



St Dominic's 'Welcoming the Stranger' Asylum Seeker Support Group

The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP
Treasurer, Member for Kooyong
695 Burke Road
Camberwell, VIC, 3124

Dear Mr Frydenberg

We write, as members of your Electorate who have been working for some years now with people seeking asylum in Australia, to advocate that asylum seekers in the Australian community who are in hardship as a result of the COVID19 pandemic be given temporary access to a financial safety net, Medicare, and adequate shelter if they are homeless.

We applaud the government for the measures that have been taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic, but we write to raise serious concerns on behalf of people that remain on the margins of our community and vulnerable to both the health dangers of the COVID 19 virus and the economic consequences of the protection measures that have been taken.

We cannot keep our community safe, rebuild our society and continue to uphold decency and justice as foundations of our society if these people are excluded from our protection regime. As Bishop Vincent Long of Paramatta, Chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, expressed it recently:

Excluding asylum-seekers and temporary protection visa holders from government assistance is not only inhumane and unworthy of a decent society, it is also dangerous to public health at this time. Similarly, international students and non-residents on working visas are not eligible for income support. Would a good host, who invited guests to contribute to the economy by purchasing educational services or filling skills gaps, simply turn a blind eye to their needs at a time like this?

The dangers of this exclusion are manifold. Drawing on our own experience and that of various Catholic agencies we submit that they include

- hunger: Jesuit Refugee Service Australia and other agencies have delivered emergency food packages to many refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations who have lost jobs, have no safety net and cannot go home.
- homelessness: Many of the women, children, and men who are receiving this support were already living in severely overcrowded dwellings. The exclusion of these people from a basic temporary net is creating a situation in which people cannot protect themselves or the wider community from COVID-19.
- Exacerbation of particular vulnerabilities: People who have been trafficked, victims of modern slavery, people seeking asylum, and women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence are all excluded from support and access to Medicare and safe homes. This is not who we want to be as a nation.

Welcoming the Stranger Asylum Seeker Support Group
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State governments are now providing some support. This is not just welcome financial support it is an act of compassion and solidarity that recognises the vulnerability of these people and the need to protect all people affected by COVID 19 for public health reasons.

Another particularly vulnerable group are those who came seeking Australia's protection and who are currently being held in hotels and detention centres across Australia. Given the circumstances in which they live, this group cannot meet required physical distancing measures and are vulnerable to guards and service providers entering and leaving the facility at will, and potentially carrying COVID-19.

We ask you, as a senior member of the Government, to join your colleagues in remembering your responsibility for ensuring safety and human rights across our community. People in our community who are seeking protection and who are in hardship as a result of the COVID19 pandemic must be given temporary access to a financial safety net, Medicare, and adequate shelter if they are homeless. Nobody should be left behind in this time of extraordinary need.

We would be happy to expand on any of the matters raised in this letter, and to meet with you or your staff if that would assist your endeavours to support people seeking asylum to manage the Coronavirus, and the building of a safer society for us all.

Yours in solidarity

Peter Charles
Chair
St Dominic's Welcoming the Stranger' Asylum Seeker Support Group
May 13 , 2020

Fr Peter Toan OP
Parish priest

cc

The Hon Peter Dutton MP
Minister for Home Affairs
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Senator the Hon Kristina Keneally MP
Shadow Minister for Home Affairs, and for Immigration and Citizenship
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600