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Edmund Rice Centre
for Justice & Community Education

How to address destitution and homelessness for people seeking refugee protection

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The Albanese Government’s reforms of the Protection Visa system are a welcome development. Additional resources at all points in the decision-making process are vital as is the reinstatement of funded legal assistance for people to navigate the complex protection application process. To ensure that these essential reforms are able to be fully realised, people who have been in the process for years need support for their basic needs. There are people seeking refugee protection in Australia who are in crisis, living in deep poverty, facing homelessness and hunger. Thousands remain without a visa even after applying and engaging in the process, leaving them without work rights or health coverage. Others have had their Bridging visa renewed but with work rights removed. This can be fixed with the reinstatement of eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Service which provides minimal essential assistance, including a basic living allowance (\$49 per day).

What is urgently needed

1. Ensure people have a valid Bridging Visa with work rights and Medicare, enabling people who can support themselves to do so.
2. Expand the eligibility criteria of the SRSS Program to ensure that those in crisis get access to basic support they need to stay engaged in the process.

Who is affected?

Over 120,000 people have sought refugee protection in Australia and are waiting for a decision.¹ Despite visa and labour-market challenges, many people seeking asylum have been able to find work and support themselves. However, approximately **5,000 people in Australia** require basic support to help them survive while they wait for a decision. This includes people with no work rights, **families with children, the elderly, and people with disabilities and chronic health issues.**

The majority of those people in crisis have been waiting several years for a decision as delays in the protection process grew.

Quick snapshot of the current situation

The Issue	What it means for people
The Program has been cut by 95% or over \$280 million	The cuts began in 2017, with the then Coalition Government radically shifting from a program providing casework and financial support to one with restrictive eligibility. The Program went from a budget of \$300 million in 2015-16 to just \$16 million in 2023-24, and the number of people assisted has

	dropped from more than 29,000 in 2015 to just 1,057 people who receive financial assistance now.
The SRSS Program has become more restrictive and the people who need it most are excluded	There are 120,000 people waiting for a resolution of the protection applications and approximately 5,000 people are struggling to survive because they do not qualify for SRSS support. They would be eligible based on their needs but are excluded because of where they are in the process.
The SRSS Program offers minimal (but vital) assistance of just \$49 a day	The SRSS Program is successor to the support program for people seeking asylum first introduced by the Howard Coalition Government in 2006. The program provides a basic living allowance (capped at 89% of the JobSeeker allowance), very limited casework support and sometimes access to torture and trauma counselling.
Charities cannot meet the need for emergency assistance	The demand for help far outstrips what charities and community groups have been able to provide . Community organisations across Australia report that they are not able to meet this increased scale and complexity of need.
State governments have wound back support in expectation that the Federal Government would step in	After providing some short-term assistance to fill the gap created by the Federal Government's cuts, state governments are now progressively withdrawing , with NSW ending its assistance in 2023.
Lengthy delays in visa processing have made the situation much worse	This lack of access to assistance is coupled with shocking waiting times for decisions for people who apply for protection onshore, with the Government's own analysis showing that many people are waiting more than 11 years without access to a safety net for a final resolution of their asylum application.

Case studies of people living in poverty because they are not eligible for SRSS support

Delay in renewing Bridging visas leaves many unable to continue working to support themselves

Omid arrived in Australia by boat in 2012 and was able to apply for protection in 2017. He was on a Bridging Visa E (BVE) while he waited for a decision. He was on a BVE and was working in construction on the Sydney Light Rail and Metro projects, earning a decent wage to support himself in his own apartment. At the end of 2022, his visa expired, and his requests for a renewal were refused. Omid went from supporting himself through work to draining his savings, and now he relies on charities to survive, as he is not permitted to work without a visa. He says that he loves nothing more than working and loves to be employed and to contribute to the community.

Access for vulnerable solo parent families

Sahar, an Iranian mother with three young children, came by boat with her husband and is waiting for judicial review of their protection case. They are not eligible for the SRSS Program because they are seeking review by the courts. Her husband was getting some casual work, but this was reduced over the Christmas period. They sought some financial support for rent from a charity. The husband took his own life in February, leaving the family distraught and with no income. Sahar's caring responsibilities and her health conditions limit her ability to work. She relies on charities for financial assistance to cover her rent. With no access to SRSS payments and limited charity support going towards her rent, she struggles to access food for her children and herself, often keeping the children home from school because she has nothing to pack in their lunch boxes. She also has an overdue electricity bill of more than \$1,000 and fears that her energy will be cut. Emergency funds are needed for such circumstances.

Hidden homelessness, up to 20% of the sleeping rough population

People seeking asylum have faced housing stress for many years, and they are also susceptible to the housing crisis like others who rely on rental accommodation. In the City of Sydney alone, over 20% of the people sleeping rough are people who have sought protection. Saad, a man from Quetta, Pakistan, arrived in 2013 and sought protection. He lodged an application for judicial review over five years ago and is still waiting for a hearing date. He presented to a charity after being discharged from a hospital into homelessness. He was experiencing regular suicidal thoughts and a sense of hopelessness due to the uncertainty of his visa. He had recently lost his job due to a work injury, which led him to accruing rental arrears and being evicted. Saad is not eligible for any assistance because he is still waiting for the courts to hear his case. He is receiving limited support through charities to cover his temporary accommodation, but this is very likely to cease soon, placing him at high risk of homelessness. If he were eligible for SRSS, this would provide more stability and a pathway to address his immediate needs and be independent in the community.