

Strengthening the Safety Net Bill



Introduction

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees, supporting and empowering people at the most critical junctures of their journey.

The ASRC welcomes the opportunity from the Community Affairs Legislation Committee to provide a submission on the Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Safety Net) Bill 2023.

ASRC welcomes elements of the Bill and encourages further reform, however, once again people seeking asylum and many refugees have been systemically excluded from the mainstream social support all people should have access to.

For more information please refer to ASRC's April 2023 report *Poverty Through Policy: The impact of excluding people seeking asylum from mainstream social support*, provided as an attachment to this submission.

Exclusion of people seeking asylum and refugees

While it is positive to see an increase in the Jobseeker payment, youth allowance, parenting payment, Austudy payment and disability support pension through an additional \$40 a day, this is still inadequate. Particularly for people seeking asylum and refugees on bridging visas who do not have access to mainstream social services.

Currently, 98% of people seeking asylum waiting for their visa application to be processed have no access to integral social support systems, including income, housing, educational assistance and legal aid.¹

Over the past seven years, the Federal Government has cut its budget of support for people seeking asylum by nearly 90% from \$300 million a year in 2016 to \$15 million.² Around 2% of people seeking asylum receive Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), which the government refers to as a 'transitional allowance'. However, the support provided through SRSS is also wholly inadequate to meet the cost of living in Australia as SRSS housing and income support are only provided at 89% of the rate provided by Centrelink. So while an increase in mainstream support will indirectly impact people seeking asylum it still leaves people living far below the poverty line.

Furthermore, choices by the Federal Government to deny people seeking asylum mainstream social support, study and work rights have forced many people into homelessness. Despite Anglicare and others highlighting the inadequacy of the Commonwealth rent assistance in

¹ ASRC, "Poverty through Policy: The impact of excluding people seeking asylum from mainstream social support" (2023)

² ASRC, "The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre's response to the 2023-24 Federal Budget: Small changes, but a cruel system remains" (2023) <https://asrc.org.au/2023/05/10/budget-2023-24/>

addressing housing affordability,³ people seeking asylum are, like in so many other areas, excluded from this support.

Sol, a refugee previously held on Nauru and currently in Australia on a bridging visa:

"The whole experience of being on a bridging visa (BV) is traumatic. I have applied to over 150 jobs, I am very skilled, I was doing a degree and I have management skills. But most employers want people they can grow with and train over a long period, I get far in job interviews but then they see my visa will expire. We are also in this rental and cost of living crisis, very soon people will be homeless because we cannot find stable jobs. It is really hard for someone like myself, in the situation the government has put me in, to get a house.

We have dignity, we are human beings. We have been living a life of conditions, all we are asking is for control of our lives. We sought asylum we asked for help and safety, and after 10 years of zero progress, the only thing that has increased is our age and trauma. We were adults and can take it day by day, but now the trauma has been transferred to our children.

BV is a pain that never goes away, a pain that sticks with you. It is a circle you have to live within. The government taxes you but you have zero rights. I know people who have been on BV for years, BV holders are abandoned people, fourth or fifth-class citizens. I have been here five years and know Australians are beautiful people, but they don't know what is happening under their name. We are not asking for much, just to live like all other people and give back to the community."⁴

Recommendations

Recommendation: Provide all people seeking asylum with access to mainstream social support, such as the Special Benefit program.

Recommendation: Refund Status Resolution Support Services to pre-2016 levels of \$300 million and expand eligibility.

Recommendation: Provide ongoing work rights and study rights for people seeking asylum on bridging visas for the duration of their application process.

³ The Guardian, "Commonwealth rent assistance has no effect on Australia's housing affordability, Anglicare says" (2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/09/commonwealth-rent--has-no-effect-on-australias-housing-affordability-anglicare-says>

⁴ ASRC, "The upcoming budget must restore rights and safety nets for people seeking asylum" (2023) <https://asrc.org.au/2023/04/18/poverty-through-policy/>