



Refugee Council  
of Australia

**20 April 2020**

The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister of Australia  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

**Nobody Left Behind: Ensuring people seeking asylum, refugees and other vulnerable groups are included in COVID-19 responses**

We, the [# of orgs] organisations listed below, write to you to urgently address the gaps in the current COVID-19 responses and ensure that nobody is left behind.

We welcome the Australian Government's recognition of the needs within Australia and its action to minimise the health and economic impacts of the global pandemic. We need to ensure that **all** people in Australia are considered in COVID-19 policies and stimulus packages, especially the most vulnerable who currently are not able to access basic levels of support. Currently, there are highly vulnerable groups who have been left behind, including:

- People seeking asylum on bridging visas
- Temporary visa holders including refugees, temporary migrant workers and international students

As Australia and the world suffers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clearer than ever that how we treat the most vulnerable in our society directly impacts the health and wellbeing of all of us. If anyone is left destitute, with no access to affordable medical help or unable to minimise the risk of catching the virus, all of us are at greater risk.

COVID-19 does not discriminate, and neither should access to a safety net or improved assistance during this time. We are in this together and there must be support for all who need it, regardless of visa status.

We ask you to lead the Australian Government to ensure that all people in Australia are protected from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 by:

- 1. Ensuring all people have access to medical treatment and Medicare for people seeking asylum**
- 2. Ensuring all people have a financial safety net so they are not forced into destitution:**
  - a. Extend JobSeeker to people on bridging visas currently ineligible for income support
  - b. Extend JobKeeper to temporary visa holders so that businesses employing them can continue to operate
  - c. Remove penalties for Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) holders accessing Special Benefit in light of the pandemic and remove restrictions on accessing Special Benefit for Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or SHEV holders who are studying
- 3. Preventing people from losing legal status and access to support**

## 1. Access to medical treatment and Medicare for people seeking asylum

People seeking asylum who are living in the community without access to Medicare and basic financial support are some of those at greatest risk for COVID-19 and also those that cannot adhere to public health requirements like self-isolation. Unstable housing as a result of destitution impedes people's ability to adequately self-isolate. Lack of access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme means many cannot afford to purchase vital medications. This can further compromise people's general health and increase their need for hospital admission, which is challenging when the health system is experiencing increased demand due to COVID-19. Without a Medicare card, people will face significant obstacles to testing and treatment. A Medicare card is the only universally-accepted, easy-to-understand identification that facilitates healthcare access for testing and treatment. **All people in Australia need access to testing and related treatments and people seeking asylum require urgent access to Medicare.**

## 2. Access to a safety net to prevent destitution

This situation is growing worse by the day as people seeking asylum and other temporary visa holders lose their only form of income. Charities, which could not cope with the demand for emergency assistance before the pandemic, are now overwhelmed, at a time when they have to work even harder to maintain frontline services because of the spread of COVID-19. Key frontline asylum support services are now receiving more calls each day from people seeking crisis help than at any stage in their history, with many seeing requests triple since mid-March. Many of the people now asking for help were working and paying taxes until recent weeks but, excluded from any form of government assistance, have nothing to survive on. **JobSeeker must be extended to all people who do not have an alternative form of income to prevent people from being destitute and homeless.**

We welcome the announcement of an emergency relief funding boost to address the needs of vulnerable Australians and people on temporary visas. The Government's recognition that people are already falling through the cracks is admirable. Unfortunately, the emergency relief funding will not adequately meet the growing needs of people who have lost their jobs, have families to support but without access to a basic safety net. The cracks are widening and the current response does not provide a safety net to catch people need. We need a more dignified and sustainable solution to provide ongoing support to those who are most vulnerable.

The Government's [response package](#) extended access to JobSeeker payments to help support people who have lost their jobs or face reduced hours because of the pandemic. While Australian citizens and permanent visa holders can access JobSeeker payments, people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas and other temporary visa holders cannot. Refugees on temporary visas – TPVs or SHEVs – can access the equivalent of JobSeeker via Special Benefit, but they face strict limitations. The Government's [wage subsidy program JobKeeper](#) is not available to temporary visa holders, including refugees on TPVs and SHEVs and people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas, all of whom cannot return home.

From an economic perspective, we need to ensure that employers are able to retain the staff they need to remain viable. Employers are being denied the choice to retain key staff who are temporary visa holders, even if they have been employed with them for over 12 months. **JobKeeper must be extended to include people employed and holding temporary visas.**

People found to be refugees but granted only temporary visas continue to have no certainty about their visa status and their job security during the economic downturn. Despite working very hard to try to keep their jobs, some have already lost their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is clear many more will lose their employment in the near future.

People who hold SHEVs are anxious about the impact of the current pandemic on their ability to fulfil the pathway requirements of this visa. SHEV holders may apply for a limited range of permanent visas if they can provide evidence they have met a pathway which requires them to work or study in

a designated “regional” area for 3½ years without accessing Centrelink payments. SHEV holders who have already lost their employment are worried about accessing the Centrelink Special Benefits they would qualify for, as they fear this will impact upon their ability to fulfil the SHEV pathway. The arbitrary criteria of the SHEV pathway, and people’s worry about fulfilling them, may leave them destitute and even more at risk of COVID-19.

The pandemic has also made it even harder for SHEV holders to try to find appropriate work in a designated regional area. Without ongoing employment, they are much less likely to meet the work requirements of the few permanent visas that may otherwise be available to them. **The SHEV pathway criteria urgently need to change in order to protect SHEV holders and the Australian community.**

TPV and SHEV holders who are studying a course greater than 12 months are prevented from access to Special Benefit. This has created significant hardship for refugees, especially young people, who are studying at university or through a vocational education provider. These students are not eligible for commonwealth support for education, such as the Higher Education Loan Program and Commonwealth Supported Places. This means that they must pay full international student rates up front, causing them significant hardship. Many of these refugee students have lost the casual jobs they relied upon to support their study. Many are facing the difficult choice of withdrawing from studies to be eligible for Special Benefit or continue studying with no income and face destitution. Students have also had to move their studies online, with additional expenses for computers, internet access and other essentials. **The Special Benefits criteria should be amended to enable TPV and SHEV holders to receive support while studying full-time.**

### **3. Access to a valid visa**

The current visa system, which sees people apply for a bridging visa renewal and face either months-long delays or refusals without clear reasons, means that people who have made every effort to engage in the process face being left without regular visa status, with no rights or entitlements. Further flexibility should be applied to deadline extensions and visa conditions (like access to Medicare and work rights). While community legal centres continue to operate remotely, many charities and volunteer organisations who assisted people in filling forms related to visa applications and renewals have had to suspend these services. This creates a significant barrier for people to remain lawful and maintain their access to rights that are linked to visas, including Medicare and work rights. We need visa security for all: security in the visa they hold, security in knowing their applications will be processed in a timely way, and security in knowing they will have work rights and Medicare. **Visa grants and renewals need to be simplified and prompt.**

### **Urgent action required**

This suite of actions would prevent people from becoming homeless and ensure that people seeking asylum, refugees and other vulnerable temporary visa holders have the medical treatment they need to stay healthy and to avoid getting others sick. It would also ensure that Australia can rebuild – economically and socially – both during the crisis and afterwards.

This virus does not discriminate on the basis of citizenship or visa status. We must act to ensure the protection of all people currently living in Australia. This must include ensuring that everyone now in Australia has the means to survive, maintain a roof over their heads and stay well during this pandemic. Maintaining the health of everyone currently in Australia, regardless of their citizenship or visa status, is in the interests of all of us.

As a community, we have the opportunity during the COVID-19 pandemic to make decisions that are compassionate, constructive and responsible. Only in doing so, can we ensure Australia emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic with a resilient, healthy and cohesive community. There are tens of thousands of refugees, people seeking asylum, and other migrants in Australia who make up our communities, and they cannot be forgotten at this time of great need. Nobody should be left behind.

**SIGNED BY**

1. Refugee Council of Australia

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