

Public Statement from Liberty Victoria's Rights Advocacy Project

We must support refugees and asylum seekers if we are to “get through this together”

In the midst of a health and economic crisis, the Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton is using his God-like powers to block members of the Australian community from accessing government-funded income support, public healthcare and safe housing.

We call on Peter Dutton and the Morrison Government to show leadership and take urgent action to protect this vulnerable group of people by allowing them to apply for bridging visas and allowing them access to basic government services. Only then will we all be in this together.

Peter Dutton is preventing refugees and asylum seekers who came to Australia by boat or for medical treatment from offshore detention from accessing government-funded income support, public healthcare and safe housing. He is doing this in a number of ways, by in effect refusing to lift the bar for these people to apply for bridging visas that would make them eligible to be considered for access to essential services. This vulnerable group includes people who have been evacuated to Australia from Nauru and Papua New Guinea for urgent medical treatment. They are barred from accessing income support and many are arbitrarily deprived of access to Medicare.

Not everyone with a bridging visa can work, access Medicare or be eligible for income support, including critical [COVID-19 support](#). However, we believe that ensuring everyone is granted a bridging visa with access to these critical supports is an important first step in guaranteeing safe living standards for all people seeking asylum.

We know that refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, due to lack of access to essential services, denial of work rights, court delays, detention and low incomes. We are particularly concerned for the safety and wellbeing of people seeking asylum who cannot access bridging visas because **we have been examining the effect of the Home Affairs Minister's power to lift the bar on this vulnerable group of people.**

The Migration Act prevents people who arrived by boat or were transferred from offshore detention for medical treatment from applying for a visa (including bridging visas). The law forces these people seeking asylum to reside in Australia ‘unlawfully’, and without essential services or the right to work. Only Peter Dutton, the Minister for Home Affairs, has the power to ‘lift the bar’ and allow an affected individual to apply for a bridging visa in these circumstances.

Together with community organisations working in this area, we have been looking at ways in which this process of ‘lifting the bar’ could be fairer and more transparent. Our project has found that this group of people, who are forced to live in our community without a bridging visa with fundamental basic rights attached, face incredible physical and psychological hardship.

The situation for this group was already dire – COVID-19 has magnified the problem.

People who are barred from applying for bridging visas have limited access to essential services and work rights while they navigate an often extremely protracted immigration process. As a result, they rely heavily on community and not-for-profit organisations for assistance. COVID-19 has led to a

spike in demand for the services of these organisations, far beyond the organisations' resources and capacity.

Without access to essential resources such as Medicare and income support, adhering to social distancing rules and staying healthy becomes impossible. Practically, this means not seeing a doctor if they become sick, being unable to self-isolate due to a lack of accommodation and being unable to buy food and other basic necessities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has never been more important for every member of the community to have access to Medicare, safe housing and income support so that they can protect themselves, their loved ones and the community around them.

We call on Peter Dutton and the Morrison Government to show leadership and take urgent action to protect this group of people and allow them to apply for bridging visas and access to these basic services. Only then will we all be in this together.

We cannot '[get through this together](#)' if some members of our community are left behind. Peter Dutton must lift the bar to allow these vulnerable members of the Australian community access to the very basic of government services, to ensure everyone has access to health services when they are sick, food when they are hungry and a safe home when they are self-isolating.

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