



Refugee Council of Australia

3 April 2019

Morrison's inclusive rhetoric cast aside with a harsh Budget for refugees

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's plan to be more welcoming and inclusive since the Christchurch terrorist attack has been cast aside with a Federal Budget which deals harshly with refugees and people seeking asylum.

The Federal Government's 2019-20 Budget includes a plan to overturn the independent medical assessment of seriously ill refugees on Nauru and Manus Island and massive cuts to assistance for people seeking asylum living in Australia.

Refugee Council of Australia CEO Paul Power has called the Government's plan to reveal the Medevac legislation by 1 July 2019 "a cruel political stunt which threatens further harm to refugees who need urgent medical attention".

"This decision, against the clear intention of Parliament and the public, is a desperate attempt at scaremongering in the lead up to the Federal Election," Mr Power said.

The Government has also announced that it will close the Christmas Island detention centre in July, after reopening it last month at a cost of \$185 million.

"The reopening of the Christmas Island was never needed to bring sick people to Australia for treatment but yet again we see the Government wasting money on political posturing while critical needs in the community go unmet."

The Budget reveals the scale of the cut to assistance for people seeking asylum who are living in Australia's cities and towns. The allocation for asylum seeker support administered by the Department of Human Services has been cut by more than 60% over two years, from \$139.8 million in 2017-18 to just \$52.6 million in 2019-20.

"While the number of people seeking asylum has doubled over the past four years, the Government has savagely cut access for people who are unable to find work. Thousands of people have been forced off the Government's Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program and many more who need assistance have been prevented from getting access to SRSS help in the first place.

"Charities, local councils and State Government services around Australia are reporting massive increases in homelessness and destitution among people seeking asylum. Their concerns have even been taken up by Government MPs but the architect of this policy of forced destitution, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, has refused to listen.

"While this happens, we see massive blowouts in spending in Mr Dutton's Department. Spending on offshore processing in 2018-19 has blown out by \$397.7 million on the forecast in last year's Budget announcements, with blowouts of \$172.3 million in Onshore Detention and Compliance, \$71.1 million in the Visas division and \$54.0 million in Border Enforcement."

Changes in the Budget also mean that refugee and humanitarian entrants will be exempt from Jobactive employment services for the first 12 months after arrival in Australia. This doubles the

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extension period (previously six months) but the \$77.9 million the Government expects to save from this measure will not be invested in other forms of employment assistance for refugees.

“The measure illustrates how little confidence the Government has in its own Jobactive program. As the compliance requirements of Jobactive are onerous and counter-productive for newly arrived refugees and many other Australians, increasing the exemption period and allowing people to opt in is a useful measure.

“However, it is shocking that none of the funding saved is being reallocated to offer refugees more constructive assistance in their search for employment.”

A full analysis of the Budget papers can be found at www.refugeecouncil.org.au