



August 2018

CUTS TO SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

Key issues

- In the next few months of 2018, the Australian Department of Home Affairs plans to drastically cut support to people seeking asylum. This is likely to leave more than 7,500 people hungry and homeless, most of them living in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.
- The Department is changing the eligibility to its Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS), saying that it plans to reduce the number of people seeking assistance through the program to fewer than 5,000. As at 28 February 2018, 13,299 people were receiving this support.
- Pregnant women, families with young children, and survivors of torture who do not meet the heightened vulnerability criteria set by the Department will be left without any form of income to pay rent, pay for prescriptions, or even get enough food for each day.
- It is counterproductive to force people into being homeless and hungry when most are likely to be in Australia for the long-term. Past statistics demonstrate that at least 70% of people who arrived by boat were found to be in need of refugee protection and remained in Australia.
- States, local communities, and charities will bear the brunt of the consequences of these cruel changes: overstretched agencies will see an increase in people seeking emergency relief for food, clothing, blankets, and support to pay rent. Hospitals will likely see more people coming through their emergency room doors as they are not able to afford their medications. Homelessness services will see more people – including families with young children – waiting on their doorsteps for help, as they will have no other options.

Background

- People seeking asylum (whether by boat or plane) often need support to survive in Australia while their claims for protection are being processed. Having often faced traumatic circumstances, they can have difficulty finding work because of their lack of permanent status and are not entitled to the social security payments available to others.
- The Government did not permit people to work for several years, but once work rights were granted, many people seeking asylum have worked to support themselves. Unfortunately,

many of the jobs were short-term, and this temporary work has meant that people need basic financial assistance while they look for another job.

- Support for people seeking asylum has been provided in recent years through the SRSS program. The program provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of Newstart allowance, or approximately \$35 per day), casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling.
- Draconian cuts to the program will make it almost impossible for people to apply for the program: very few people will fit the restrictive criteria. This will see a reduction of the current program by over 60%.
- This harsh policy is entirely within the discretion of the Minister, and does not require Cabinet approval or legislative change to reverse. In the context of the overall budget, the savings also appear to be relatively minor.

Impact of the cuts

- The cuts to who is eligible for SRSS will mean that over 7,000 people currently on the program could lose access to basic income assistance, a caseworker and torture and trauma counselling. Thousands more will not be able to access this life-saving support if they need it again (for example, if they lose their jobs).
- People will have to stop taking vital medication, go hungry so their children can eat, and end up in work where they are exploited. We know from our experience that many people will become so desperate that they may self-harm.

Recommendations

We call for this policy change to be stopped. Cutting off all support for people whilst they are looking for work is not fair. We call for a policy that means no one is left without a form of income to pay for their rent, for vital medications, and to feed themselves and their families.

We recommend that the Federal Government restore access to the SRSS program for all people seeking asylum until a resolution of their status is complete.

People at risk as at 27 February 2018

Age	Number
0-4 years	1,726
5-6 years	439
7-12 years	1203
13-15 years	447
16-17 years	244
18-25 years	1,543
26-35 years	4,030
36-45 years	2,447
46+	1,220
Total	13,299

By band (support level)

Band	Number
Band 1	1
Band 2	16
Band 3	424
Band 4	27
Band 5	397
Band 6	12,434
Total	13,299

By State or Territory

State or Territory	Number
VIC	5,863
NSW	4,836
QLD	1,086
SA	828
WA	532
ACT	85
TAS	40
NT	29
Total	13,299

Timeframe

9 April 2018: The Department provides a list of all single adult men and women with work rights on Band 6 to SRSS providers ("first wave"), excluding certain Red Cross and Marist 180 clients (delayed until July 2018). SRSS providers conduct vulnerability assessments (see below) and must report back to the Department..

1 May 2018: New SRSS Program model will apply to new applicants.

7 May 2018: Deadline for SRSS providers to provide details of vulnerability to the Department on "first wave" clients for consideration

27 June 2018: First wave clients not identified as having an excluding vulnerability will start to be exited from the SRSS program (including basic financial support). Around 1,500 people likely to be affected nationally.

9 August 2018: The first group of first wave clients who have been exited will lose income support.

16 August 2018: The first group of first wave clients who have been exited will lose all SRSS support.

Assessments

Initial indications from the Department were that people would be assessed as to their "job-readiness" before potential exit from the SRSS program. The most recent information is that job readiness will not form a measure of eligibility. Rather, SRSS providers and the Department will assess a person's vulnerability.

The four elements to the vulnerability assessment are:

- Physical health barriers that are ongoing; permanent disability; or cognitive impairment
- Mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place
- Single parents with pre-school aged children (children under six); pregnant women; a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability; people aged 70 and over
- A major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood)
- The Department will also use its own information to conduct assessments (the Community Protection Assessment Tool, CPAT) and may seek a second opinion on certain issues.



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