

Urgent support needed for visa holders stuck in COVID-19 outbreak limbo

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) has written to Prime Minister Scott Morrison calling for the Federal Government to urgently extend stimulus package support to some categories of visa holders who will be left unsupported amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Under the current rules stimulus package support will not be provided to certain people in the community, including:

- Temporary visa holders
- Permanent residents who were granted permanent residency after 1 January 2019
- Those who call Australia home on Special Category visa Subclass 444 (Citizens of New Zealand)

These groups of people will experience job loss and hardship as a result of measures to slow the spread of coronavirus and the economic consequences of those measures.

There is also uncertainty around what level of access to healthcare these and other visa types will be eligible for, which requires urgent clarification.

Due to travel restrictions, many of these affected people, including some international students, will be unable to travel to a country where they hold citizenship, meaning many could be stranded in Australia without access to essential support services and healthcare if action is not taken. We urge the Government to support these cohorts.

FECCA's priorities are:

- That the Government ensure temporary migrants, recent permanent residents and those on Special Category visa Subclass 444 can access income support should they be quarantined or lose their paid work during this economic downturn
- That the Government ensure health care is provided on the basis of need, not visa class
- That the Government ensure the timely distribution of correct and consistent information in languages other than English

FECCA chairperson Mary Patetsos said while FECCA welcomed key elements of the Federal stimulus and health package announced in recent days, urgent reassurances for visa holders were needed.

"This crisis we all face is completely unprecedented and requires us all to rethink existing ways of doing things to ensure the safety of individuals living in Australia, and of the broader community," she said.

"I think most Australians would consider it profoundly unfair for a situation to exist where those living and working in Australia on certain visa types lose their jobs due to public health measures designed to slow the spread of the virus, but then have no access to financial support.

"This situation is even more problematic if as a result of travel restrictions people in these categories have no choice but to stay in Australia, with no employment and no welfare support.

"As case numbers continue to rise many visa holders are also anxious about whether they will have access to healthcare. These people need urgent reassurance that their health needs will be met if they contract COVID-19.

"These people contribute to our society and economy, they are our friends, neighbours and co-workers, and they deserve the support of their community at this time.

"This is a moral imperative, and also a public health one – no one should be in a situation where they might be deterred from seeking medical help due to financial circumstances.

"FECCA acknowledges the Government's efforts in dealing with these complex issues and offers its support in its efforts to respond to this pandemic, including for coordination with Australia's CALD communities."

FECCA is the national peak multicultural body representing people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia.

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