



Refugee Council
of Australia

PRIORITIES FOR PROTECTING PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM AND REFUGEES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As at 25 March 2020

On 23 March 2020, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) hosted an extraordinary meeting of its regular national Asylum Policy Network teleconference, with 65 representatives of organisations around Australia, to bring together concerns and ideas about the most pressing issues for people seeking asylum and refugees resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is RCOA's summary of the priorities discussed at this meeting.

1. Move people urgently out of crowded immigration detention facilities

RCOA member organisations providing support to refugees and people seeking asylum hold grave concerns for people in immigration detention facilities, particularly those who have been transferred from offshore facilities to Australia for medical treatment and those people detained long-term.

The Commonwealth Department of Health last week nominated people in detention facilities as one of six groups of people in Australia most at risk of serious infection from COVID-19. The majority of closed immigration detention facilities, including hotels that are being used as alternative places of detention to accommodate people transferred from PNG and Nauru, are currently overcrowded. RCOA members are concerned about the inability of people in those facilities to maintain the social distancing recommended by health authorities to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19. A number of people in immigration detention also fall into two other high-risk groups identified by the Department of Health: those with compromised immune systems and those with chronic medical conditions.

RCOA member agencies are concerned about the adequacy of the current responses to COVID-19 from the Australian Border Force, Department of Home Affairs and contracted detention service providers. It is clear that the most appropriate and safest response in the current circumstances is to release people into the community into either residence determination (community detention) using some of the many vacant accommodation facilities around Australia or release people onto ongoing Bridging Visas, with financial support and access to Medicare being essential. The appropriate community placement should be identified based on people's needs and vulnerabilities.

2. Ensure a financial safety net and Medicare access for all in Australia

RCOA member agencies are increasingly concerned about people seeking asylum who are living in the community without access to financial support and Medicare. The agencies agree that it is now paramount that everyone in need in Australia, regardless of their visa status, has access to a safety net, namely to Medicare and financial support.

For the past two years, an increasing number of people seeking asylum have lost access to financial and casework support under Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) because of deliberate program redesign. Many do not have access to Medicare, either because of a delay or refusal to renew Bridging Visas or through government policy. The service providers working with people seeking asylum report an increase in the number of people who have recently lost their jobs and without access to a safety net, are destitute and significantly vulnerable. Unstable housing as a result of destitution impedes people's ability to adequately self-isolate. Lack of access to PBS means many cannot afford to purchase vital medications. This can further compromise people's general health

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and increase their need for hospital admission, which is challenging when the health system is going to experience increased demand due to COVID-19.

With several charities and organisations now closing, others scaling back their work and many volunteers not able to continue offering assistance, there is less support for this group. RCOA member agencies acknowledge that states have stepped up to fill the gaps created by limited Federal government support and believe stronger advocacy by the states to the Federal Government to grant people seeking asylum in need of support a safety net can address this issue.

3. Simplify processes for visa grants and renewals

It was agreed that there needs to be concerted efforts to ensure Bridging Visa grants and renewals are simplified and prompt. The current system, which sees people apply for a Bridging Visa renewal and face either months-long delays or refusals without clear reasons, means that people who have made every effort to engage in the process face being forced into an irregular status, with no rights or entitlements. Further flexibility should be applied to deadline extensions and visa conditions (like access to Medicare and work rights). While community legal centres continue to operate remotely, many charities and volunteer organisations who assisted people in filling forms related to visa applications and renewals have had to suspend these services. This creates a significant barrier for people to remain lawful and maintain their access to rights that are linked to visas, such as Medicare and work rights.

RCOA member agencies believe that the Departments of Health and Home Affairs need to work together to disseminate messages to assure people that no-one taking a test for COVID-19 will be at risk of arrest or detention, even if they have no current visa.

4. Move refugees and people seeking asylum from PNG and Nauru

RCOA member agencies are deeply concerned for the refugees and people seeking asylum who are still in PNG and Nauru under Australia's offshore processing regime. Noting that there have already been cases of COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea and a State of Emergency has been declared in both PNG and Nauru, service providers working with refugees and people seeking asylum are worried about the capacity of health systems in those countries to respond to a potential pandemic. There is ample and overwhelming evidence of the inadequacies in healthcare provision in those countries, even with financial support from Australia. Further pressure on those fragile health systems could result in their falling apart, with serious consequences for the refugees and people seeking asylum in those countries, many of whom have already chronic illnesses and are immunocompromised.

5. Explore permanency and family reunion for people moving to high-need regional areas

RCOA member agencies identified the growing and urgent need to fill labour force gaps created by the border closure to all non-residents. In order for farming and other major production to continue, there needs to be quick and committed movement of people already in Australia to the regional and rural areas in need. People found to be refugees but granted only a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) are among those who could fill some of these gaps, as many either currently reside in regional SHEV zones or intend to do so. The missing piece for many people to make the move to a regional area has been access to ongoing employment and the need for a way to build a future in that place. With employment opportunities now emerging because of the COVID-19 response, the remaining gap is access to permanency and immediate family reunion. If people on TPVs and SHEVs were able to be granted a permanent visa and also bring immediate family members to settle with them in regional and rural areas, it would not only address the urgent short-term needs of farmers and Australian production but also allow people to set down roots with their families in those communities long-term. This would contribute to revitalising regional and rural communities which are desperate for residents who will contribute and remain well past a working holidaymaker visa.