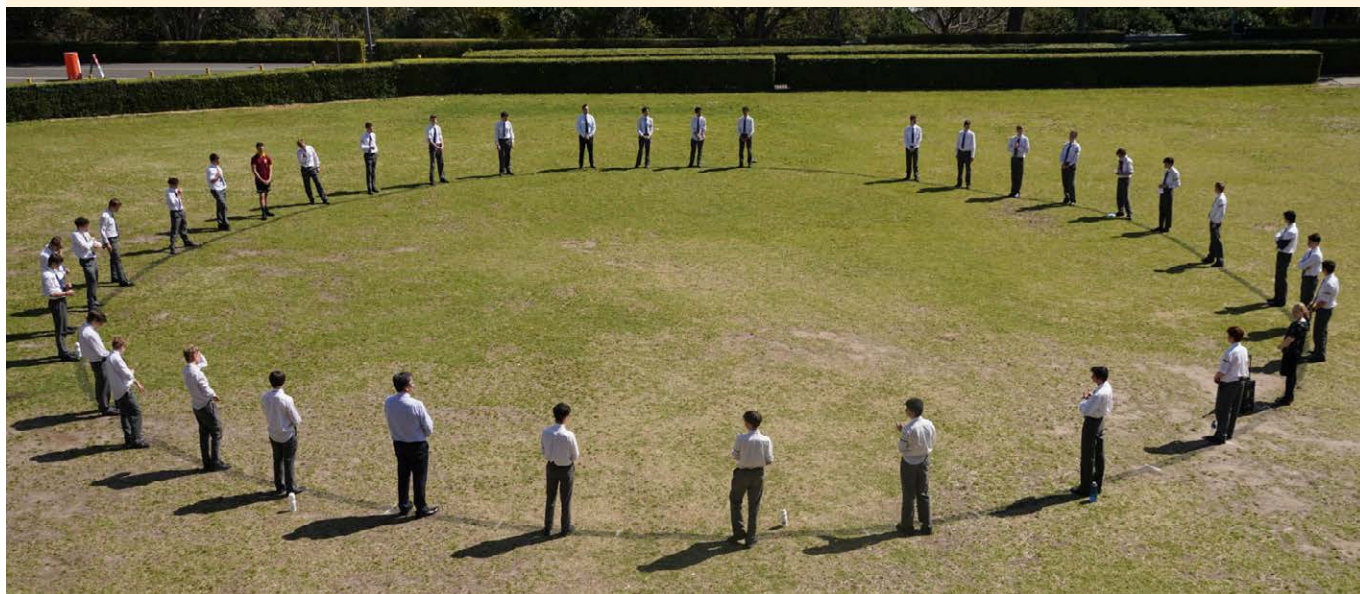
Once again, thank you for walking with those left behind in this crisis.

~ Carolina Gottardo,
JRS Australia Director

 'On our first day of transferring the foodbank to a COVID-19 safe delivery service, Carolina (our Director), drives food to people's homes along with our incredible volunteers.'



Australian Catholics stand with people seeking asylum during COVID-19



📷 'Circles of Silence' in support of the 16,000 children seeking asylum at risk of homelessness and destitution during the pandemic.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect Australia in March 2020, people seeking asylum, refugees, and other migrants in vulnerable situations have been doing it tough. Many individuals and families have experienced job losses, and have no access to ongoing Federal Government support. Most cannot return to their countries of origin. Either they are seeking asylum, and have not had their claims for protection conclusively assessed, often after years of waiting. Others have been caught out in the pandemic, and cannot find or afford flights.

JRS Australia has adapted remarkably to the significant increase in demand for our support. But NGOs, diaspora groups, and communities cannot carry out the Government's role forever.

People on temporary visas, including people seeking asylum, must have access to a temporary safety net, so that they can pay rent, buy life-saving medications, put food on the table, and send their children to school. Ultimately this stability will ensure they are in a good place to start working again.

Fortunately, since March 2020, there has also been a strong and consistent national Catholic voice making this call. Collectively, we want the Government to act with decency and kindness towards people in limbo and dire need of support.

JRS Australia is proud to play a key role in this national Catholic advocacy response.

In April 2020, JRS Australia, the Justice and Peace Office (JPO) of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, and

the Diocese of Parramatta coordinated a public letter addressed to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and relevant Ministers, asking the Federal Government to provide people seeking asylum and other temporary visa holders with a financial safety net during the pandemic.

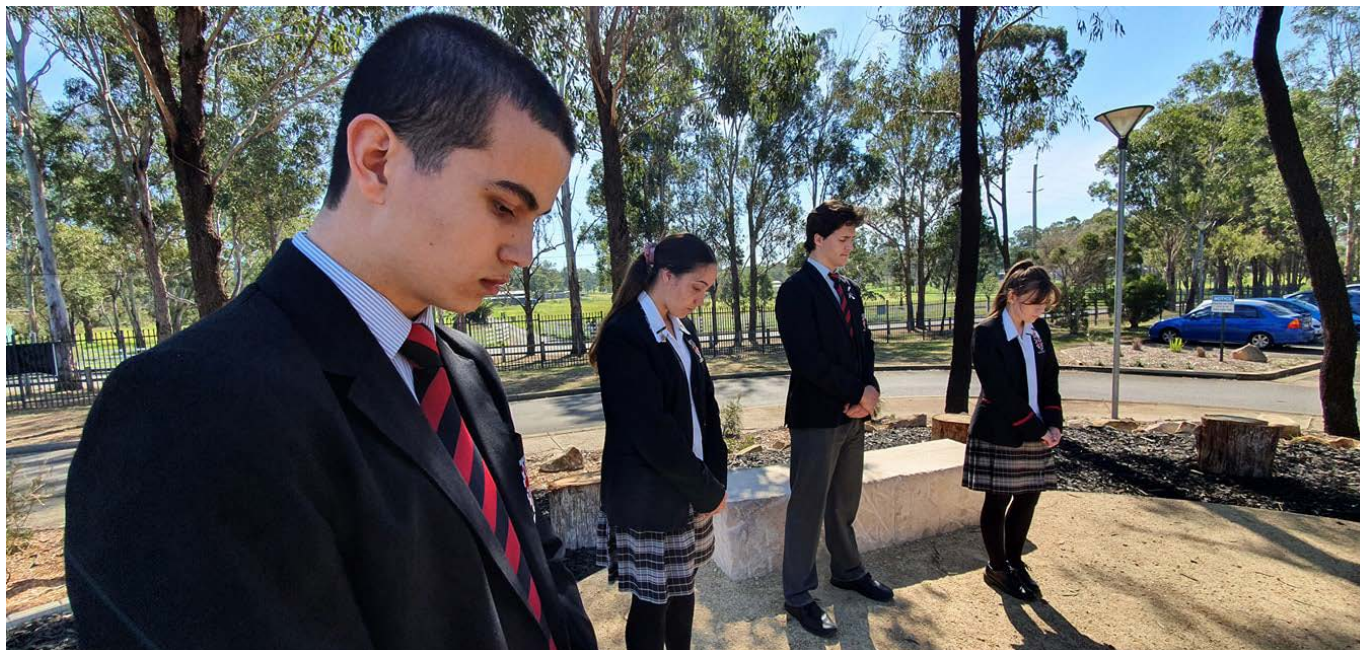
Close to 50 national Catholic leaders, including Australian Catholic Bishops, heads of Religious Orders and CEOs of several major Catholic health and social service providers, signed on to the letter. More than 7,500 people and counting signed on to a public petition calling for the same.

As Fr. Peter Smith, Promoter of Justice and Peace of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, said at the time: "these women and men are members of our communities and congregations: they pray in our pews, work in our restaurants, farms, factories, aged care homes, supermarkets and NGOs, study in our schools and universities, and live in our neighbourhoods. And we have abandoned them to their fate."

In subsequent weeks and months, Catholic leaders continued the push for systemic change behind closed doors. JRS Australia, the JPO, Bishops' offices and partners from around the country met with a range of decision-makers including the Prime Minister's office, various Ministers, backbenchers within the government, Shadow Ministers, and crossbenchers.

Behind the scenes, these efforts have involved speaking to public health professionals to understand the links between the lack of support to temporary migrants, and the spread of COVID-19; gathering data

cont on p3



📷 Schools stand with people seeking asylum in National Week of Solidarity. Pictured is Xavier College.

cont from p3 about the extent and scale of the crisis; and briefing participants in these meetings. JRS' direct work with people seeking asylum has allowed us to directly connect these issues in our meetings with decision makers and to ensure leaders with lived experience are part of the conversation whenever possible.

Church communities – parishes, schools, NGOs, sisters, priests and other religious leaders – have been incredibly active raising the call to action publicly.

Of the more than 45 parishes in the Diocese of Parramatta, the Archdiocese of Sydney, and the Diocese of Broken Bay assisting forced migrants directly, a significant proportion have written letters, made phone calls, or organised meetings with their state and federal MPs; and have participated in public solidarity action.

During Refugee Week, more than 150 people attended “Between Welcome and Exclusion – the Politics of Asylum during COVID-19”, a JRS Australia public webinar (pictured below) on the challenges facing the people we serve during the pandemic, and participated in a call to action.

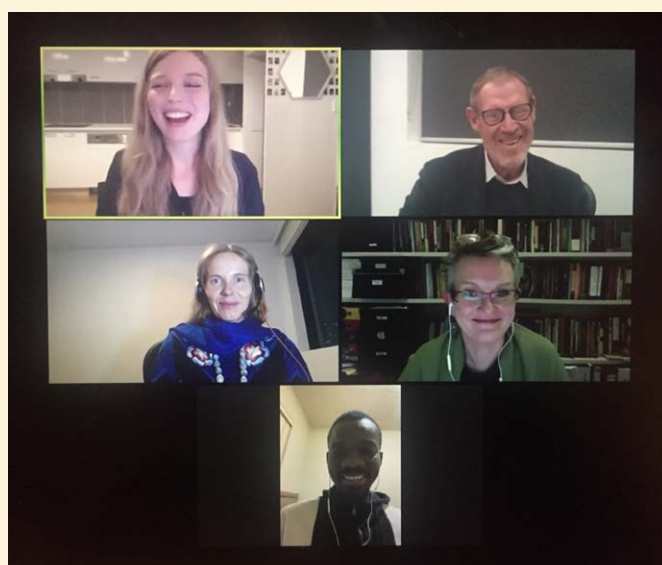
More recently, Catholic, Jesuit, and Diocesan schools in Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, Hervey Bay, Geelong, and Bendigo conducted ‘Circles of Silence’ in support of the

16,000 children seeking asylum at risk of homelessness and destitution during the pandemic. These powerful acts of solidarity between children and young people resonated with so many, and feedback from some decision-makers indicates “they were heard, if not listened to.”

Change can be slow. However, there have been some positive, interim developments. Notably, in June 2020, the NSW Government, assisted by Multicultural NSW announced \$6 million in emergency relief support for temporary visa holders, including people seeking asylum. This hugely important decision demonstrated that some decision-makers do recognise that temporary visa holders are stuck in Australia and need to survive. It was a sign of strong leadership, but will not be enough to support the hundreds of thousands of temporary visa holders in the State over the long term.

Until there is a systemic safety net for everyone living and working in Australia, our advocacy work must and will continue in earnest -- however steep the climb.

📷 Pictured here was a webinar highlight from 'Between Welcome and Exclusion: Australia and the Politics of Asylum during COVID-19' featuring a number of esteemed panellists, including Fr. Peter Smith (Promoter of Justice and Peace of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney; top right), Dr. Eve Lester (2020 Myer Innovation Fellow, International Lawyer, and Academic; pictured bottom right), Idrissa Dumbuya (human rights advocate and lived experience leader; bottom image), Carolina Gottardo (JRS Australia Director; bottom left) and Zoe Grant (JRS Australia Community Organiser; top left).



Volunteering in a pandemic



📷 JRS Volunteers packing food for many people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations.

In April 2020, JRS was delighted to welcome Jane Turner who stepped into the role of JRS Volunteer Coordinator, taking over from our much-loved Sister Margaret. Coordinating our Volunteers is integral as it utilises the skills of the community to directly serve refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations through their arduous journeys of seeking protection in Australia.

The same week that Jane started work, the pandemic hit Sydney. The new Jane was part of JRS' transformation to ensure that all clients, staff and volunteers remained healthy through new COVID-19-safe methods and that client's needs were met using new systems. Many of our devoted volunteers were forced to step back (due to being in high-risk demographics). It was with sadness that Jane explained that they could no longer perform the tasks that have such an important place in the lives of the people that we serve. With so many people losing their jobs, many more became dependent on charities like JRS to survive.

New volunteers stepped forward in the team effort to continue providing critical support to people excluded from all of the government's federal support packages. On our first day of transforming the JRS Refugee Foodbank to delivery-mode, our Director, Carolina Gottardo, drove food to people's homes, along with our amazing volunteers. Currently JRS has many mothers and daughters/sons

Volunteers regularly coming to volunteer including Marianne and Emily, Teresa and Elena, Abby and Jessica, Susie and Mimi plus Jamie, and Elsie and Kate amongst others.

"We have so many volunteers who come every week," explained Jane as she rattled off many names of couples, singles, young men and women. "There is Edwin who comes every week and sometimes brings one of his sons or his wife, John B, Toni and Mike who have been doing deliveries every single week since the beginning and many others who are an invaluable part of our volunteer team."


Big thanks to all our volunteers who are helping provide this critical support to people who have otherwise been left behind in this crisis. It has been very heartening to see so many people step forward and our new systems could have not operated without our volunteer's help. We look forward to one day reconnecting with our much-valued JRS volunteers who have needed to step back during this crisis.

Be part of it. To join our incredible volunteer team, please email jane.turner@jrs.org.au

Please note, the COVID-19 Crisis means that we cannot currently accept volunteers in high risk age/health categories. We look forward to welcoming you to the team in better times.

COVID-19 and JRS: Serving in times of crisis



 Maeve Brown (right) with Jane Turner, JRS Volunteers Coordinator, unpacking food to be used for our COVID-19 safe JRS Refugee Foodbank delivery service.

Around the world, JRS works where the need is the greatest, where there are gaps in services, where people are most vulnerable, and where we can work collaboratively with others to be the most effective. These values are instilled in all our work with the people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations that we serve in Western Sydney and have formed the basis of our COVID-19 response.

This year started off with a great deal of hope and enthusiasm for what JRS would be able to achieve in 2020. The JRS Women's Space entered into its third year of supporting women seeking asylum and refugee women who have experienced or who are at-risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). We planned to launch leadership training for these women. We also were continuing to build upon our partnerships including with the Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS) through our JRS Finding Safety Project that hosts the JRS Women's Space and the RACS Women at-risk Legal Clinic.

Our shared employment program, Empowered To Work, run in partnership with the House of Welcome, had a solid team of volunteers and we were looking forward to rolling out new workshops and individualised support to help people find work.

The JRS community garden was growing and we had family picnics, Eid celebrations, and community working bees planned. A new youth group and homework club was just getting started with a group of young people from refugee backgrounds and peer tutors from neighbouring schools.

We had recently reviewed the foodbank service. Many people had moved off of the program, as they were working and no longer needed regular support. The casework team was also busy reviewing policies and processes and looking at ways to improve our support systems for the year.

But by the middle of March 2020, so much had changed because of the pandemic.

As NSW entered a period of lockdown with schools and businesses closing,

all of our programs and face-to-face support came to a sudden halt. Nearly all of our volunteers also had to take a step back because they were in the most at-risk demographics.

Our foodbank program shifted from a drop-in pantry system, to the distribution of pre-packed parcels for pick-up from our parking lot, to a COVID-safe and socially distanced door-to-door delivery service around Sydney. This all happened within a matter of days to ensure that people with no other safety net still had access to food. All casework and employment appointments were quickly moved to telephone support, as people lost jobs, had hours reduced, and were suddenly unable to afford food or rent after years of self-sufficiency.

It has certainly been a challenging six months, but the resilience and adaptability of the people we serve has been nothing short of extraordinary. Our staff and volunteers have also been unwavering in their dedication.

Flexibility and responsiveness are qualities that define JRS. As the aims, the needs, and the plans for early-2020 became irrelevant within a matter of weeks, we were able to completely shift our ways of working to fit in with the challenges of COVID-19, both in terms of the needs of our clients and the challenges of meeting new social distancing and COVID-safe requirements.

Over the last few months, our foodbank service has grown significantly as people seeking asylum remain excluded from the federal government's support packages. We have gone from serving roughly 300–350 individuals (singles, couples and those within family groups) over the course of a month to over 840 individuals per week and we had to recruit over 120 volunteers to meet the corresponding food packing, dispatch and delivery needs. Our drop-in Women's Space shifted to online workshops in partnership with key service providers, including

Women's Legal Service and NSW Police, SGBV-focussed casework, as well as providing over 89 dignity kits to women and girls at-risk.

The Empowered to Work program continued to support those struggling to find work via phone appointments. Whilst we've responded to over 100 clients who have lost work or had their hours reduced, less than 10% have been able to regain employment. The casework team have also responded to over 1000 referrals in the last 6 months, supporting people with complex casework needs and covering requests for rent, food, and medication.

The challenge that lies ahead is how to eventually transition from emergency response in relation to COVID-19, back to regular service delivery. Face-to-face English classes and drop-in community lunches may still be a long way off, but the hope is that in the coming weeks and months we will be able to look for creative ways to meet the accompaniment needs of those we




 Pictured, The amazing Will was inspired to raise funds to buy food for our JRS Foodbank.


serve, while still providing essential casework, emergency relief, and food.

JRS has always been there to fill in the gaps and to support those most vulnerable and marginalised, but the cracks created by COVID-19 have left the people we serve even further disadvantaged. While we will continue to respond, the calls for support will keep coming for as long as businesses remain closed and the people we serve remain ineligible for a viable safety net.

~ Maeve Brown, Direct Services Manager for JRS Australia

 JRS Foodpacks to go to the people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in Sydney who depend on this food service to feed themselves and their families to make it through COVID-19.



 During the toilet paper shortage, Quilton donated this item to our Foodbank service allowing us to give this to people around Sydney.





📷 Maeve, our Direct Services Manager, having lunch in the midst of a massive donation to our Foodbank.

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What JRS Does

JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government. Through COVID-19, JRS Australia continues to provide emergency assistance, a Foodbank, professional casework support, an employment support program, facilitates free legal advice, as well as conducting targeted advocacy work, and a project to empower women.

 www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia

 @JRS_Aus

donate

How your donation will help

Your support allows us to continue to advocate for policies of welcome and protection and to provide people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations with COVID-19 safe specialist casework support, employment support, emergency payments and assisting women who are experiencing violence as well as providing food via our JRS Refugee Foodbank to people who have been otherwise left behind.

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