

Private Submission to Senate Inquiry into COVID-19

While I believe that the overall response of the Commonwealth Government and the National Cabinet to the COVID-19 pandemic has been good, I wish to draw the attention of the Senate Committee to significant matters which have not been addressed in the response to date (23 April 2020) and which pose large risks of fresh outbreaks of the virus.

Risks to workers and students on temporary visas

By not providing income support to the thousands of people who are in Australia temporarily on student and working visas and who have recently lost their jobs, many of these people will likely be forced into crowded conditions to reduce rental costs, or even into homelessness. Crowded living quarters and homelessness make social distancing difficult and contribute to poor health, and could lead to outbreaks of COVID-19 as has recently occurred in dormitories in Singapore where many foreign workers live.

It is not practical for many of these people on temporary visas to return to their home countries, as proposed by the Commonwealth Government. The Commonwealth's approach also undermines Australia's reputation as a welcoming country, and is likely to discourage many overseas students from coming to Australia when the pandemic is over.

Risks to asylum seekers and refugees

For the past nine years, I have been volunteering at a charity in Melbourne which does a great job in looking after many of the needs of thousands of asylum seekers and refugees. There are a number of areas of COVID-related risk to these people, and the wider community, which I wish to bring to the attention of the Senate Committee. These risks have not been recognised by the Commonwealth's response to the pandemic to date, and they could be addressed quite easily.

Firstly, around 1440 asylum seekers and refugees are currently held in national places of detention, in crowded conditions in which it is difficult to practise social distancing. A hotel in Preston in Melbourne is one such place where men are being held at close quarters. These conditions are conducive to the spread of COVID-19 and put at risk the health of the asylum seekers, refugees and the officials who work at the places of detention.

It is important to release these people from detention and place them in housing where they can more easily adhere to the current rules around social distancing. This will reduce the risk of them contracting COVID-19 and the risk of a cluster of cases developing when many people live in close quarters.

Secondly, even in these most difficult times, some asylum seekers who live in the community are having their SRSS (Status Resolution Support Services) payments taken from them by Commonwealth authorities. This increases the risk of these people either becoming homeless or crowding into small dwellings with friends and relatives. This, in turn, heightens the chances of outbreaks of COVID-19. I

SRSS payments should not be withdrawn from any asylum seekers, and should be restored to those who have lost them in recent years.

Thirdly, there is another large cohort which has so far not been afforded access to Job Seeker or Job Keeper support. Currently, around 37,000 people in Australia are on Bridging Visas awaiting decisions by federal authorities on their applications for protection visas. Some of these people have never had the right to work, while others have been supporting themselves and their families in casual, insecure work in areas such as hospitality, construction and Uber driving. With the advent of COVID-19, many have recently lost their livelihoods. Others have never been able to find work.

None of the thousands of people on Bridging Visas currently have access to Centrelink payments. Like everyone else, they need basic income to pay their rent and feed their families, and they now face a heightened risk of becoming homeless and destitute. Charities have done a superb job in supporting these and other asylum seekers for years, but the scale of this situation is beyond their capacity.

Without income support, there would be a sharp rise in homelessness and destitution among this large cohort of people, and this in turn would contribute to the risk of transmission of COVID-19 among these people and the wider community.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Andrew Trembath

23 April 2020