

Call for Senate to reject punitive Social Services Bill

An alliance of peak bodies and welfare groups has called on Labor, Green and crossbench Senators to reject a Government move to force new migrants to wait longer before they can access various social security payments.

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) has joined the Australian Council of Social Service, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council and more than 30 other organisations (listed below), declaring that the proposed legislation will impose severe hardship on tens of thousands of people.

A proposal to lift the waiting period from the current two years to three years was included in the *Social Services Legislation Amendment (Encouraging Self-sufficiency for Newly Arrived Migrants) Bill 2018*, introduced to Parliament earlier this year.

However, the Government announced in last month's Federal Budget that the waiting period would be extended further, to four years. A Parliamentary Committee is now examining the Bill.

The **Chairperson of FECCA, Mary Patetsos** said that any extended waiting period would affect social security payments as well as carer allowances, family tax benefit and widow allowances.

"These changes will hit the most vulnerable of migrants," Ms Patetsos said.

"Permanent migrants should enjoy the same benefits as all other Australian residents, especially at the time when they need a little help to settle into their new home.

"Regardless of the Committee's report, we call on the Senate to oppose any increase to waiting periods, whether to three years or four years."

People most at risk in the proposed changes to waiting periods include:

- Single parents and children;
- Women at risk of family violence;
- Children whose parent unexpectedly loses their job;
- Young migrants and newly-graduated students; and
- People who unexpectedly become carers.

The **Chief Executive Officer of St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, Dr John Falzon** said:

"These changes are unjust, unnecessary and divisive.

"They undermine the needs-based focus of our social safety net and will create an underclass of residents cut off from the basic rights and supports afforded to other members of the community.

"Without access to a safety net, the most vulnerable new residents will be forced to rely on charities and risk being trapped in a cycle of poverty and hardship.

"The current two-year waiting period already causes significant and unnecessary hardship, and it is unconscionable that the Government is seeking to increase the hardship of people in need of support," Dr Falzon said.

The **Chief Executive Officer of ACOSS, Dr Cassandra Goldie**, said: "Migrants must already wait two years to access essential social security payments. We cannot see the justification for extending this waiting period other than to make life harder for people setting up their lives in Australia.

"Very concerning is the fact that women and children will be hardest hit by this cut, with at least 110,000 children, including children born in Australia, to lose access to Family Tax Benefit.

"People who are migrants make such a huge contribution to Australia. They should be treated fairly, including being supported if they are in financial need," said Dr Goldie.

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SIGNATORIES TO THIS RELEASE:

- Anglicare Australia
- Carers Australia
- Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change
- Uniting Care Australia
- St Francis Social Services
- Albury-Wodonga Ethnic Communities Council
- Australia Multicultural & Settlement Services
- Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
- Melbourne Catholic Migrant & Refugee Office
- Multicultural Council of Tasmania
- Multicultural Communities Council Gold Coast
- Refugee Communities Advocacy Network
- Refugee and Immigration Legal Services
- Tasmanian Asylum Seeker Support
- Welcome to Australia
- Tasmanian Council of Social Service
- LGBTIQ Support and Protection Services
- Women with Disabilities Australia
- ACT Council of Social Service
- People with Disability Australia
- National Council of Single Mothers & their Children
- Council of Single Mothers and their Children
- Queensland Council of Social Service
- First Peoples Disability Network Australia
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
- Community Mental Health Australia
- Financial Counselling Australia
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Jobs Australia
- Settlement Council of Australia
- Refugee Council of Australia