



MEDIA RELEASE

Monday 11 May 2020

Justice for Refugees SA joins call on PM to ensure #NobodyLeftBehind during COVID-19

Adelaide-based Justice for Refugees SA has joined a call by over 200 civil society organisations to extend critical COVID-19 support to temporary visa holders, including refugees and people seeking asylum.

In an open letter sent to the Prime Minister last week, the group outlined their concerns that 1.1 million temporary visa holders across the country are in precarious situations as COVID-19 unfolds, with no access to JobKeeper or JobSeeker, limited access to Medicare, and visa insecurity, and called on the Prime Minister, Treasurer, and Minister for Families and Social Services to address these gaps.

Maintaining the health of everyone currently in Australia, regardless of their citizenship or visa status, is in the interests of us all. The health of the entire community depends on every one of us being able to safely observe the physical distancing, quarantine and isolation measures recommended by our health authorities. Financial strain and the inability for people on temporary protection visas to pay their rent will have a negative impact on our economy.

The coalition of organisations, including the Refugee Council of Australia, World Vision, Australian Council of Social Services, the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney and Australian Council of Trade Unions are responding to advice from epidemiologists and medical experts who are concerned that people who have lost their jobs and can't access any support will be forced to choose between protecting themselves and feeding their families.

One such voice is medical epidemiologist and principal research fellow at Melbourne's Burnet Institute, Professor Michael Toole AM who has over 40 years of experience working in public health, including ten years at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, coordinating their response to emergencies.

"To effectively suppress community transmission of the coronavirus in Australia, key elements of the response need to be accessible by vulnerable populations, which include those people living in crowded settings. These may include those who have not been eligible for government benefits and thus cannot afford decent housing, food and access to health care," Professor Michael Toole AM said.

"Australia must do all it can to ensure that vulnerable people such as those lacking permanent resident status are not disadvantaged by their inability to adhere to recommended public health measures like physical distancing and hand-washing."

Heeding this medical advice, the coalition of organisations is concerned that unless prompt action is taken to ensure people have support during this time, we could go down the path of Singapore. Lauded as a world-leading response to COVID-19, Singapore now records the most COVID-19 cases in all of Southeast Asia, due to a massive outbreak of the virus amongst migrant workers communities.

“We only have to look to Singapore to see the risk associated with excluding large numbers of people from crucial support. Like Australia, early interventions meant that cases were low in Singapore. Like Australia, the Singaporean government introduced extensive support packages but excluded large numbers of people on the basis of their visa status. In recent days, there has been a huge explosion of cases in Singapore among migrant workers living in cramped conditions, as they were unable to safely distance from one another,” said Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia, who is coordinating the joint letter.

“This should serve as a clear warning to Australia,” Mr Power said. “Many people on bridging or temporary visas are living in overcrowded situations due to financial hardship. As the financial fallout of the pandemic increases, this situation will only deteriorate. The Australian government has shown true leadership in its response to COVID-19 thus far. We’re simply asking them to fill in the gaps.”

Justice for Refugees SA is an active member of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), the peak body for refugees and the organisations that support them.

MEDIA: For further information or to arrange an interview please contact Sandy Boyce on 0409 283 004 or info@justiceforrefugeessa.org

Other attributable quotes

Professor Micahel Toole, AM, Principal Research fellow, Burnet Institute: “In crowded settings where physical distancing and personal hygiene are difficult, the virus has spread rapidly. This is demonstrated by rapidly escalating outbreaks among migrant workers in Singapore, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. In all of these countries, migrant workers have been housed in crowded dormitories with inadequate access to clean water and sanitation.”

Michele O’Neil, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions: “Australia is not the kind of country where we leave people to starve because they have been denied access to income and support. During Covid19 all people in Australia must be able to access the services they need to stay safe, put food on their table and keep a roof over their head.”

Dr Cassandra Goldie, CEO, Australian Council of Social Service: “Temporary migrants, including asylum seekers and international students, are being left to face destitution, without access to JobSeeker, JobKeeper or Medicare and this needs to be urgently fixed. Now more than ever we are seeing how much we rely on each other as a community and that the only way through this crisis is by working together to ensure nobody is left behind.”