



## **Inquiry into Temporary Migration**

### **Select Committee on Temporary Migration**

#### **Supplementary Submission to Submission 49**

## Settlement Services International (SSI)

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a community organisation and social business that supports newcomers and other Australians to achieve their full potential. We work with people who have experienced vulnerability, including refugees, people seeking asylum and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, to build capacity and enable them to overcome inequality. In our work we also work to engage with communities and businesses at the local and regional level in order to build capacity and enable successful settlement and integration.

SSI and its subsidiaries are pleased contribute this supplementary to the Committee's inquiry into temporary migration in Australia.

**Authorised by:** Greg Benson, General Manager, Client Services and Operations  
**Date:** 24 July 2020

## Supplementary Recommendations

SSI recommends the Australian Government:

1. **Grant access to income support and other social safety nets for temporary residents and their dependents in cases of extreme hardship:** The current health and economic crisis has created significant hardship for many temporary residents and their dependents who are forced to rely on charity to survive despite their contribution to the Australian economy.
2. **Improve processing times for onshore visa applications to reduce the numbers of people on bridging visas:** The current pause in migration and arrivals provides an opportunity for the Department of Home Affairs to address delays in processing onshore visa applications.
3. **Review the conditions of temporary visas to reduce the likelihood of prolonged uncertainty for temporary residents.** The current pause in all forms of migration offers an opportunity to review and reset temporary migration policy and get better alignment with the sound policy principles that have underpinned Australia's past record in migration in terms of social cohesion and integration and ensure that Australia remains a preferred destination for temporary residents to work, study or work while holidaying.

## Discussion

**The current health and economic crisis has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of temporary residents and their dependents and the hardships they are facing have been exacerbated by their limited access to the social safety net and other essential support in a time of extreme need.**

The current health and economic crisis has highlighted the precarious status of temporary residents and the piecemeal patchwork of measures to address their needs, even when faced with extreme need. The Committee would be aware of the contributions of temporary residents to the Australian economy and society, including through their skills, expertise and labour, and taxes paid and revenues generated including through export earnings in the education sector.

Despite their contributions, temporary residents are not eligible for income support, Medicare, settlement support or other universal services (Australian Parliament House, 2020). However, just like all Australians, temporary residents are vulnerable to unforeseen events which affect their ability to earn an income and be self-sufficient. In addition, all residents, irrespective of their residency status, require access in times of need to vital support such as family and domestic violence services, mental health support and homelessness services.

During Covid-19 SSI has seen many temporary residents who have been left destitute and unable to get back on their feet. In May 2020, SSI conducted a pulse survey of over 450 people in NSW on temporary humanitarian and bridging visas who sought support from SSI. It found that in the eight weeks prior to the survey:

- More than 80% of people had lost their job or had their hours reduced, which is far higher than the rate of job losses in the wider NSW economy;
- 62% of individuals indicated they have gone without meals;
- 75% could not pay the rent or a mortgage on time;
- 52% had to forgo medication and 50% had not accessed the health services they needed; and
- 79% had to borrow money from friends and family to pay for essential items (Settlement Services International, 2020).

By the end of May 2020, over 600 people had sought support from SSI. In response, SSI opened up an office two days a week to distribute food packages to individuals and families to address these emergency needs.

The Australian Government's criteria for access to income support in cases of exceptional need is piecemeal and largely rests on qualifying for Special Benefit or relying on the emergency relief program funded through the Department of Social Services. Many temporary residents are unable to satisfy the highly restrictive conditions which constitute a change of circumstances to access Special Benefit. In addition, many would be unaware of this and would have little or no

understanding of how to navigate complex Centrelink service systems or where to go to seek access to emergency relief.

Similarly, the current crisis, has highlighted gaps in terms of access to vital support in times of need for temporary residents including early intervention particularly in the areas of family and domestic violence, mental health, and homelessness. In SSI's experience, temporary residents are less likely to be aware of how to access this critical social support. This can manifest in an over-representation of temporary residents in the crisis response system in family and domestic violence shelters, mental health facilities and homelessness services which are often delivered at the State and Territory level.

As temporary residents continue to make a significant economic and fiscal contribution (in terms of taxes and/or export earnings) to Australia, in SSI's view, they should have access to income support in cases of extreme hardship and ready access to other social safety support rather than being pushed onto the crisis response system in States and Territories.

Possible ways forward include:

- a payment that is equivalent to the 'old' Newstart payment for temporary residents satisfying exceptional financial hardship criteria and/or;
- extend the eligibility criteria for the JobKeeper scheme to temporary residents in the sectors hardest hit by the economic crisis that are not currently eligible and/or;
- consideration of extending access to JobKeeper to temporary residents who have been contributing to the tax system for a defined residency period, say five years or more, and;
- redouble efforts to ensure that all temporary residents are made aware of entry points to vital support when needed such as family and domestic violence, mental health and homelessness and ensure that these services are adequately funded to provide early intervention irrespective of residency status.

**The scale of temporary migration in Australia is much larger and the purpose is very different to permanent, 'settler migration' which characterised migration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Temporary migration has deviated from the sound policy principles that have underpinned Australia's record in terms of social cohesion and integration.**

Temporary migration is a part of a shift to a demand-driven migration program (Migration Council Australia, 2013) and sectors such as education, agriculture, health care are key beneficiaries. SSI contends, along with the Productivity Commission, that the economic benefits of temporary migration (e.g. economic growth, export earnings, tax revenues) to these sectors should not be equated with the long-term social, economic and environmental interest of all Australians (Productivity Commission, 2016, p. 16).

Australia's strong record in achieving social cohesion and integration has been underpinned by a policy of multiculturalism and a migration system that works to uphold people's rights and

delivers, to the extent possible, certainty to promote a sense of welcome, fairness and belonging. Arguably, the current temporary migration system delivers a high degree of uncertainty for those on temporary visas and bridging visas which erodes the capacity of temporary residents to maximise their contribution to Australia.

A survey commissioned by the Australian Government of almost 5,000 temporary residents found high proportions of people who had held, one two or more visas (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016). The survey reported that 15 per cent of sponsored visa holders having five or more previous visas (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016). More recently, CEDA estimated that, excluding New Zealand citizens, there were 46,000 people who arrived on a temporary visa between 2007 and 2008 and remained on one at the end of 2016 (CEDA, 2019). This paints a picture of a people who are resident long-term on temporary visas which can undermine the trust of temporary residents, and potentially the wider Australian community, in the migration system and contributes to prolonged uncertainty among temporary residents.

Bridging visas are the second most common form of temporary visa and CEDA has suggested that this is a proxy for how the Australian Government is managing the intersection of temporary and permanent migration (CEDA, 2019). In 2019, there were almost 230,000 people in Australia holding a bridging visa, the highest figure on record (CEDA, 2019, p. 17). SSI agrees with CEDA, and others (Mares, 2016), that Australia should not “unintentionally create a class of perpetual temporary residents for whom permanent migration and the associated safety nets are always out of reach” (CEDA, 2019, p. 17).

The current pause in migration offers an opportunity for the Australian Government to reset aspects of temporary migration which could include:

- improving processing times for the determining visa applications (e.g. for spouse/partner visas, renewals of temporary visas, etc.) in a procedurally fair manner to reduce the current record-high numbers of people on bridging visas;
- reviewing the requirements and conditions of temporary visas particularly in situations where visa holders have had prolonged uncertainty

### Concluding remarks

The dramatic increase in temporary migration, in all its forms in Australia, has transformed Australia’s migration program and has been beneficial to Australia. In the face of a major health and economic crisis we are at a critical juncture which offers an opportunity to reflect on how temporary migration policy, and the temporary residents that are at the heart of that policy, can contribute to the long-term social, environmental and economic interests of all Australians.

## References

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