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Submission to Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 regarding the Government's response to the pandemic.

Combined Refugee Action Group welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee.

Combined Refugee Action Group (CRAG) is based in Geelong, Victoria. CRAG is a network for over 700 individuals and community groups across the Geelong, Bellarine Peninsula and Surf Coast region, all advocating for people seeking asylum to be treated with fairness and decency and to be given the opportunity to rebuild their lives in safety.
Our members are in regular contact with people who have come to Australia for refuge and who are now part of the social fabric of our region, and people who are held in situations of immigration detention. It is from this perspective that we raise the following concerns.

Lack of Access to Income Support

The Geelong Region is home to at least 300 people who are seeking asylum or who have temporary refugee protection visas. Many of these people have been stood down from their work, or have had their hours significantly reduced, in factories, hospitality, cleaning, and event work. Others have lost income from the small business they run, as their usual clients are no longer able to pay for their services due to their own loss of income.

Only Australian citizens and permanent residents are eligible for Job Seeker and Job Keeper payments.

Most people seeking asylum have absolutely no access to any form of income support to assist them during this crisis, even though have been living in our local communities for around eight years, working since they were granted work rights, and contributing through the payment of income tax and GST. Many are still living on Bridging Visas purely because Home Affairs has not yet completed their refugee determinations. They are relying on the support of local community support services for food parcels and bill relief, and have no way to pay their rent.

People who have been granted Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas may apply for Special Benefit through Centrelink, however people in Geelong in this situation report that they have still not received any benefits two months after submitting their applications.

CRAG is very concerned about people's ability to keep roofs over their heads (without accumulating large rent debts) when landlords are less than understanding, their ability to feed themselves and their children, and heat their homes over the winter months.

CRAG therefore urges the Government to urgently make provision for these people.

Immigration Detention Settings

Individual CRAG members have regular contact with people who are held in situations of detention, including the hotel-based Alternative Places of Detention.

The people our members are in contact with report that they are too fearful to leave their rooms, for fear of Covid-19 cluster infections occurring in their places of detention, due to the lack of availability of appropriate social distancing space and/or personal protective equipment. Some people are leaving their rooms only to access meals and so are spending at least 23 hours a day isolated in their rooms, without access to fresh air, sunlight, or opportunity for exercise. The refugees and people seeking asylum held at the Mantra and Kangaroo Point Central hotels have been brought to Australia for medical care. Therefore, they already have compromised health. The possibility of contracting Covid-19 is yet another life-threatening situation for them to face.

CRAG urges the Government to release these detainees into situations of community detention, where they can practice safe social distancing and access outdoor areas for their physical and mental health.

Excessive Policing at Protest Actions

Regular protest actions have taken place in Melbourne and Brisbane to draw attention to the indefinite hotel detention which some refugees and asylum seekers have endured for more than 12 months. These protests have been conducted within the public health requirements for social distancing, and on the basis of providing care and support to friends during the crisis.

CRAG believes that the arresting of protest organisers and attendees, and the orders to move on, have been an over-reach. Some of these people have merely been wearing t-shirts with slogans, or carrying placards, as they walked for exercise in the vicinity of the hotels. Individuals and family groups who have held birthday signs or played music outside the homes of their loved ones during the lockdown, have not been prevented from doing so. CRAG fails to understand why providing support to refugee friends has been treated so differently by police, and why police have not applied social distancing measures to their dealings with protestors.

CRAG urges the Government to ensure that people maintain the right to protest, and that state and territory police are not used for federal political purposes.

Conclusion

The messaging of the Federal Government during the Covid-19 pandemic has been that “we are all in this together”. For this to be truly the case, all people in Australia, regardless of visa status, must be treated with dignity, care and respect. No-one should have their basic needs in terms of food, shelter, warmth, health and well-being overlooked. This current health crisis should not be allowed to become a humanitarian crisis.