
Companion
House
2011–12 Annual Report

Mission

Companion House is a non government community based organisation. We work with adults and children who have sought safety in Australia from persecution, torture and war related trauma. We believe that people who have survived torture, trauma and human rights violations should have access to services that respect, empower and promote recovery.

PRINCIPLES OF SERVICE

- We acknowledge and respect the strength and resourcefulness of survivors of the refugee experience.
- We respect and respond to diverse needs including those determined by culture, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.
- We promote client independence, self-determination and informed choice.
- Our services are based on a holistic approach to health care.
- We are committed to the confidentiality of all client information.
- We work in strong partnerships with government and non-government agencies and individuals to ensure health care and other service systems and communities are accessible and sensitive to the needs of survivors of torture and trauma.
- Our services are open and accountable to feedback and suggestions from clients and the community.
- We promote and preserve human rights.
- We as staff support each other in our work.

Patrons, Board, Staff and Funding

PATRONS

Justice Elizabeth Evatt AO
Professor William Maley AM

BOARD

Chairperson - Helen Cory
Secretary - Jennifer Hurley
Treasurer - Michael Brown
Members - Jackie Wenner (until October 2012), Ibi Losoncz, Liz Sturgiss, Cat Argall, Henry Addison (from June 2011) and Kathy Ragless (from October 2012), Clare Doube (until October 2012)

STAFF

Director - Kathy Ragless (from October 2012), Clare Doube (until October 2012)
Deputy Director - Megan Layton (from November 2012)

COUNSELLING TEAM

Team Leader - Ina Suslijk (until February 2012), Fiona McDonald (from February 2012)
Counsellor/Advocate - Children - Deborah Nelson (until May 2012), Jeroen Splinter (from April 2012)
Counsellor/Advocates - Elizabeth Price, Robin Alderson-Smith, Sheila Kenny, Sandra Russett-Silk, Marg Callaghan, Paul Kowalik, Marie Novella-McMahon (until April 2012), Liz Morillis (until January 2012)
Complementary Therapy – Rosemary Taylor

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Team Leader - Vesna Golic
Project Officer - Hongsar Channaibanya
Project Officer - Sandra Lloyd
Project Officer: Vieli Choka

MEDICAL TEAM

Practice Nurse - Emily Lambert
Medical Coordinator - Silvia Salas Meyer
Support staff - Andrew Sein (from March 2012)
GP pilot Project Officer - Jeannie McLellan (from Jan-June 2012)
Clinical Director - Dr Christine Phillips
GP - Dr Katrina Anderson
GP - Dr Joo-Inn Chew
GP - Dr James Eldridge
GP - Dr Danielle Butler
GP - Dr Bethan McDonald
GP - Dr Tony Edwards (from May 2012)

TRAINING, ADVOCACY AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Team Leader/Trainer - Glenn Flanagan
Trainer - Sai Maung (until May 2012)

COMPLEX CASE SERVICES

Pam Mitchell
Jill Caley

MIGRATION ADVICE

Jennifer Tode
Carly Saeedi

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Finance Officer - Gen Jones
Admin/Reception Staff - Loan Freeman (until March 2012), Sarah Nash, Andrew Sein (from March 2012), Pam Mitchell (from March 2012), Raffaella Santosuosso (March-April 2012)

FUNDING

In addition to donations gratefully received from many individuals, we acknowledge the following funding bodies for their financial support:

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing - Program Assisting Survivors of Torture and Trauma (PASTT - counselling, advocacy, community development and community capacity building)

Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship - short-term torture and trauma counselling and community awareness, Immigration Advice and Application Scheme, Complex Case Services, counselling for people in community detention and asylum seekers participating in CAS/ASAS

Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs - Emergency Relief, Sharing and Learning project

ACT Government Health Directorate - counselling, primary health services and health promotion projects

ACT Government Community Services Directorate - children's program, community development program, Sudanese Women Singing our Cultures

PARTNERS AND ALLIANCES

ACT Dental Program
ACT Mental Health
ACT Health Community Pediatrics Registrar Program
ACTCOSS
Adult Migrant English Program
Australia-Karen Organisation of the ACT
Australia Mon Association Inc
Amnesty International ACT Branch
Belconnen Child and Family Centre
Calvary Refugee Mentoring Program
Canberra Multicultural Communities Forum
Canberra Men's Centre
Canberra Refugee Support
Canberra Sierra Leone Association
Capital Careers
Capital Medical Supplies
Capital Pathology
Capital Football
Connections ACT
Chin Community Goulburn
Dickson College Secondary Introductory English Centre
Dinka congregation at St Georges Anglican Church
Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT)
Football United
Goulburn Multicultural Centre
Gungahlin Child and Family Centre
Housing ACT
Interchange General Practice
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims
Medicare Local
Multicultural Youth Service
National Capital Diagnostic Imaging
North Ainslie Primary Introductory English Centre
Australian Red Cross
Refugee Council of Australia
Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT
Spectacle Subsidy Scheme
St John the Apostle Refugee Resettlement Committee
St Vincent de Paul
Social Ventures Australia
Sudanese Australia Community Association
Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre
Youth Coalition of the ACT

From the Chairperson

"Let us reflect on what is truly of value in life, what gives meaning to our lives, and set our priorities on the basis of that."

The 14th Dalai Lama
From *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*. 1999.

In an organisational sense, our priorities are our aims and objectives. They are:

Rehabilitation of survivors of torture and trauma

To provide assessment, treatment and rehabilitation services to survivors and their families

To promote and develop understanding of issues relating to survivors of torture with the community and health agencies

Client confidentiality and security of records

Keeping those objectives in mind, the Board acknowledges the enormous effort of our dedicated and experienced, professional and administrative staff in serving the hundreds of clients who walk through our front door and in educating the community at large.

Our Director, Kathy Ragless, returned from Maternity Leave in October 2011, recognised nationally for her work in this field with an Order of Australia. The Board decided to create a Deputy Director's position, which is competently held by Megan Layton.

Our Board this year has comprised members with finance, legal, medical, teaching, policy development, management and research skills. Our funds have been expertly managed by our Treasurer Michael Brown.

We are fortunate to have such a harmonious relationship between staff and the board. Events such as the annual soccer day bring us all together and remind us of the value of friendship and companionship.

The Board's fundraising dinner on 21 September 2012 with Professor Patrick McGorry as the guest speaker was a great success and I thank Liz Sturgiss, Jennifer Hurley, Catherine Argall and Henry Addison for their enthusiasm, energy and organisational and planning skills.

Thankyou to all our contributors: clients, staff, board members, volunteers, sponsors and funding bodies. We look forward to another year of rewards and achievements.

Helen Cory

From the Director

2011-12 was a busy year. Our medical and counselling services felt the pressure of increasing numbers of service users at various points. At one point of the year we had a peak in the number of people using services who had been in an Australian Immigration Detention Centre long term. This group of people tended to experience high levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and trauma symptoms. This trend once again illustrated the destructive effects of long term mandatory detention on health and well being.

The policy context and public debate focused on asylum seekers sometimes dismayed us in its negativity towards people seeking protection over 2011-12. We are however, very glad to experience the commitment of ACT Government to ensure asylum seekers have access to social entitlements at the local level and the release of substantial numbers of people from Immigration Detention Centres into the community at the Commonwealth level.

Across Companion House we worked with survivors of torture and trauma from a variety of perspectives: medical, counselling; community development; migration services and living support. Our community development team continues to do great creative and grassroots work with communities focused on health promotion, linking to key services, governance and social enterprise. We also continued to carry out a large amount of community education and policy advocacy work as described in detail in other sections of this report.

Companion House is now well settled into the Cook Community Hub. The Cook site works very well for us and is a bright and friendly space. We are certainly grateful for ACT Government support to refurbish and develop the site. However, it is is quickly becoming too small for us and we have already had to refurbish our medical area to expand capacity.

Services have expanded for a variety of reasons. An increase in the number of asylum seekers in the community due to the very welcome release of some asylum seekers from Australian Immigration Detention Centres has been one key reason behind the growth of counselling and medical programs.

We also continue to find it difficult to source referral points from our medical service to community GPs. This difficulty has changed our medical service into an ongoing service rather than the predominantly transitional service it was originally designed to be. Over 2011-12 we started to develop new pathways and protocols to develop our capacity to refer some patients to community GPs after a transitional period.

Another reason our organisation has grown is that we now provide migration services through Immigration, Advice and Applications Assistance Scheme (IAAAS) funding from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).

I need to take this opportunity to recognize the work of Companion House staff (ranging from GPs, psychologists, social workers, migration agents, community development workers, trainers, counsellors, administrative workers and nurses) who continue to bring a very large range of high quality skills to our work.

With many thanks also to funders, friends and supporters for your contributions over 2011-12.

I look forward very much to continuing to work with individuals, families and communities to rebuild lives shattered by torture, persecution and war.

Kathy Ragless

Goal One

Survivors of torture and trauma heal and rehabilitate from emotional and psychological pain

Counselling, Advocacy and Complementary Therapy with Adults and Young People

Our counselling programs worked with people of all ages and from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. We worked with people who have just arrived in Australia and those who have been here for some years.

We also worked with both people from a refugee background and asylum seekers. The proportion of asylum seekers across counselling programs increased substantially with the release of people into community detention arrangements and onto bridging visas from Australian detention centres.

We used a wide range of therapeutic tools with a strong focus on building safety. Our work with asylum seekers in this area tends to focus on containment of distress and anxiety and symptom management.

Counsellor/Advocates also work to ensure people have access to social entitlements and on other advocacy issues where necessary.

We had a challenging year in 2011-12 and worked hard to expand services to meet the needs of people being released from Australian Immigration Detention Centres.

Working with Children

We continued to work with primary aged children both individually and in groups. Much of this work is done in close cooperation with ACT schools. Most individual work with children is done within the school, in collaboration with school staff. We also ran a variety of group programs during the school term.

For many years we have run regular school holiday programs for primary aged children and we continued these in 2011-12. School holiday programs have the core aim of assessment and identification of children in need of early intervention. However, at the same time the programs build links with parents and children, provide children with stimulating and fun activities and build friendships, trust, safety and confidence.

"Our work brings us into people's lives when they are most desperate, alone, sad, afraid and wounded…", but for the most part we discover together "…stories of hope, survival, triumph. Surprisingly, it is often when wandering through the emotional carnage left by the worst of humankind that we find the best of humanity as well"

Perry, B. D., & Szalavitz, M. (2009)
What traumatized children can teach us about loss, love and healing.

Goal Two

Survivors of torture and trauma maximise their physical health

Medical Service

Companion House's Medical Service worked with newly arrived people from a refugee background as they settle into Australian life; people with complex needs over the longer term; and asylum seekers.

We had 838 patients in the Medical Service in 2011-12.

We aim to be a transition service for new arrivals for their first year in Australia but often struggle to find GPs for referral. Our service also expanded in 2011-12 due to the introduction of community detention in the ACT and larger number of asylum seekers in our community.

The medical service provided GP and Registered Nurse services four days a week. This included health screening and primary health care such as vaccinations when people first arrive in Australia. We also worked with people over a longer period to help them manage chronic and complex health needs. Our clinic also provided a range of referral, coordination and outreach services to ensure clients can access other health and allied services in the ACT.

We strengthened the capacity of our medical service over the year with a new project aimed at increasing our capacity to refer patients to community GPs and by boosting staffing support for administrative and patient support staffing.

Another notable enhancement is that we also now have a paediatric registrar working with our GPs once a week under a memorandum of understanding with ACT Health Directorate.

Counselling and Primary Health Services

Program	Number of Clients
counselling/advocacy with adults and young people	320 (70 asylum seekers)
Children's holiday programs, and group work and individual counselling with children	78
Counselling and advocacy with people in community detention	50
Complex Case	7
Complementary therapy	35
Medical patients	838

Goal Three

The community welcomes refugees and is sensitive to the needs and strengths of survivors of torture and trauma

Training

Companion House has a substantial and high quality training and community education program aimed at increasing understanding of the refugee experience and building skills in working with survivors of torture and trauma. During the 2011-12 year, we facilitated 87 training sessions with a total of 1524 participants from government and community agencies in Canberra and Goulburn.

Over the year we developed new content focused on on vicarious trauma and refugee health and consolidated a new package focused on cross cultural work. Sessions were evaluated very highly by participants and our training programs continued to go from strength to strength.

Advocacy

Advocacy can be important to bring about change at a variety of levels. Our advocacy includes at the individual level (staff members advocating for clients to access services and entitlements) and at the systemic level (advocating for changes to policies, programs and systems).

In 2011-12 we worked with partner agencies and with policy makers on a large variety of advocacy issues. These included; the need for higher rates of interpreter use in a range of Government systems and services including, schools and the Canberra Hospital; ACT government social entitlements for asylum seekers, issues for children in schools and the care and protection system; housing options for asylum seekers and people from a refugee background and a range of other local and national issues.

Community Awareness

We held one major event over 2011-12 aimed at raising community awareness about the great positives of having settlement of people from a refugee background in our community. Companion House's eighth soccer tournament celebrating World Refugee Day attracted soccer teams from six communities under a banner of building friendships between communities. It was a wonderful, if cold day, with great participation from the Mon, Karen, Sierra Leone, Goulburn Liberian and Southern Sudanese teams.

Goal Four

Communities affected by torture and trauma are strong, resilient and skilled in ways that enable them to thrive in Australia

Community Development and Capacity Building

Our Community Development Team worked with a number of refugee communities to facilitate links, draw out the considerable strengths and skills within the community and to assist people as they transition to life in Australia. We focused particularly on cultural transition, health promotion, governance of community associations, social enterprise and parenting activities.

This year, we worked with about 400 people from the Chin, Karen, Mon, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tamil and Hazara communities. This work is only possible through the ongoing support and guidance from leaders of each community.

Highlights included work which:

- Supported women to form the Arabic speaking and Dinka Southern Sudanese Family Association, a regular playgroup for the association and a project to record women's songs for children in collaboration with the West Belconnen Child and Family Centre.
- Facilitated women from four communities to start participation in health screening.
- Supported the White Nile catering company run by a group of Southern Sudanese women.
- Supported the formation of Sierra Leone soccer team.
- Supported the formation of Hazara Association and radio program.

Migration Advice and Assistance

Over 2011-12 we managed the Immigration Advice and Application Assistance Scheme (IAAAS) for the ACT.

Under the IAAAS we provided 248 immigration advice sessions. Most of these sessions were focused on family reunion applications. We also supported 16 asylum seekers with advice and application assistance.

We sourced probono support for people not eligible for the IAAAS and used some donation funds for this purpose also. In addition, we introduced a volunteer program to support people to complete migration documentation.

Goal Five

Human rights principles underpin our work and our expertise about human rights issues informs policy makers and the community at large

We continue to ensure that human rights principles are at the core of our work. As the first organisation to voluntarily "opt in" to being covered by the ACT Human Rights Act, we have an added responsibility to ensure that our services comply with human rights standards.

Over 2011-12 Companion House collaborated with the ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs for an important new initative from ACT Government. We became the point of contact for granting ACT Access Cards to asylum seekers (which ensure access to ACT local Government services). We granted about 90 cards each quarter.



Goal Six

Companion House is a high quality and responsive service with excellent governance and management

To be able to deliver services to our clients, it's important that we maintain a strong, healthy organisation.

Over 2011-12 we focused strongly on pressures on our medical service. The service has a fast expanding patient base. Over 2011-12 we started on the refurbishment of our medical service, set up of a new medical room and replacement of ageing medical equipment. Just as importantly we started a project aimed at improving referral pathways to community GPs, including new resources for community GPs and referral protocols.

Over the year we also reviewed some key governance and management policies and procedures, revised key human resource processes and carried out a range of processes needed to transition to the new modernised employment award which employs most of our staff.

We consulted widely with communities we work with to ensure our services are responsive to the people we serve. We maintained active involvement in a wide range of multi agency forums and continued to host the ACT Asylum Seekers Network (ACTASN).

At a national level, our involvement in the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) remained important for service quality and development.



Broadly speaking, we understand that reactions to trauma demonstrate certain patterns of biological, social and psychological response, all mediated by culture, which may compromise the person's and the community's ability to adapt, and which cause suffering. It is crucial to also focus on the great strengths that the person and community have brought to survival. Counsellors explore with clients their strengths and skills, and help them to use and adapt those skills to overcome the challenges posed by the new environment.

Companion House Practice Manual for Counsellor/Advocates 2010

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Thank you

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- The leaders and peer mentors from all the refugee communities we work with
- The volunteers supporting the IAAAS, particularly Pat Varga and Christine Stewart

The following people and organisations for assistance with the World Refugee Day Soccer Tournament:

- Australia Mon Association Inc
- Capital Football
- Viola Oshan
- Rev Richard Browning and Radford College
- MLA Joy Burch
- United Nations High Commission for Refugees
- Jordan Bowles and Denise Small from the West Belconnen Child and Family Centre
- Football United
- Allens Arthur Robinson for providing pro bono legal advice

Particularly generous donations from very valued supporters, including:

- University of Canberra's fundraising breakfast; Oliver family; CIT for their beautiful fundraising cards
- Salvation Army community Services
- Dickson IEC with special thanks to Ros Phillips
- Dr Tuck Meng Soo
- Social Ventures Australia

Snow Foundation for generous donations to support White Nile Catering

Peter Kuot from the Southern Sudanese community and Shin Thu Gay from the Karen community

Our close partner agencies, Red Cross and Canberra Refugee Support

The wonderful interpreters who support us

Photos courtesy from The Canberra Times