



28 May 2020

## SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE

# Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG) is an Australian refugee-led entity with the purpose of creating spaces and platforms for voices of former refugees, people seeking asylum, and people from refugee-like backgrounds to be included and inform decisions, policies, public and media discourse about them.

We are making our submission based on the Australia wide consultation NRAAG conducted virtually on 22nd of April 2020 with over 34 people from refugee backgrounds, people seeking asylum and refugee members of LGBTIQ community and other feedback received by other community members in response to Federal Government's COVID-19 health and economic measures. We attach the full outcomes report "***Leaving Nobody Behind***" as an appendix to this submission where we detail the gaps and feedback involved with COVID-19 through this report. We put forward compiled 25 recommendations to address concerns raised.

COVID-19 has brought the Australian communities together in a unified way to combat the effects of a global health crisis. While the Australian Government's unprecedented response has been welcomed by many in the refugee community groups such as citizens and permanent residents who are able to access many of the health and financial responses, major policy gaps have meant many vulnerable groups have been left behind in this time of crisis.

The consultation recorded many barriers, shortfalls and unmet needs with the measures introduced for vulnerable groups. Our key findings from this consultation are classed in four broad categories:

- Asylum issues
- Digital divide and literacy
- Community safety and wellbeing
- Other emerging issues

1. The consultation demonstrated that the most hard-hit group within refugee communities are people on Bridging Visas (BV), people on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV), the elderly and members of the LGBTIQ refugee community.
2. The community holds grave concerns for those in detention and requests their imminent release from closed detention facilities considering overcrowding and the associated health concerns.
3. Many Bridging Visa holders who are left without any basic financial and health support and work rights are at the verge of destitution and feel significant and crippling uncertainty and looming fear of being deported. Many no longer have access to Special Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments who are also not entitled to any COVID-19 supplements including JobSeeker payment as a basic safety net.
4. Refugees holding SHEV are barred from vital JobKeeper subsidy and face challenges in applying for Special Benefits, even when losing their jobs. Community members called for equity, fairness and leniency of complexities at times of crisis.
5. The consultation highlighted the dilemma for many groups within the refugee community to close the digital divide for equitable access to online resources and services. While it affects mostly the elderly and those with limited language proficiency, digital literacy also poses major challenges for homeschooling and online learning for refugee youth and children and their parents.
6. The consultation raised the importance of community safety and wellbeing and the necessary infrastructure needed in times like this. It was discussed that rising misinformation and panic in refugee communities are symptoms of inadequate, de-centralised, and limited translated audio-visual information. Appropriate and accessible resources must be made available to all in accordance to community needs.
7. Thousands of refugees remain separated from their immediate families for up to 9 years with refugees on temporary protection visas disallowed from ever reuniting with their families. Community members expressed concerns about the complex intersection of legal limbo and family separation both through humanitarian resettlement and inability of visas such as SHEV and TPV to reunite with immediate family members stranded in conflict zones.
8. The LGBTIQ refugee community members raised the importance of including their complex needs as part of service responses as they are especially vulnerable in this environment.
9. Other pertinent issues raised by community members included inadequate level of support for refugees with disability, importance of in-language centralised information on COVID-19 and a showcase of strengths in times of crisis.

**See attached for the full report below.**



**NRAAG**  
National Refugee-  
led Advisory and  
Advocacy Group

# Leaving Nobody Behind

**COVID-19  
National Refugee  
Community  
Consultation**

**Outcomes Report  
May 2020**

*The authorship of this report belongs to the NRAAG Steering Committee.*

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	3
<b>Key Recommendations</b>	4
<b>COVID-19 National Consultation – Outcomes Report</b>	6
About NRAAG	6
Guiding Principle	6
About the Consultation	6
<b>Asylum Issues</b>	7
1.1 Grave concerns for people in detention	7
1.2 Adverse impacts on SHEV holders	7
1.3 Bridging Visa holders at risk of homelessness	8
1.4 Confusion about accessibility to different support packages	9
1.5 Advocating to state governments for more support	10
<b>Digital Divide and Digital Literacy</b>	10
2.1 Challenges in accessing services online	10
2.2 Digital divide felt more by the elderly	10
2.3 The challenges of home schooling and online learning	11
<b>Community Safety and Wellbeing</b>	11
3.1 Circulation of misinformation and speculations from overseas	11
3.2 The intersection of legal limbo and family separation during COVID-19	12
3.3 The unique and complex issues faced by LGBTIQ community	12
3.4 Domestic violence	13
<b>Other Emerging Issues</b>	13
4.1 Refugees with disability	13
4.2 In-language information on COVID-19	13
4.3 Strength in a time of crisis	14
<b>Next Steps</b>	14

## Executive Summary

COVID-19 has brought the Australian communities together in a unified way to combat the effects of a global health crisis. While the Australian Government's unprecedented response has been welcomed by many in the refugee community groups such as citizens and permanent residents who are able to access many of the health and financial responses, major policy gaps have meant many vulnerable groups have been left behind in this time of crisis.

This **Consultation Outcomes Report** focuses on the feedback NRAAG that has received via its national community consultation held virtually on the 22nd of April 2020.

This report aims to consolidate community feedback on the gaps, challenges and barriers in light of COVID-19 rapid responses. The consultation recorded many barriers, shortfalls and unmet needs with the measures introduced for vulnerable groups. Our key findings from this consultation are classed in four broad categories:

1. Asylum issues
2. Digital divide and literacy
3. Community safety and wellbeing
4. Other emerging issues

The consultation demonstrated that the most hard-hit group within refugee communities are people on Bridging Visas (BV), people on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV), the elderly and members of the LGBTIQ refugee community.

The community holds grave concerns for those in detention and requests their imminent release from closed detention facilities considering overcrowding and the associated health concerns.

Many Bridging Visa holders who are left without any basic financial and health support to get through this crisis are concerned about facing destitution and crippling uncertainty.

Refugees holding SHEV are barred from vital JobKeeper subsidy and face challenges in

applying for Special Benefits, even when losing their jobs. Community members called for equity, fairness and leniency of complexities at times of crisis.

The consultation highlighted the dilemma for many groups within the refugee community to close the digital divide for equitable access to online resources and services. While it affects mostly the elderly, digital literacy also poses major challenges for homeschooling and online learning for refugee youth and children and their parents.

The consultation raised the importance of community safety and wellbeing and the necessary infrastructure needed in times like this. It was discussed that rising misinformation and panic in refugee communities are symptoms of inadequate, de-centralised, and limited translated audio-visual information. Appropriate and accessible resources must be made available to all.

Community members expressed concerns about the complex intersection of legal limbo and family separation both through humanitarian resettlement and inability of visas such as SHEV and TPV to reunite with immediate family members stranded in conflict zones.

The LGBTIQ refugee community members raised the importance of including their complex needs as part of service responses as they are especially vulnerable in this environment.

Other pertinent issues raised by community members included inadequate level of support for refugees with disability, importance of in-language centralised information on COVID-19 and a showcase of strengths in times of crisis.

The consultation raised factors that have significantly hampered psychological safety, livelihood and protection for many groups in the refugee community. Community members insisted on equity and leaving no one behind, as COVID-19 is a collective fight.

# Key Recommendations

## 1. Asylum

### Addressing refugees in detention

1. *The Australian Border Force and the Department of Home Affairs should imminently place detainees in appropriate community accommodation on Bridging Visas and allow them financial and access to basic support.*
2. *The Australian Border Force and the Department of Home Affairs should relax the red tape around detention visits.*

### Equity and leniency for SHEV and TPV holders

3. *The Department of Home Affairs should not penalise SHEV holders for accessing Special Benefits and make an exception for the COVID-19 period access to Special Benefits as sitting outside the SHEV pathway requirements.*
4. *The Department of Home Affairs should waive Special Benefits' strict asset and income tests during the COVID-19 period.*
5. *The Department of Home Affairs, The Department of Social Services and Services Australia need to extend equity and relief to TPV and SHEV holders according to their needs.*
6. *Services Australia, Department of Social Services and the Department of Home Affairs should work together to release fact sheets (with in-language translations) for each visa category so that consistent advice can be given to SHEV, TPV and other Bridging Visa holders about what support and services they are eligible for.*

### Reversing risks of destitution for Bridging Visa holders

7. *The Government should allow access to Medicare to all Bridging Visa holders to lessen the risk to their health and in turn the health of all Australian communities.*
8. *The Government should ensure that Bridging Visa holders can access a basic financial safety net to enable them to adhere to self-isolation and survival during COVID-19 by relaxing SRSS payment eligibility or extending access to federal COVID19 stimulus packages.*

## 2. Digital Divide and Digital Literacy

### Challenges in accessing services online

9. *Government services (such as Centrelink, ATO, etc.) and health departments' websites should provide in-language video demonstrations for vulnerable communities to help navigate and access their services online.*
10. *Settlement service providers should collaborate with community leaders to co-design and co-deliver digital capacity building programs to help refugees and people seeking asylum navigate through the complex online platforms.*

### Closing the gap for the elderly and other vulnerable groups

11. *The Government, service providers and health departments should offer users the option of listening to the onscreen text in their language through use of audio functionality, which is currently available in English only.*
12. *The Government and service providers should use social media platforms already widely accessed by the community such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook to share in-language informative content, particularly in the form of videos*

### **More effective homeschooling and online learning**

13. *Schools, service providers and government health and education departments should use clear and easily understandable language when addressing parents and endeavour to provide translated resources as much as possible.*
14. *The state education departments should facilitate virtual parent-teacher support meetings to guide parents and enable them to better support their children's education.*

### **In-language information on COVID-19**

15. *The state and federal health departments should use audio and video visuals as necessary measures to maximise the spread of awareness about health and financial responses.*
16. *The Government and service providers should provide support through connecting bilingual staff with the most vulnerable members of the refugee communities such as the elderly to diffuse further isolation*

## **3. Community Safety and Wellbeing**

### **Reversing circulation of misinformation and speculations**

17. *Settlement services, the state and federal government departments should work on more visual, video and interactive translated resources to ease access especially for refugees with low to nil English literacy.*
18. *Settlement services, the state and federal government departments' multicultural liaison officers and community based organisations need to work together to centralise availability of translated resources.*
19. *Settlement services, the state and federal government departments need to better coordinate with community based organisations and need to work together on increasing awareness about the translated resources.*

### **Overcoming the intersection of legal limbo and family separation during COVID-19**

20. *The Government should immediately lift restrictions from SHEV and TPV holders in accessing vital government economic support such as JobKeeper and those on Bridging Visas, a safety net.*
21. *The Government should continue processing the humanitarian intake for the financial year 2019-2020 with a view to resettle the Annual Humanitarian arrivals as soon as practicable.*
22. *Mental health and trauma support services should provide additional psychosocial and mental health support services for all groups of refugees and people seeking asylum.*

### **Addressing the needs of the LGBTIQ community**

23. *Service providers and Government departments need to recognise and address the unique challenges faced by the LGBTIQ community in their COVID-19 responses.*
24. *Service providers and Government departments' COVID-19 responses should be informed by consulting with members of the LGBTIQ community.*

### **Domestic Violence**

25. *The frontline services responding to cases of family violence need to hire extra bilingual and culturally sensitive workers to address the increased demand for support that encourages reporting.*

# COVID-19 National Consultation – Outcomes Report

## About NRAAG

The National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG) is an Australian refugee-led entity with the purpose of creating spaces and platforms for voices of former refugees, people seeking asylum, and people from refugee-like backgrounds to be included in decisions, policies, public and media discourse about them. NRAAG's aim is to ensure that the people whose lives are impacted by decisions made and actions taken are also playing an essential part in the decision-making process. NRAAG envisions to do this by informing key policies, service delivery, campaigns, research, and initiatives affecting the lives of its constituents with a range of partners and allies.

## Guiding Principle

The guiding principle deeply entrenched in all of NRAAG's work is the belief that given the opportunity and the right resources, those with first-hand experience of an issue, the impacted communities, are best placed to devise the most effective and efficient solutions to their own challenges. With this strengths-based approach and the expertise of lived experience, we aim to join forces with key players in the refugee rights movement to find solutions that will positively enhance the lives of refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.

## About the Consultation

NRAAG held a national community consultation on the 22nd of April 2020 with people of refugee backgrounds, people seeking asylum and further marginalised groups within refugee communities including members of the LGBTIQ community. The aim of this consultation was to receive direct community feedback about the health and financial support services introduced by the Australian federal and state governments in response to COVID-19. NRAAG aimed to host a safe space for community members, including those in very precarious and uncertain legal predicaments to come together and highlight the challenges they are facing in a COVID-19 environment. The consultation further aimed to discuss and put forward recommendations and solutions to help address these highlighted issues.

The consultation was conducted online through the video conferencing platform, Zoom, and focused on the following topics:

1. Asylum issues
2. Digital divide and literacy
3. Community safety and wellbeing
4. Other emerging issues

# 1. Asylum Issues

People seeking asylum on Bridging Visas, refugees on temporary protection visas such as SHEV and TPV face immediate risk as they are not offered many of the economical and health protections offered to other members of Australian communities.

Below are some of the top issues identified by community leaders, and people seeking asylum and refugees on TPV and SHEV.

## 1.1 Grave concerns for people in detention

While none of the participants were someone currently in detention, many of them were former detainees from the early 2000's that have now settled and are Australian citizens. The discussion revolved around how to better provide community support for people in detention who need family and community support in a more consistent and sustained way. Whilst participants recognised connecting to detainees as a necessity, participants shared that currently there is an existing gap in connecting with people seeking asylum in detention, and further highlighted the excessive red tape around detention visits. A prominent concern participant raised was that settled community members were very overwhelmed with supporting their own, often resourceless, community-based organisations to address settlement issues and other emerging issues diaspora communities experience.

Furthermore, many community representatives and those working with refugee community based organisations raised concerns about the closed nature of detention centres and accommodation facilities in light of required physical distancing in crowded spaces. As many of them could reflect on their previous personal journeys in detention, they expressed concerns about the safety of detainees given they suffer from compromised physical and mental health that makes them more prone to this epidemic. Communities believe that detainees more than ever need to be placed in community settings as it is both an economically viable option and in the interests of their health and paramount to the health of the public.

### Recommendations

- *The Australian Border Force and the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) should imminently place detainees in appropriate community accommodation on Bridging Visas and allow them financial and access to basic support.*
- *The Australian Border Force and DHA should relax the red tape around detention visits.*

## 1.2 Adverse impacts on SHEV holders

There are concerns about processing times, strict eligibility criteria and the adverse impacts on SHEV holders' pathway requirements despite having no other source of income.

### Barriers in accessing Special Benefits

Community members reported that the application for Special Benefits can take a long time to process while they are waiting without any source of income with many of them who have lost their jobs and closed down their businesses. Most of these people are the sole providers for their families. Community leaders reported that this has created family rift especially for families who are stranded in other parts of the world and are barred from reuniting in Australia. As a result, community members on SHEV and TPV visas are going through an overwhelming level of stress and anxiety not being able to provide for them and their families.

SHEV holders are not eligible for the JobKeeper Subsidy. However, if a person on a SHEV receives Special Benefit for more than 30 months, this may affect their eligibility for another visa via the SHEV Pathway. Students over 18 on a SHEV or TPV studying full time are not eligible for these supports.

A community member on TPV said that, as soon as COVID-19 hit, it meant that he had to close down his business. He currently has no access to Special Benefits or any of the COVID-19 supplementary payments or JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments living on the brink of destitution. He provided that the process of applying for Special Benefits is very lengthy and cumbersome where he was still required to provide assets test and is required to meet the “limited savings” rule which requires SHEV and TPV holders to hold no more than fortnightly Special Benefit payment amount which is approximately 80% of the JobSeeker Payment. This in many instances is less \$500 a fortnight.

In the case of a university student who wrote to NRAAG, explained that he has been left out of any options. He provided:

*“I am a full time second year university student studying law on scholarship and have lost my part time job. I went to Centrelink to apply for the Special Benefit. I was told that I was not eligible due to being a full time student and the duration of my course being longer than one year. I am not sure how to survive.”*

People like him have no access to any support in this vulnerable time and face the prospect of dropping out of their tertiary degree to face destitution if they cannot find a job. Other community members emphasised that there was an overwhelming confusion about what support could be accessed and whether accessing this basic safety net would compromise their legal status.

#### Other adverse impacts on SHEV pathway

Due to the SHEV pathway requirement not to rely on Government support, community members reported that many people despite desperately needing assistance are hesitant about applying for Special Benefits. Community members argued that all visa holders need to be treated with fairness and equity during these difficult times. Community members further raised that the period that they are accessing Commonwealth support needs to be excluded from compromising their SHEV pathway requirements. They noted that:

*“If there is a suspension of Mutual Obligations Requirements by Jobactive and Services Australia applied to all job seekers in Australia for COVID-19 period, then people on temporary protection visas need similar leniency as they are equally affected along with their businesses and their contribution to the Australian economy.”*

#### **Recommendations**

- DHA should not penalise SHEV holders for accessing Special Benefits and make an exception for the COVID-19 period access to Special Benefit as sitting outside the SHEV pathway requirements.
- DHA should waive Special Benefit’s strict asset and income tests during the COVID-19 crisis.
- DHA, Department of Social Services (DSS) and Services Australia need to extend equity and relief to TPV and SHEV holders according to their needs.

#### **1.2 Bridging Visa holders at risk of homelessness**

Community members reported that bridging visas holders specifically are facing risks of homelessness due to lack of access to the government COVID-19 support. A number of participants

on Bridging Visa E (Subclass 050) as well as community leaders pointed out an overwhelming number of other BVE holders in the community facing similar challenges. This visa (3 to 6 months longevity) lets people seeking asylum to lawfully remain in Australia while their immigration matters are finalised or they make arrangements to leave Australia, having exhausted all legal avenues. A community member raised concerns that without access to Medicare, it is likely that he will not access any health services even if he falls ill. He further said:

*“The problematic aspect of this visa is the fact that they do not give us the right to work and we do not qualify for SRSS\* and any COVID-19 support packages, leaving us very desperate with the possibility of getting homeless, without food and sick.”*

--- BVE 050 holder residing in WA, Australia

Another person seeking asylum on Bridging Visa also reported that he was increasingly anxious at the prospects of his current 3-month visa expiring again where he was compelled to apply all over again both for the visa and other support where possible and wait for an unpredictable time to have another visa or fear becoming unlawful.

It was also raised that many interviews relating to protection visas for LGBTIQ people seeking asylum have been rescheduled, whereas for some they are processed. There is a concern regarding procedural fairness as there are many interviews and hearings that are being rescheduled with no explanation. This might have an impact when the government is rushing through applications and it has created many inconsistencies.

Furthermore, community members supporting those on Bridging Visas are concerned that they are running out of capacity to support them out of destitution. These conditions of vulnerability are far reaching in terms of their impact in reaching families with children who have been rejected from the High Court. With no work rights and entitlement to any of the support payments, they are now faced with destitution under the COVID-19 circumstances.

### **Recommendations**

- *The Government should allow access to Medicare to all Bridging Visa holders to lessen risk to their health and in turn the health of all Australian communities.*
- *The Government should ensure that Bridging Visa holders can access a basic financial safety net to enable them to adhere to self-isolation and survival during COVID-19 by relaxing SRSS payment eligibility or extending access to federal COVID19 stimulus packages.*

### **1.4 Confusion about accessibility to different support packages**

It was noted that initially there was a degree of confusion within the community about access and eligibility requirements for the different support packages announced by the governments due to lack of clear communication and in-language information. The confusion has since eased to a small degree with more clarity provided both by the government and some organisations. However, there is still an urgent need for translated fact sheets outlining the different supports and services available to each visa category.

Some participants also raised that while the Federal Government's support package to the Red Cross to assist all groups is welcomed, the eligibility requirements do not cover everyone and is not adequate enough to fill the need for supporting people on BVs, TPVs and SHEVs.

### **Recommendations**

- *Services Australia, DSS and DHA should work together to release fact sheets (with in-language translations) for each visa category so that consistent advice can be given to*

*SHEV, TPV and other Bridging Visa holders about what support and services they are eligible for.*

### **1.5 Advocating to state governments for more support**

Participants welcomed the role of gap filling by the state governments. For instance, some participants raised that the [Tasmanian government](#)'s support package of \$3 million designed to support communities including international students could be used positively to encourage other state and territory governments and introduce similar measures to fill the gaps in federal policy that have left behind people seeking asylum and many other vulnerable communities.

## **2. Digital Divide and Digital Literacy**

With major disruptions to daily life and a shift to working remotely, participants spoke about a silver lining of the pandemic for some members of the community in being encouraged to learn more about and embrace using technology in different ways. However, this has also brought about numerous challenges to many others. It has further exacerbated the situation for some vulnerable members of the community who were already finding it challenging to access and navigate support services. These include elderly members in the community, parents with young children, those with low levels of literacy in their own languages as well as English, isolated women and others. The top issues identified by the participants are as follows.

### **2.1 Challenges in accessing services online**

Community members expressed concerns over the removal of the face to face element of service delivery to suit digital or online delivery methods in light of the physical distancing requirement. This has proven to be enormously difficult for many members of the community as it has left them confused about how to best access and communicate with their service providers now. This includes government services such as Centrelink and settlement services and remote support that community members need to access on a regular basis.

#### **Recommendations**

- *Government services (such as Centrelink, ATO, etc.) and health departments' websites should provide in-language video demonstrations for vulnerable communities to help navigate and access their services online.*
- *Settlement service providers should collaborate with community leaders to co-design and co-deliver digital capacity building programs to help refugees and people seeking asylum navigate through the complex online platforms.*

### **2.2 Digital divide felt more by the elderly**

It was raised that while there are many in the community who have been able to adjust to virtually socialising with friends and family via social media and other digital platforms, it has been a particularly challenging time for the elderly in the community with already limited to no digital capacity. Participants raised concerns that the elderly are pushed to further isolation due to this digital divide and that current efforts to engage and support them are not enough and need to increase.

#### **Recommendations**

- *The Government, service providers and health departments should offer users the option of listening to the onscreen text in their language through use of audio functionality, which is currently available in English only.*
- *The Government and service providers should use social media platforms already widely accessed by the community such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook to share in-language informative content, particularly in the form of videos.*

### 2.3 The challenges of home schooling and online learning

Community members reported that for many families from refugee backgrounds, the transition of their children's schooling to online learning has been a great challenge. While limited digital literacy and capacity remains the most significant issue, navigating the Australian education system and curriculum to support their children's learning has been particularly difficult for parents as well. Families lack preparation and resources to fulfill this sudden and burdensome responsibility of facilitating and keeping their children's homeschooling at the required level. While some have found a little relief through a few refugee support organisations providing guidance and assistance to parents, it has not been a community wide experience.

Participants reported that some schools have prepared resources in different languages for parents to navigate the complexity of managing the school system through the digital means. This has been effective in terms of providing clarity to many parents. However, more needs to be done to assist culturally and linguistically diverse families, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, to ensure they do not experience further vulnerability during this time and their children aren't left behind academically.

#### **Recommendations**

- *Schools, service providers and government health and education departments should use clear and easily understandable language when addressing parents and endeavour to provide translated resources as much as possible.*
- *The state education departments should facilitate virtual parent-teacher support meetings to guide parents and enable them to better support their children's education.*

## 3. Community Safety and Wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects the Australian refugee communities. Social restrictions put in place have brought about additional and unique challenges to the safety and wellbeing of individuals and families already facing numerous social and economic hardships putting them at greater risk of deteriorating mental and physical health.

### 3.1 Circulation of misinformation and speculations from overseas

Community participants expressed concerns that those less literate in English language and heavily dependent on information conveniently available, often reach out to media outlets from their home countries about the virus and how to respond. These outlets include social media, news outlets and words of mouth. This has enabled circulation of conspiracy theories and panic amongst the communities that may not be true with COVID-19 environment locally in Australia.

#### **Recommendations**

- *Settlement services, the state & federal government departments should work on more visual, video and interactive translated resources to ease access especially for those with refugees with low to nil English literacy.*
- *Settlement services, the state & federal government departments' multicultural liaison officers and community based organisations need to work together to centralise availability of translated resources.*
- *Settlement services, the state & federal government departments need to better coordinate with community based organisations and need to work together on increasing awareness about the translated resources.*

### 3.2 The intersection of legal limbo and family separation during COVID-19

As a result of the quickly evolving situation, all communities have had to make major adjustments. For many refugee community members, this environment is much more complex to cope with as a result of being separated from their immediate family members and loved ones who remain in very dangerous situations.

With the huge change to the international migration system, and refugee resettlement and a freeze to family reunion pathways, family members are unable to reunite with the rest of their family members in Australia for as long as migration restrictions persist. The more recent barriers and impacts arisen as a result of UNHCR and IOM's suspension of resettlement departures, many are stuck in an indefinite limbo. For many participants, they have family members stranded in their home countries where there is a complex intersection of conflict, COVID-19, and a government with a fragile health and security system that are not able to respond to the gravity of this situation.

A community member provided,

*“My only grandmother is isolated and stuck in remote Afghanistan, where the Taliban attack could take place at any given time after a so-called peace process and diplomatic power sharing. All doors have now shut for my mother to bring my grandmother to Australia so that she is safe. The family is under a huge amount of stress.”*

For many other community members, the predicament of family separation is coupled with an ongoing uncertainty for the future, loss of job and inability to access support packages such as JobKeeper payments for TPV/SHEV holders, and basic safety net for Bridging Visa holders. These factors have significantly hampered psychological safety, livelihood and have increased panic in refugee communities without any resolution. Inevitably, the community reported they are feeling a crippling anxiety.

#### Recommendations

- *The Government should immediately lift restrictions from SHEV and TPV holders in accessing vital government economic support such as JobKeeper and those on Bridging Visas, a safety net.*
- *The Government should continue processing the humanitarian intake for the financial year 2019-2020 with a view to resettle the Annual Humanitarian arrivals as soon as practicable.*
- *Mental health and trauma support services should provide additional psychosocial and mental health support services for all groups of refugees and people seeking asylum.*

### 3.3 The unique and complex issues faced by LGBTIQ community

Members of the LGBTIQ participants also raised that as a result of rules pertaining to self-isolation, there has been extra pressure and stress caused from being confined to households with homophobic and transphobic attitudes. In many cases this has meant increased domestic and family violence.

Members of the LGBTIQ community also stressed that they are facing unique challenges as many already have compromised immune systems, such as living with HIV, and are more vulnerable to respiratory issues. Participants raised that across the support system that has developed, there are no mentions of support available specific to the LGBTIQ community. They also reported that LGBTIQ people seeking asylum are not eligible for Medicare and will not be able to access essential services such as telehealth, hormone therapy or counselling services. Many of the LGBTIQ community members are also not clients of most refugee settlement services, or Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) Program so they have been vulnerable to falling through the cracks as they have

not been able to get the support measures offered to other groups. There have been some crowdfunds to support food and other primary needs; however, it has not been adequate because needs have easily overwhelmed supply.

### **Recommendations**

- *Service providers and Government departments need to recognise and address the unique challenges faced by the LGBTIQ community in their COVID-19 responses.*
- *Service providers and Government departments' COVID-19 responses should be informed by consulting with members of LGBTIQ community.*

### **3.4 Domestic violence**

Community members reported that the rate of domestic violence has increased due to increased physical restrictions, compulsory measures in staying home, unemployment and more desperate financial reliance most often on the perpetrators of violence. There are many outstanding barriers to accessing the outstretched services that may be available. These barriers range from lack of specific assistance COVID-19 translated resource kit, lack of family support, fear of authorities, lack of understanding of systems and laws that can provide support and protection.

### **Recommendations**

- *The frontline services responding to cases of family violence need to hire extra bilingual and culturally sensitive workers to address the increased demand for support that encourages reporting.*

## **4. Other Emerging Issues**

### **4.1 Refugees with disability**

Given the closure of a number of support services, community members raised concerns around the impact of the shift to online learning on families with children that have disabilities such as autism or behavioral disorders. People with disability have not received the same attention in public announcements and information campaigns as the aged care sector for instance. Further, regardless of having access to the NDIS, many refugees and people seeking asylum with disabilities are not receiving adequate support in this difficult time.

### **4.2 In-language information on COVID-19**

While there is an abundance of useful information on COVID-19 related matters in English, access to key in depth information on different support packages still remains difficult for many with language barriers. An important factor contributing to this could be the complex user interface of government websites and platforms where translated information is located.

Secondly, many participants indicated that while many may have learnt to navigate these websites and have now discovered the translated resources, it still remains inaccessible to those who are not literate in their own language.

A third Issue raised was that many translated resources on support packages are not in plain and easily understandable language (equivalent to plain English). Some are significantly translated in highly academic and complex language that includes jargon unfamiliar to community members with different literacy needs.

### **Recommendations**

- *The state and federal health departments should use audio and video visuals as necessary measures to maximise the spread of awareness about health and financial responses.*

- *The Government and service providers should provide support through connecting bilingual staff with the most vulnerable members of the refugee communities such as the elderly to diffuse further isolation.*

### 4.3 Strength in a time of crisis

In the context of an extremely difficult time for many, in particular for the most vulnerable within our communities including refugees and people seeking asylum, the discussion at the consultation largely focused on highlighting issues, concerns and challenges. However, participants rejoiced at the sharing of incredible stories about the community coming together in the most compassionate and innovative ways to support each other through this global crisis. It was underscored that given the opportunity and resources, often those with lived experiences, the impacted communities, can devise the most effective and efficient solutions to their own challenges.

We heard examples of those in the community with professional expertise in financial services, health and medical matters, immigration laws, such as Accountants, Doctors, Migration Lawyers and Agents providing advice and explanation of the complex information on COVID-19 and government response to it, in the forms of videos or live chats on social media easily accessible to their community members. It was highlighted that community based organisations and associations are also playing a key role in relaying timely and comprehensive information to their respective communities using their large followings on social media networks.

Some community leaders and representatives have partnered up with local members of parliament (MP's) to produce regular weekly videos for their communities summarising the key events, announcements and new changes to guidelines and regulations that took place during the week, published through the MP's social media pages. Fundraising, emergency relief funds and crowdsourcing efforts by the community for their most vulnerable members have helped provide prompt and much needed solace for those that have fallen through the cracks and are left behind with no other lifeline both in Australia and globally. In the absence of social gatherings, some women have created an alternative structure to stay connected where each woman is tasked with the responsibility of checking-in with two other women from their social group via a phone call or video chat and help reduce risks of further isolation. In just a matter of a few weeks, there has been an awe-inspiring display of transnational mobilisation of diaspora communities across the world coming together to aid and support vulnerable communities in their countries of origin, despite the precarious circumstances most of them find themselves in currently.

## Next Steps

This report outlines the outcomes of NRAAG's first public consultation on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia. It discusses the unique challenges facing particular members of the community and puts forward specific recommendations as potential solutions to help address the highlighted issues. While we were able to have fairly in-depth conversations, mostly around issues arising in the asylum space, there is an evident need to continue this forum and further explore the issues and concerns raised by the participants for deeper understanding and more extensive community based solutions. This initial report is to provide direct and immediate feedback from the community to the Government and responsible departments, help our partners, allies and supporters in the sector to better target their efforts in addressing these pressing issues and ensuring no one is left behind as Australia manages and emerges from this crisis.

*If there are any issues, concerns or matters of interest, please contact us on the details below.*