

07 April 2020

Dear Prime Minister Morrison

Cc: Minister Greg Hunt  
Minister Anne Ruston

I am writing to call on you to urgently include people seeking asylum and refugees in your COVID-19 crisis plan.

I urge you and your government to immediately introduce an emergency plan to give all people and families seeking asylum inclusive access to:

- Medicare and Telehealth services
- Centrelink income support payments with standard eligibility criteria
- Social services including for family violence
- Any COVID-19 crisis support services, funds from stimulus package, and wage subsidies for workers

30,000 women, men and children are on temporary and bridging visas or without a visa. Thousands of these people are excluded from any safety net of Medicare and Centrelink.

Up to 7,000 people seeking asylum, many of whom are children, are cut off from their only safety net of Status Resolution Support Services and live without income support or medical care.

The thousands of people seeking asylum who are in casual, insecure or exploitative work are at risk of losing work hours in the crisis.

cohealth, as a large Victorian community health organisation, provides health care and support daily to people who are refugees and seeking asylum. We are seeing the real and distressing impact the loss of income is having on people trying to survive and support their families. These accounts illustrate the dire reality that are facing:

Mohammed, currently on a bridging visa, seeking asylum describes: 'I've been working for a tour company, casual shifts, but just enough to support my wife and three small children. But the company has shut down now because of coronavirus and I have no work and no money. I'm so worried about my children. I'm terrified what will happen to me and my family when I can't pay the rent, bills or buy food and the other things my children need.'

Another father, Gopal, is seeking asylum and living on a bridging visa E with no work rights. Gopal is married with two children – he is the sole income earner and the family are ineligible for Centrelink payments due to their visa category. Gopal has supported his family with casual work in a factory, but due to COVID-19 his shifts have been cut back. He expects to lose his job soon. He cannot see any other possible job options in the current environment. With the prospect of no income, Medicare card, or a Health Care Card that would help his family access services, he is despairing about the family's future. Gopal's mental health is suffering and the exclusion from all of the mainstream welfare supports that have been announced in response to COVID-19 only furthers the family's sense of isolation, marginalisation and persecution – one of the many factors as to why they fled their country of origin in the first place.

We are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of these particularly vulnerable families. Parents have no support to feed and help families, elderly and children survive COVID-19.

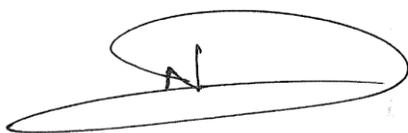
Tens of thousands of people seeking asylum and refugees rely on charity from service organisations and the good will of Australians for rent, food and healthcare to survive. These organisations and communities are already stretched and will be overwhelmed in the coming weeks and months due to COVID-19 economic and health impacts.

There is a serious risk of homelessness, food insecurity, poorer health and disruption to children's education (from limited access to laptops and internet data other technology for online learning).

This pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for our society and I applaud the efforts of your government to respond with decisive action and ground-breaking support packages. I only hope that you decide to extend that support to all people in our community, including refugees and asylum seekers.

I look forward to your prompt action to protect these most vulnerable people and families in Australia.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Nicole', enclosed within a large, hand-drawn oval shape.

**Nicole Bartholomeusz**  
**Chief Executive**

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everyone is welcome at **cohealth**



cohealth acknowledge the ancestors and traditional custodians of the land on which our offices stand and pay respect to Elders past and present.