Changes to Supports for People Seeking Asylum

While waiting for their immigration status to be resolved, people seeking asylum in Australia remain socially and economically vulnerable. Bridging visas limit access to ongoing work and training opportunities, and prevent people from obtaining apprenticeships. The Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) have historically supported people seeking asylum to meet their basic healthcare and living needs as they are ineligible for any other form of Government-funded social security support during periods of unemployment or under-employment. As a result of the Federal Government's recent changes to the SRSS, many people seeking asylum have lost their only form of financial safety net and their access to critical services.

Late in 2014, the Federal Government also made changes to the refugee determination process, removing access to funded legal support and access to the Refugee Review Tribunal, for people in the new 'Fast Track' system. This has resulted in many people receiving negative determinations who may have otherwise received positive determinations. Their only avenue for appeal is to go through the courts, which is a costly and very lengthy process. As soon as someone receives a negative outcome, their SRSS (including income and case management support) is immediately ceased. In some cases, people also lose their work rights (leaving them without access to any form of income at all) and lose access to Medicare.

These two sets of circumstances have put many people (including families and children) in situations of severe poverty, at risk of destitution and homelessness. In Geelong, we have seen mothers with babies in arms wondering how they will manage to pay their next rent payment and provide food for their children; people 'couch surfing' in over-crowded households because they have no-where else to go; and people with serious medical conditions unable to access the healthcare and medication they require.

The resulting stress and anxiety impede the ability of people to find or maintain employment, even if they are eligible to work. Removing the income safety net and case management support also shifts federal welfare costs and responsibilities to community-based organisations, many of which are reliant on private donations and volunteer support. These changes to immigration policy create an unnecessary penalty for people already rendered vulnerable by the immigration status resolution process.

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