

2.2 CHANGES TO THE STATUS RESOLUTION SUPPORT SERVICES (SRSS) PROGRAM ADVOCACY

Responsible Director: Julie Salomon

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 1. Notes the impact on people living in the community seeking asylum who may be affected by proposed changes to the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) program.*
- 2. Writes to the Honourable Peter Dutton, Minister for Home Affairs, to advocate against the changes to the SRSS Program as part of a regional advocacy response led by the City of Greater Dandenong.*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to highlight the detrimental impact on people seeking asylum living in the community who are at risk of losing core services and financial support due to the Federal Government's changes in the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program and seek Council's endorsement for further advocacy.

BACKGROUND

The Federal Government has proposed changes to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) Program that will be implemented over the next two months. These changes are likely to see thousands of people being removed from SRSS services with no safety net, living in the community. The City of Greater Dandenong is requesting that Monash Council contribute to a joint advocacy response, calling on the government to reverse these changes.

The Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) provides vital assistance to people living in the community awaiting a determination on their claim for protection. It provides a basic living allowance (89% of Newstart allowance, equating to \$247 per week), casework support, assistance in finding housing, and access to torture and trauma counselling.

AMES Australia and Life without Barriers will be only the two remaining SRSS program providers, with Red Cross no longer being funded from 20 June 2018.

The Department of Home Affairs (formerly the Department of Immigration and Border Protection) funds the SRSS program and determines eligibility for the program and the level of support they receive. People who secure work and receive income in excess of their allowance exit the SRSS program, as do people who receive a temporary protection or safe haven enterprise visa. Those who are granted one of these visas are eligible for the full Newstart allowance if unemployed. While the number of people in the program has steadily declined

over the years, there are still some 13,000 people across Australia and 5,863 people in Victoria who are reliant on SRSS support (Department of Home Affairs).

As a result of the changes made late last year many people suddenly lost their SRSS support. This included people studying fulltime and those found to have sent money home to family or friends, leaving them with no financial or service assistance. Likewise people who have secured work but then lost it have found it almost impossible to get support again when they need it.

DISCUSSION

The Government is now planning further changes that in the next two months will result in additional people becoming ineligible. People receiving SRSS support are currently being reassessed and if found to have no identifiable vulnerabilities will be deemed to be 'work ready' and will exit the program from 4th June 2018. For families the process will run between late May and 18 July 2018. This withdrawal of support may occur even if during this time they have been unable to secure a job.

These changes will have an impact on already vulnerable people who are seeking protection while living in the community. Given the existing vulnerability these people may also be at risk of becoming homeless. The removal of critical support will not only leave people without basic needs, it will have an extremely harmful impact on their mental, physical and emotional health, impeding their capacity to support themselves and settle in Australia. This level of risk for people seeking asylum is unprecedented and will bring significant challenges for support and advocacy. Much of the burden will fall on faith based agencies, churches and charities to support asylum seekers in the community with no Government funding. These agencies are already stretched providing essential services to other vulnerable members of our community.

The overwhelming majority of people seeking asylum, desperately wish to support themselves rather than rely on charity or government assistance. However many people on SRSS find working difficult because of significant mental and physical health issues, or because they are carers of young children. Others who want to work find it difficult to find jobs because of a lack of Australian experience and networks, or because of language barriers and uncertainty over their bridging visa making them less attractive to employers. While encouraging people to work brings significant benefits to the individual and the community, they should not be removed from financial assistance until they have secured employment and can support themselves.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Council has made a significant commitment through the adoption of "A Healthy and Resilient Monash Integrated Plan 2017-2021 to strive towards a healthy, resilient and socially inclusive diverse community. Council actively promotes inclusion of those who may be vulnerable and experiencing isolation including newly arrived and temporary residents. While the number of people seeking asylum living in the Monash community may be small, many come to the municipality to access health, education, charitable and other services. There is also the possibility of an increase in homelessness in the municipality as a result of people losing their housing and being forced to stay with friends or sleep rough.

Council also recognises the importance of social and economic participation for all. These changes will push an already vulnerable cohort into further hardship and limiting opportunities to build resilience and financial independence.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Providing adequate access to food, housing, medical care and employment are basic human rights. We should provide people seeking asylum with the opportunity to rebuild their lives and thrive whilst integrating into our community.

Advocating for people seeking asylum to continue to have access to vital SRSS support, directly supports the Monash community by ensuring that every member of our community is valued and feels safe.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

Advocating for the continuation of the current SRSS support model to those who need it most, supports asylum seeker's human rights to protection from inhuman and degrading treatment (s.10), to protection of families and children (s.17) and to liberty and security of person (s.21) as outlined in *The Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (xi).

Moreover, Australia has an international obligation to provide protection to refugees as a signatory to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Refugee Convention). Typically individuals and families arrive in Australia with little money, limited or no English, and with limited knowledge of Australia's laws and systems.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications for advocacy actions.

CONCLUSION

Monash Council has an important role in advocating against the changes and imploring the Federal government to reconsider this policy that removes vital SRSS support. People seeking asylum should not be excluded from financial and service supports until they have secured employment and can support themselves.

It is recommended that Council advocates for the Federal Government to reverse the proposed changes and restore current levels of financial and service support.

ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT 1: Copy of Letter to the Hon. Peter Dutton MP, Minister for Home Affairs from the Mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong.