



Latest Government decision forces refugee families to rely on local charities

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South Australian refugee advocates are drawing attention to the recent actions of the Federal Government to remove financial support for refugee adults and children who have been brought to Australia for acute medical attention and essentially forcing them to rely on charities or State Government agencies to survive. They have written to the Premier, Steven Marshall, the Minister for Human Services, Michelle Lensink, and to the Minister for Child Protection, Rachel Sanderson to express their concerns.

The refugees were brought to Australia from Papua New Guinea and Nauru where they were being held in offshore detention. The Federal Government has recently issued notices to these people telling them they would be moved from community detention onto "Final Departure Bridging Visas." This means that they would no longer have access to any Federal financial assistance or housing support. A total of 58 people in South Australia will have all Federal support removed because of the Minister's decision.

Rev. Sandy Boyce, Chair of Justice for Refugees SA, said the Federal Government is walking away from its most basic responsibilities by releasing vulnerable and often unwell refugees into local communities without adequate support.

"At first glance, being released from 'Community Detention' sounds like a good thing," says Rev. Boyce. "After all, these people will finally have the right to work and the right to decide where to live. The problem is that they will have no access to any Federal financial assistance other than Medicare (and no clarity about whether Medicare will cover all their ongoing health needs)."

Rev. Boyce points out that since entering Australia between mid-2013 and early 2014, these refugees and people seeking asylum have been denied the right to work, or to undertake post-school study. None of them has had a previous opportunity to work in Australia or to get their existing qualifications recognised. While some are fluent in English, many are not, having been denied access to programs such as the Adult Migrant English Program.

Justice for Refugees SA fears that most will not find work, particularly given current workforce conditions. "In these circumstances, removing accommodation and financial assistance is heartless and irresponsible, particularly amid the current pandemic and economic environment, Rev. Boyce said. "After seven years of treating people so poorly, authorities appear determined to rub more salt into wounds needlessly inflicted by Government policies."

“We are quite fearful that these families and children will have to face widespread poverty and homelessness, and that this may lead to or compound existing mental health issues,” Rev. Boyce said. The destitution being forced on families and children raises very real child protection issues and community health risks.

The Home Affairs Minister’s decision means that State Government services, Non-Government Organisations funded by State agencies, local government, unfunded community service providers and volunteer groups will be left to deal with the human and social costs of this dereliction of Federal responsibility.

As of 23 September 2020, 188 people have been moved from community detention in Australia (30 of them in South Australia). A further 327 people who do not have an active US resettlement application are also liable for removal (28 in SA).

They are part of a group of 783 refugees and people seeking asylum placed into community detention in Australia after being transferred by the Federal Government to address acute health needs which could not be met in Nauru or Papua New Guinea. Some were transferred to accompany family members with acute medical needs. *[See note below.]*

While the Orwellian sounding “Final Departure Bridging Visas” appear to suggest that those assigned with visas will be leaving Australia sometime soon, the reality is that this is highly unlikely.

Justice for Refugees SA is a non-partisan community organisation working for the just and humane treatment of people seeking asylum in Australia and those who have come to Australia as refugees building on Australian traditions of generosity, openness, and fairness.

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Note to media: *The people affected by this policy are **not** part of the group brought to Australia under the Medevac legislation passed by the Federal Parliament last year against the wishes of the Coalition Government. Despite that legislation being repealed last December, the 250 or so refugees and people seeking asylum brought to Australia under that legislation remain in locked detention, primarily in Brisbane and Melbourne.*