

Supporting people on temporary visas during the COVID-19 crisis

April 2020

When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you must not oppress him. You must treat the foreigner living among you as native-born and love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:33-34

The Uniting Church, along with many community support groups, are concerned for the plight of the majority of workers on temporary visas who are currently ineligible for the Australian Government's COVID-19 relief package. While the Uniting Church is welcoming of the support measures that have been administered so far, it is vital that they are extended to include all people who have been working in Australia, regardless of their visa status.

What supports the Government has committed to:

JobSeeker – The Commonwealth and State Governments in Australia have provided positive support to people and businesses who will be impacted by the coronavirus crisis. Part of the package that has been put in place is an extra \$550 a fortnight payment to people on certain social security payments. The extra funds are to assist the hundreds of thousands of people who will lose or have lost their jobs as a result of the measures needed to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, however temporary visa holders are largely prohibited from accessing any such social security assistance.

JobKeeper – The Commonwealth Government has also positively intervened to provide a wage subsidy of \$1,500 a fortnight to keep people in employment through a JobKeeper scheme. The payment is equivalent to around 70% of the national median wage and is available to eligible employers to pay their employee for up to six months. However, most workers on temporary visas are ineligible.

The Problem:

At the moment, around 2.17 million people are living in Australia on temporary visas. The majority of people on temporary or provisional visas in Australia cannot access standard social security support, such as income and disability support programs, despite being taxpayers. Many of these people are no longer able to return to their home countries with flights being cancelled and borders being closed.

Refugees – People on temporary visas who are refugees or have applied for asylum and have lost their jobs because of the coronavirus restrictions are particularly vulnerable. The Uniting Church knows of a growing number of refugees who have already lost their jobs because their employers are not able to access the JobKeeper payments due to the exclusion of their visa type. There is obviously no way for refugees to safely return to the countries from which they have fled and many are worried that they will breach their visa requirements if they are not working.

SHEVs – Refugees who hold a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) are anxious about the impact of the current pandemic on their ability to fulfil the requirements of this visa. SHEV holders may apply for a limited range of permanent visas if they can provide evidence they have met a pathway which requires them to work or study in a designated "regional" area for 3½ years without accessing Centrelink payments. SHEV holders who have already lost their employment are worried about accessing the Centrelink Special Benefits they would qualify for, as they fear this will impact upon their ability to fulfil the SHEV pathway. The arbitrary criteria of the SHEV pathway and people's worry about fulfilling them, may leave them destitute and even more at risk of COVID-19.

Medicare – Further, at this time, there is a need to ensure that people living temporarily in Australia have access to Medicare. Access to Medicare will encourage people to seek medical assistance at the first sign they may have coronavirus. The Uniting Church has experience of people from the Pacific Islands on the Australian Seasonal Worker Program delaying seeking medical assistance until they are very ill, because they have no sick leave entitlements. If they don't work they don't get paid. Currently, their access to the Australian healthcare system is only through private health insurance, where they are often forced to make large upfront payments before applying for reimbursement. It places the broader community at risk if a person living temporarily in Australia contracts the coronavirus and delays seeking medical advice and assistance.

The Solution:

The Federal Government needs to extend the JobSeeker and JobKeeper schemes to include all people who have been working in Australia, regardless of their visa status. Also, the SHEV pathway criteria urgently need to change in order to protect SHEV holders and the Australian community. People who have been contributing to the economy, paying taxes and are part of our communities deserve access to essential relief and Medicare. To ensure their safety and the safety of all Australians during this crisis, we need to make sure we include everyone in the support measures provided.

Case study from the WA Refugee and People Seeking Asylum Network

In 2016 Mohammad was found to be a refugee and was granted a 5-year temporary protection visa called a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). On this visa, if Mohammad works or studies for 42 months in a specified regional area, without receiving Centrelink benefits, he may be eligible to apply for other temporary and permanent visas. Motivated to meet the SHEV pathway, Mohammad relocated from Perth to Busselton and has been working as a waiter in the hospitality industry. Prior to COVID-19 Mohammad had been working for 39 months without receiving Centrelink. After the restaurant closed due to COVID-19, he was three months short of meeting the 42 month requirement. Mohammad spoke with his employer about his concerns about claiming Centrelink. His employer agreed to look into paying him the JobKeeper allowance but was advised that Mohammad is not eligible. As Mohammad is concerned about claiming Centrelink, he is currently living off his limited savings and desperately trying to find other work.

Case study from Uniting Church in Australia, Vic/Tas Synod

Uniting Church members in Warragul have been assisting three seasonal workers from Vanuatu who had planned to fly home on Friday 20 March. The day before they were to fly home, the Uniting Church was advised by the Vanuatu High Commission in Canberra that the workers would not be allowed to board the flight home. They would need to leave Australia and spend 14 days in a third country. They would then need to be tested to ensure they did not have the coronavirus before they would be allowed into Vanuatu. In effect, these restrictions make it impossible for the people from Vanuatu working in Australia to be able to return home at this time. The congregation members in Warragul organised for the flights to be cancelled. The congregation members also arranged for the men from Vanuatu to be able to continue to work at the vegetable processing facility they have been working at. However, their current visas will soon run out and need to be extended.

What You Can Do:

Write polite and respectful letters to your local Federal Member of Parliament and to:

Senator The Hon Anne Ruston MP
Minister for Families and Social Services
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Salutation: Dear Minister

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Points to make in your letters:

- Thank the government for the steps they have taken to support people during the coronavirus crisis.
- Ask that they extend JobSeeker support payments to all people living in Australia at this time who need them. Note that many people on temporary visas, including some people who have applied for asylum, are unable to return home and are not eligible for existing social security payments. No person should be left destitute due to the current crisis.
- Also, request that people living temporarily in Australia should be given access to Medicare at this time. Point out the serious health risks to these people and the wider community if they contract coronavirus and delay seeking medical advice and assistance because they do not have easy access to healthcare.
- Request that the JobKeeper scheme be extended where the job would be on-going if not for the COVID-19 crisis, regardless of who is in the job. People on temporary visas, including people who have applied for asylum and refugees should be eligible for the JobKeeper payment.
- Ask that the SHEV pathway criteria urgently changes to protect SHEV holders and the Australian community.