



## **BRIEFING NOTE: DRASTIC REDUCTIONS TO INCOME SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM**

Updated 24 April 2018

### **1. Key messages**

An estimated 13,000 highly vulnerable people seeking asylum could be at risk of destitution and homelessness in mid-2018, due to a drastic reduction in income support and other life-saving supports.

### **2. The Issue**

#### **2.1. Support for people seeking asylum**

2.1.1. People seeking asylum (whether by boat or plane) often need support to survive in Australia while their claims for protection are being processed. These highly vulnerable and often traumatised people are often unable to work and are not entitled to the social security payments available to others.

2.1.2. This support has been provided in recent years through the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) program. The program provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of Newstart allowance), casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling. The service is funded by the Department of Home Affairs (formerly the Department of Immigration and Border Protection), but delivered by contracted service providers nationally, including the Australian Red Cross and Life Without Barriers.

2.1.3. Not all people seeking asylum are entitled to access the Program. Eligibility is determined by the Department of Home Affairs, and people must apply through an SRSS service provider. There are different levels ('bands') of support, depending on the circumstances of the client. The Department issues an operational policy manual to providers, which includes information on eligibility.

#### **2.2. Recent reductions in SRSS**

2.2.4. There have been several recent changes (beginning in August 2017) restricting eligibility for SRSS:

- People who are studying full-time are no longer eligible and have been exited from the program on this ground;
- People who have sent money home to family or friends have been exited from the program;
- People on other types of visas (typically people who come by plane, for example students or visitors) are no longer eligible while their other ('substantive') visa is valid (often for years).

2.2.5. The Department has also indicated that people could lose access to SRSS because of transfers of money to an account in Australia that is not in the client's name. This has great implications for people who transfer money to pay their rent, shared utility bills, and other expenses. It is unclear how this aspect of the policy will be monitored.

2.2.6. As well, SRSS providers are reporting that it is almost impossible for people to regain access to the program (for example, after they have lost their jobs) or to be escalated to a higher level of support if they become more vulnerable.

#### **2.3. Future reductions in SRSS**

2.3.7. Imminent changes to the design of the program will see eligibility for SRSS severely restricted, with the Government position indicating that people who have work rights and do not meet a high threshold of vulnerability are expected to secure employment.

2.3.8. From **9 April 2018**, the Department will advise contracted providers of the first wave of people on SRSS who will be reassessed under the redesigned program, which will be “single” adult men and women with work rights. They will ask for the providers to conduct a vulnerability assessment. SRSS providers must provide information to the Department by 7 May 2018.

2.3.9. On **4 June 2018**, anyone not identified as vulnerable will begin to be exited from SRSS, losing all access to basic income support, case management, and torture and trauma counselling. This same process will continue for other waves of people, including families, from 21 May 2018. Further details about timelines and vulnerability assessments are in section 6.

2.3.10. People will be expected to find work without further employment support. Currently, people on bridging visas can only get support under Stream A of jobactive (mainly access to computers and the Internet).

## **2.4. Consequences**

2.4.11. These changes, combined, are likely to dramatically reduce the number of people able to access this program, even if those people have no other means of support and will still be waiting for many months before their protection claims are resolved.

2.4.12. We have already heard of:

- Bright young students who have won scholarships to university losing access to income support;
- Pregnant women who fled family violence but found themselves without access to any money or appropriate health care for another two years while her partner visa was still in effect.

2.4.13. We would expect that if the policy changes are fully implemented, thousands of people could become homeless and forced to survive on charity. They will stop taking medicines, skip meals, take exploitative jobs, and are at high risk of acts of desperation, including self-harm.

## **3. Changes in detail**

### **3.1. Who this will affect**

3.1.1. As at the end of February 2018, [there were 15,023 applications by people seeking asylum by boat still waiting for a decision by the Department](#), over three years after the Department introduced its so-called ‘fast track’ system to accelerate processing of protection claims. While not all of these people will be on SRSS (as, for example, some will be working), they are all potentially affected by losing eligibility. We have heard already that some service providers have seen their number of clients halve. Our estimate of 12,500 people being at risk is based on the historical rates of SRSS provision, but we have not yet received official statistics from the Department and SRSS providers cannot provide these to us.

3.1.2. Currently, 73% of people in this group (the ‘Legacy Caseload’) [have been granted a temporary protection visa](#) (including Safe Haven Enterprise Visas). Those who are not granted a visa, however, are likely to be waiting for several years for a decision at judicial review. Our understanding is that dates for judicial review hearings are being set in 2020.

3.1.3. As well, these changes affect people who claim protection after coming to Australia on another visa (such as a student or a partner visa). These people will generally have a valid visa which will not expire for years. By denying them access to SRSS while their other visas are valid, these people are denied access to Medicare and any form of income support. Further, processing times for these people in recent years have blown out to several years.

### **3.2. How this will affect them**

3.2.4. For people who came by boat, this is the latest of a series of punitive policies that have threatened their ability to survive. Many of these people have been in detention, including in Nauru or Manus Island. Many of them will have waited in limbo for years for their claims to be processed, and some of them have gone through several different reassessment processes. Most of them will have been barred from working until recently.

3.2.5. During this time, they have not had access to English classes or other settlement services available to resettled refugees, and because of administrative difficulties have often lost their lawful

right to live in the community or their access to Medicare. Most of these people will have had limited support by caseworkers, as the most common level of support only requires monthly phone contact. They have had to scrape by in Australia, typically without networks, on 89% of a living allowance that is widely condemned as inadequate for Australians.

3.2.6. These are people already living on the margins of our society, often through the support of their own communities or overstretched voluntary community organisations. These are people who, because of pre-existing and continuing trauma, are already highly vulnerable and suffer significantly poorer mental and physical health than others.

3.2.7. Depriving these people of income support will have severe consequences on their access to housing, health care, education, and employment. It will mean many of these people will be at least delayed, and probably denied, the ability to settle for years to come. At its worst, it could be the tipping point for many people and drive them to acts of desperation, including acts of self-harm.

3.2.8. The voluntary sector, including many people from refugee communities themselves, will also feel the impact of these changes. After four years of punitive policy changes, many people and organisations are already exhausted and overstretched, and the long-term nature of support required will be beyond the resources of most.

3.2.9. For people coming by plane, we have heard reports of women, including pregnant women who have been victims of family violence, that are not able to access any income support or health services because of this change in policy.

#### **4. What needs to happen**

4.1.1. This change is entirely within the discretion of the Minister, and does not require Cabinet approval or legislative change to reverse. Reversing these changes could be effected through negotiation with the Minister on other matters. The political gain is hard to perceive, as most Australians do not even know there are people seeking asylum living in the community. In the context of the overall budget, the savings also appear to be relatively minor.

4.1.2. This could be achieved by internal pressure within the government, and external pressure by politicians, other levels of government, media, and civil society.

#### **5. What has already happened**

5.1.1. The Department did not communicate these changes to key stakeholders, including the Refugee Council. SRSS providers are, by contract, limited in what can be disclosed to others. Instead, we were alerted to the issue by members who are not funded by the government reporting that many former SRSS clients were turning up advising that they had been exited from SRSS.

5.1.2. The Refugee Council met with the Department in January 2018 to clarify details about the policy changes, and the Department has undertaken to follow up on more detailed questions. We also understand that SRSS providers have been seeking to clarify recent policy changes before discussing these changes with their clients.

5.1.3. There has been some clarification and some changes to the recent changes following internal advocacy. The Department has changed its policy on money transfers so that debts can only be incurred for payments after 3 November 2017, when the SRSS providers were notified of the policy. The policy also now clarifies that a threshold of \$1000 must be reached over a twelve-month period. However, our members are still reporting that most clients seem unaware of any changes of policy and it is unclear if people previously removed from the program can regain access to support.

5.1.4. On 8 February 2018, the Refugee Council and the ASRC spoke together on this issue on ABC media. The Refugee Council, its members and other stakeholders are working in collaboration through a small working group on a wider campaign. Members, including ASRC, Anglicare and JRS have also issued media releases. On 26 March 2018, the Refugee Council and the Australian Council of Social Service issued a joint media release condemning the future changes to SRSS.

## **6. Further details on the assessments and timeframe**

### **6.1. Assessments**

6.1.1. Initial indications from the Department were that people would be assessed as to their “job-readiness” before potential exit from the SRSS program. The most recent information is that job readiness will not form a measure of eligibility. Rather, SRSS providers and the Department will assess a person’s vulnerability.

6.1.2. The four elements to the vulnerability assessment are:

- A. Physical health barriers that are ongoing; permanent disability; or cognitive impairment
- B. Mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place
- C. Single parents with pre-school aged children (children under six); pregnant women *with complications*; a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability; people aged 70 and over
- D. A major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood, etc)

6.1.3. The Department will also use its own information to conduct assessments (the Community Protection Assessment Tool, CPAT) and may seek a second opinion on certain issues via experts, e.g. for health matters using the Chief Medical Officer or Bupa.

### **6.2. Timeframe**

- **9 April 2018:** the Department provides a list of all single adult men and women with work rights on Band 6 to SRSS providers (“**first wave**”), excluding certain Red Cross and Marist 180 clients (delayed until July 2018). SRSS providers conduct vulnerability assessments and must report back to the Department by **7 May 2018**. This will be approximately 3,000 people.
- **1 May 2018:** new SRSS Program model will apply to new applicants.
- **7 May 2018:** deadline for SRSS providers to provide details of vulnerability to the Department on “**first wave**” clients for consideration
- **21 May 2018:** Department notifies SRSS providers about families in Band 6 who have work rights (“**second wave**”).
- **4 June 2018:** **First wave** clients not identified as having an excluding vulnerability will be exited from the SRSS program (including basic financial support), whether they have employment or not.