

BACKGROUND STATEMENT DOCUMENT

Changes to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) for People Seeking Asylum

Preamble

Local Government is an essential tier of government working in partnership with the State and Commonwealth Governments to improve the overall quality of life and achieve the best outcomes for people in local communities. Local government's strength is in activities and services that are place based and responsive to the community.

Local Governments support a wide range of services that help both people seeking asylum and refugees, through direct service provision and through collaborative partnerships with community groups.

From the recognition of various local government areas as Refugee Welcome Zones, the establishment of Interfaith Networks, free access to maternal and child health services, local government seeks to create a community that is welcoming and inclusive.

This Statement represents the agreed views of local government bodies across Victoria that carry the greatest burden of real, every-day support for asylum seekers.

Joint Statement

We the undersigned representatives of local governments in Victoria note that providing adequate resources for support for people seeking asylum based in the community is a duty of the Australian nation and primarily a responsibility of the Commonwealth Government of Australia.

We want the Australian Government to support local government with adequate resources to meet the needs of people seeking asylum who live in the community.

Over 4,000 children nationally could be affected by the changes and we call upon the Australian Government to adhere to its national and international obligations in accordance with the Charter of Human Rights.

We strongly believe more effective collaboration and coordination is essential between Commonwealth, State and Local Governments and we seek the following commitments from the Australian Government:

Reversal of the job readiness changes for SRSS eligibility

Changes to the Federal Government's SRSS program will cut income and case management support of many people seeking asylum and dramatically increase the demand for material aid resources at the local municipality level. This action will leave many people destitute and requests for places to live, money for clothes, food and medicine, will only escalate.

People seeking asylum are already seeking emergency assistance in increasing numbers from agencies and other charities throughout Australia. Many of these organisations receive no money from the government. There is a genuine risk that people seeking asylum will increasingly fail to integrate as healthy and productive community members and the changes to the SRSS program will erode the social cohesion that Australia has invested so much in achieving.

Commitment One: We want the Australian Government to reverse the recent assessment changes to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program and provide adequate income and case management support for people seeking asylum while they seek sustainable employment.

Additional funding to enable accurate assessment and support for job readiness

Accurate job readiness assessment for sustainable employment is difficult to assess and providers of SRSS case management are not trained employment consultants. There is a strong concern in the sector that the majority of people seeking asylum affected by the SRSS changes will be even more disadvantaged than other job seekers in the marketplace.

Federal government funded jobactive providers only provide extremely limited Stream A level job seeking support for people seeking asylum who register voluntarily with their service. People seeking asylum face significant challenges in finding employment, accentuated by the uncertainty of their status in Australia, language and cultural barriers, and a lack of work place understanding. People seeking asylum come from unbelievably traumatic situations, often suffering from physical and mental abuse, homelessness and periods of starvation. The effects of these deprivations are often ongoing and a far higher level of support will be required to prepare for job readiness. Current funding levels for Stream A employment outcomes do not incentivise jobactive providers to provide any job assessment or employment consultant support for people seeking asylum.

Commitment Two: We strongly call on the Australian Government to provide funding to enable accurate initial job readiness assessment by trained employment consultants who understand the unique and significant barriers that people seeking asylum face.

Commitment Three: We want the Australian Government to provide additional funding to enable asylum seekers to be registered as Stream B and C job seekers within the jobactive network of agencies to facilitate ongoing job readiness assessment and skilled employment consultant support.

Local level coordination

Local Government takes account of the needs of all groups in the community when allocating its limited resources. Informed local area planning is essential for Local Government to provide adequate and timely support for asylum seekers and support groups in the community, while ensuring that support is well targeted and equitably distributed.

Community organisations are often among the first responders in providing support to vulnerable community members and provide a service that is distinct to that of funded service providers. Operating in isolation and with limited funds, these organisations do not currently have the resources available to enable a coordinated response which at times results in the unnecessary duplication of effort and a less efficient use of already scant resources.

Commitment Four: The Australian Government needs to improve local area coordination in cooperation with LGA's. We call on the Australian Government to work with local municipalities in exploring the feasibility of local coordination points to better respond to local area need.

Emergency relief and material aid resources

The Australian Government must recognise that local government and the community work together as key partners when addressing the complex needs of people seeking asylum in Australia. A wide range of community service and voluntary organisations offer essential assistance to people seeking asylum and many rely on philanthropic, voluntary or charitable contributions to enable them to deliver these services. Voluntary agencies do not have the capacity to service this growing need and stretched volunteer agencies cannot be expected to provide the level of service required for the growing demand that changes to the SRSS policy will bring.

Commitment Five: We strongly call on the Australian Government to provide greater resourcing to reinforce the capacity of community service and voluntary organisations to assist people seeking asylum to live safely in local communities and receive emergency relief and material aid support until such time as they receive a substantive visa or are deported.

Accountability

Additional resourcing will bring with it an obligation to ensure that Local Government allocates resources appropriately and resource areas of identified need.

We commit to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

We commit to evaluate the application of resources in people seeking asylum support programs by measuring service delivery against agreed objectives and targets. The evaluation process will include annual program reports and Inter-Governmental consultations to review program effectiveness and refine objectives and activities.