



SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

SOCIAL SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (PAYMENT INTEGRITY) BILL 2017

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees, asylum seekers and the organisations and individuals who work with them, representing 200 organisations and more than 900 individual members. RCOA promotes the adoption of humane, lawful and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants. RCOA consults regularly with its members, community leaders and people from refugee backgrounds and this submission is informed by their views.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the review of Australia's welfare system. Our concerns with this amendment is that it will unfairly impact refugee community members who may be required to travel overseas for extended periods of time, such as those who need to visit sick or dying family members in countries of asylum.

1. Schedule 2: Pension payment reduction for those outside Australia

- 1.1. Schedule 2 of the Bill severely reduces the portability of the Age Pension and Disability Support Pension. Currently, recipients of these pensions continue to be paid at their basic means-tested rate for 26 weeks after leaving Australia. Under the proposed amendment, payment of the pension supplement will cease after only six weeks overseas.
- 1.2. RCOA believes this amendment unfairly affects new migrants, especially those from refugee backgrounds. Due to the numerous problems with family reunion, refugee community members are often required to travel overseas for long periods of time to visit their relatives and community members, as they are not able to bring their family members to Australia. This is especially important for those who have sick or dying relatives in secondary countries of asylum. As such, refugee communities may need to travel overseas for several months. This Bill will impact their ability to receive the pension while overseas, placing further barriers on family reunification.
- 1.3. Refugee settlement service providers have reported to RCOA that they have noticed an increase in the prevalence and severity of incidences of disability among newly resettled refugees, as well as an increased proportion of elderly humanitarian entrants. This a reminder that collectively we need to ensure that newly arrived refugees who are elderly or living with a disability have the support they need to make a new life in Australia, including adequate social security.
- 1.4. By further limiting access to income support, especially for those who travel overseas, this amendment serves to compound the hardships of those who are already most vulnerable. In particular, refugees who experience a severe disability or who are no longer able to work will be at risk of losing their vital income support.

Recommendation 1

RCOA recommends that Schedule 2 not be passed. If this recommendation is not adopted, RCOA recommends the inclusion of powers to exempt those who need to travel overseas for a longer period due to special circumstances, such as visiting a dying relative.

Sydney office:

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010 Australia
Phone: (02) 9211 9333 • Fax: (02) 9211 9288
admin@refugeecouncil.org.au

Web: www.refugeecouncil.org.au • Twitter: @OzRefugeeCounc

Melbourne office:

Level 2, 313-315 Flinders Lane
Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9600 3302
melbourne@refugeecouncil.org.au

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