



**JENNY LEONG MP**

**MEMBER FOR NEWTOWN**

**THE  
GREENS**

**31 March 2020**

**The Hon Gladys Berejiklian**  
**Premier of NSW**  
52 Martin Place  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Premier,

**Re: Assistance for non-citizens during the pandemic**

I write on behalf of a large cohort of people living in the electorate of Newtown, our city and NSW, who are currently facing extremely difficult circumstances and have become very vulnerable as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the NSW Greens Multicultural spokesperson, I feel very strongly that to ensure a cohesive society where everyone is treated equally and is able to live free from discrimination and racism, we need to ensure that wherever possible all people are able to access basic needs, services and supports without regard to their citizenship status. This is particularly important during times of crisis, and even more so during this current pandemic.

Our office has been contacted by a significant number of non-citizens who do not have any resources to support themselves and are not able to access the measures put in place for citizens or those offered yesterday by the federal government to category 444 visa holders.

I am sure many members of parliament are also being contacted by people who live in their electorates about these issues, however I am also aware that many have long-standing practices to only provide constituent assistance to those who are on the electoral roll. We have never made this distinction in our office, as we believe all people who live in our community, our electorate, and our state, have the right to be represented and assisted. It is my strong hope that you feel the same.

Below is a brief outline of some of the immediate concerns for different groups that are not citizens currently living in NSW who are in desperate need and deserve to be treated equally and with dignity.

International students

We have been contacted about a number of international students who are studying full-time on scholarships at university, who are ineligible for any government assistance even though the scholarship does not have an allowance attached. These students all have casual jobs which are in jeopardy.

Loss of income for many international students, who often are already in high risk insecure jobs and housing, should be of serious concern and needs to be addressed to ensure the health and

safety of these students. Risks to them also pose increased risk to the broader community if they are unable to follow health advice due to the need to earn income to survive and keep a roof over their heads.

Students living in share accommodation are facing compounding problems as one or more of their housemates is forced to leave and return to their home country leaving those still with the tenancy with extra large rent commitments and /or arrears.

### Refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers who are on a range of different visas are not entitled to the same provisions offered to permanent residents in NSW. We support the urgent calls by the Refugee Council of Australia to allow access to Medicare and a financial safety net for all of these people.

We also support the call to remove refugees and asylum seekers from detention centres such as Villawood which are crowded and susceptible to increased risk of COVID-19 infection.

Additionally, it's crucial that those people who may not have a formal visa, are able to seek medical assistance without the fear of being taken into custody, as this will mean that these individuals face greater health risks to themselves and to the community generally.

### Temporary residents

We have been contacted by family members of people on 457 or 482 visas who are temporary residents and have been stranded overseas as Australia's borders were closed. They are people who have families and work and businesses here in NSW, but are unable to access support and assistance at this time. These people need support to be able to reunite with their families and their support networks in Australia. Many are based in Sydney and consider our wonderful city their home.

### Backpackers

We have been contacted by backpackers who were in casual employment here and have found themselves unemployed and unable to return to their country of origin as flights have been cancelled and available funds have dried up.

These people are reporting being moved out of hostel accommodation and moved on from caravan parks and similar locations. Additionally there are many whose visas are expiring and who are concerned about the penalties that may accrue.

These people and all temporary visa holders should be entitled to Medicare health benefits and emergency crisis housing and services should they require it.

## **Our Requests**

### Access to all NSW Government services and supports

I would urge you to make a decision and a clear statement that all services and supports - including access to health, housing and other NSW government services are able to be accessed by all people currently in our state.

Given the virus pays no attention to the colour of people's passports, it is impossible to see how any decisions to limit access to housing, healthcare, services and support is in line with health advice or is keeping these individuals and our broader community safe.

Clear messages need to be sent to those who may not normally be able to access services that their health is intricately linked to the health of our whole community and so they are able to get the care they need without risk of repercussions or based on their ability to pay.

#### Increased communication and warnings

The latest restrictions and police powers were barely communicated in English through mainstream media channels before being introduced, so it is hard to imagine how notice of these tough new restrictions with significant penalties attached have been shared with those who speak languages, and access news in languages other than English.

The news reports of police issuing \$1000 fines to two women working in a massage parlour in the CBD demonstrate the concerning nature of this. I hold serious doubts as to whether these people were aware of the restrictions or issued a warning, or had engaged someone to provide translation assistance prior to issuing this fine.

Given this, I would ask that you make it clear to NSW Police that targeting people with fines and harsh penalties who are unaware of the restrictions or appear to not be able to understand their directions due to their limited English would be unacceptable. Improvements also need to be made to how these messages are being communicated directly to people who may not engage with the mainstream media.

#### National Cabinet Priority

Given some of these issues can be addressed in NSW, but many need national decisions, I would urge you to make the care and support for non-citizens a priority for the next National Cabinet meeting.

Thank you for taking the time to read these concerns, and I hope you will take up these issues and provide the leadership that is much needed to make sure these vulnerable communities are cared for and supported.

**I look forward to your response and would welcome the chance to work cooperatively with you and your office to resolve these matters.**

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Leong". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Jenny Leong MP**  
**Member for Newtown**