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MEDIA RELEASE

Refugee Council warns government cuts to support services for asylum seekers could push people into destitution

Today, the Department of Home Affairs will begin a staggered exit of around 1500 people seeking asylum from the lifesaving Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS). The news comes despite warnings that these cuts could result in thousands of vulnerable people being pushed into destitution and homelessness.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is alarmed by this move and is calling on Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to immediately put an end to this cruel, inhuman and illogical policy.

The Refugee Council of Australia along with leaders from ten national NGOs, including the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), with a delegation of people seeking asylum and community members, travelled to Canberra last Monday June 18, when the cuts had been expected to start. They engaged in dialogue with the Federal government about the devastating impacts these cuts will have on individuals and communities.

“Last week was an important moment, in that we had organisations representing hundreds of thousands of people across the country, coming together to warn the government of the absolute destitution we are expecting to see when the critical support services offered through the SRSS are no longer available to thousands of people,” Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia said.

“People are most likely to find paid work and flourish when they are adequately supported to do so. You do not help people rebuild their lives by pushing them into destitution. We strongly oppose this decision and it must be reversed as a matter of urgency to prevent great harm being done in our communities,” Cassandra Goldie, CEO of the Australian Council of Social Service said.

The Refugee Council of Australia understands that from Wednesday 27 June, the first round of around 1500 people will begin to receive notice that they will be excluded from the SRSS program. From July 25 they will lose the income support they receive through the SRSS – around 89% of Newstart, or \$35 a day. From August 1, this same group of people will lose access to critical torture trauma counselling and case management. The majority of this group are adult men and women.

“Can you imagine being sent a letter one day telling you that the only means you have to support yourself will be gone in four weeks?

“If the Turnbull government seriously wants people seeking asylum to enter the workforce, it is going about it in completely the wrong way. Many people are telling us they want to work, but are struggling to do so.

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What the Federal government should be doing is offering training and support for people on the SRSS, rather than forcing people into destitution which will only isolate them further,” Paul Power said.

The Refugee Council of Australia strongly supports all efforts to help people seeking asylum to find work but notes that they face many barriers to gaining work. Employers are reluctant to employ people who have no Australian work experience, no local referees and limited proficiency in English and are often confused about the legality of employing people who are on short-term Bridging Visas.

“We have already seen the impact of cuts to SRSS with a significant increase in demand for our services, particularly housing, food and employment services. It's common sense that in order for people to find a job they need support and somewhere to live. These cuts mean men, women and children will be left homeless and destitute. It's incomprehensive, unnecessary and inhumane,” Director of Advocacy and Campaigns at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Jana Favero said.

This is only the beginning of a range of cuts to the SRSS, which is expected to affect another 5500 people in the next few months across Australia, including families with young children and pregnant mothers.

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