

24 December 2020

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

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to express cohealth's deep concern at the plans to strip financial assistance for refugees and people seeking asylum previously transferred to Australia from Papua New Guinea and Nauru due to serious health need.

This change will see people classified as 'transitory persons' moved from community detention on to Final Departure Bridging Visas. While they will be granted work rights they will have no access to Federal financial assistance. My understanding is that in Victoria this change will impact on 164 people, and will occur in the New Year.

These are highly vulnerable people who were brought to Australia for the treatment of serious medical conditions under the Government's medical transfer process.¹ The transfers occurred because the individuals' medical needs were assessed as being so acute that they could not be adequately treated in Nauru or PNG. Some were transferred to accompany family members with acute medical needs.

The majority of people in this group were given refugee status in PNG or Nauru under refugee status determination processes established with Australian Government support. Others were transferred to Australia before their refugee status assessment was complete. A smaller number were assessed and not given refugee status.

Since entering Australia the people affected by this policy have been denied the right to work or to study. None of them has had a previous opportunity to work in Australia or to get their qualifications locally recognised. Some are fluent in English but many are not, having had no access to the Adult Migrant English Program.

While they are now being granted the right to work, it is likely that most will not find work, given current workforce conditions. While everyone would support the idea of giving people the right to work and support themselves if they can, removing any form of financial safety net will mean the people subject to this decision will struggle to survive.

cohealth, as a large Victorian community health organisation, provides health care and support daily to people who are refugees and seeking asylum. In particular, the cohealth Refugee Asylum Seeker Health Program (RASHP), funded by the Victorian Government, supports the health and wellbeing of people of refugee and

asylum seeker backgrounds. A team of nurses, coordination support workers, counsellors, women's health nurses, physiotherapists and people working in community engagement including bi-cultural workers, provides health assessment and monitoring, care co-ordination, capacity building, advocacy, education and the provision of person-centred culturally responsive health services. The RASHP team has worked with many people who have lost their jobs due to restrictions and business closures and has seen first-hand how hard it is to find employment during the pandemic, despite the concerted efforts of our clients. Finding employment will be an even bigger task for people subject to this decision.

At the same time, the various agencies, like cohealth, that support people seeking asylum are overstretched. Our RASHP team already spend significant time advocating on behalf of clients to help them access basic services, such as employment providers, food banks and housing support. This work has increased during the pandemic as the job market has contracted. Indeed, 30-40% of clients whose circumstances were stable before the pandemic, and had no longer needed cohealth support, have been driven back to our service as a result of loss of jobs and income and the accompanying increased insecurity. We have also seen a dramatic increase in the proportion of people referred to RASHP who are currently seeking asylum (in 2020 they make up nearly half of people referred, compared to less than 5% in 2019). While RASHP clients are spending time trying to secure the foundations of safety and security – particularly an adequate income - it is impossible to focus on improving their health.

cohealth has been seeing the real and distressing impact the loss of income is having on people trying to survive and support their families during the pandemic. The people excluded from an income support safety net tell our nurses and support workers how the loss of income is impacting on their physical and mental health:

1. A father of two young children had been working two casual jobs to support his family. However these jobs ceased during the first round of COVID-19 restrictions and he was not eligible for income support. He has since been searching hard for other work, independently and through support services. However, the job hunt was hard due to his visa status, not having a car to get to work sites and limited English. He eventually found work, but the employer had poor occupational health and safety standards. After only a week he suffered a serious back injury and was unable to work at all.

cohealth's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Program has provided him with extensive support, including: linking him to job network providers; supporting his wife to contact agencies to assist with rent payment; providing groceries, personal items and children's clothing to the family; and referring him for x-rays and CT scans, physiotherapy and GPs, along with providing pharmacy waivers for medications. Our client's health has made a slow improvement and he has recently begun to look for work again. cohealth continues to support the family.

2. Another client lost his hospitality job at the beginning of the pandemic, however he too was not eligible for income support.

Despite pro-actively looking for work throughout the pandemic and lock down period our client was unable to find work. The cohealth Refugee Health Nurse referred him to a community program that supports disadvantaged job seekers into paid employment but there were no opportunities available through this option either.

The lack of money to pay the rent and purchase food left our client highly stressed and reliant on charities for support. Pre-existing health conditions were exacerbated by not being able to purchase the foods required to manage these conditions.

The lack of employment opportunities, purpose and poverty impacted on his mental health and he required referral to mental health services.

The job loss and lack of social welfare safety net created a cascade effect impacting on every aspect of our client's health and well-being which resulted in increased use of health services co-ordinated by cohealth's Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Program, including: more GP appointments and investigations; referrals to a counsellor; increased well-being checks and risk assessment screenings; and multiple referrals for food, financial and material aid to services and charities.

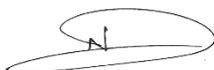
Tens of thousands of people seeking asylum and refugees already rely on charity from community organisations and the good will of Australians for rent, food and healthcare to survive. These organisations and communities – cohealth included - are already stretched and should not be the only source of support for those locked out of the job market.

We are deeply troubled that this most recent decision will thrust even more people into hardship and distress, and further burden already overwhelmed community organisations such as cohealth and their workers to fill the support gap.

There is a serious risk of homelessness, food insecurity and poorer health.

I urge you to extend income support payments to these most vulnerable people and families in Australia to ensure they do not become destitute.

Yours sincerely,



Nicole Bartholomeusz
Chief Executive

Nicole.bartholomeusz@cohealth.org.au

24 December 2020

The Hon. Peter Dutton
Minister for Home Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600
Peter.Dutton.MP@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister Dutton,

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This change will see people classified as 'transitory persons' moved from community detention on to Final Departure Bridging Visas. While they will be granted work rights they will have no access to Federal financial assistance. My understanding is that in Victoria this change will impact on 164 people, and will occur in the New Year.

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I urge you to extend income support payments to these most vulnerable people and families in Australia to ensure they do not become destitute.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Nicole', enclosed within a large, loopy oval scribble.

Nicole Bartholomeusz
Chief Executive

Nicole.bartholomeusz@cohealth.org.au