



## **HOW FEDERAL CUTS TO SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM WILL AFFECT PEOPLE, STATES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

*Updated 17 April 2018*

### **Key issues**

- Before the end of June 2018, the Federal 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. The Refugee Council of Australia estimates that 12,500 people currently receive support.
- Pregnant women, families with young children and survivors of torture who will 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 75% 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 \$250 per week), 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.

### **Consequences of the cuts to support**

- The cuts to who is eligible for SRSS will mean that over 7,000 currently on the program will 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.