

PROPOSAL 7

OPPOSING RESTRICTION OF ACCESS TO THE STATUS RESOLUTION SUPPORT SERVICE

The Social Justice Commission (SJC):

That the Synod,

- *noting the long commitment of the Uniting Church to seek justice for refugees and people seeking asylum; most recently the ‘Shelter from the Storm’ statement and associated resolutions adopted by the 14th Assembly in July 2015, and*
- *recognising the ongoing dedicated efforts of Uniting Church congregations and members who continue to offer support and advocacy for people seeking asylum in our community,*
 1. *write to the Federal Government expressing our concerns with the restriction of access to the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) for people seeking asylum, and request that full access is urgently reinstated;*
 2. *write to the State Government requesting the provision of financial and in-kind support to agencies working with people affected by these Federal policy changes;*
 3. *encourage congregations, schools and agencies to provide practical and financial support to the Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees’ (CARAD), Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) and other relevant organisations supporting people affected by the restriction of access to the Status Resolution Support Service;*
 4. *encourage congregations, schools and agencies to continue to pray:*
 - a. *for all refugees and people seeking asylum, particularly those seeking protection in Australia,*
 - b. *for political leaders and the staff of government departments with responsibilities in this area, that a longing for justice and peace will guide them in the exercise of their responsibilities.*

Rationale

The Uniting Church in Australia Assembly and the Synod of Western Australia have long expressed their concern at policies which do not protect the human rights of people seeking asylum.¹ The political discourse concerning the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees has continued to deteriorate requiring urgent and drastic policy change. For a full account of the Federal Policy requests from the Uniting Church in Australia, Assembly we refer to the *Shelter from the Storm* document.²

As Christians, the Bible makes it clear that we are called to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, challenge unjust systems and offer refuge and care to those who are marginalised and in exile. We, therefore, have a particular responsibility in our society when it comes to responding to issues related to people seeking asylum and refugees. As a church we have said that all people should be treated with respect and accorded the dignity they deserve as human beings and that:

- *people do not flee their home, their family, friends and community and undertake perilous journeys without very good reason;*

¹ <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and-asylum-seekers>;

<http://unitingchurchwa.org.au/services/taking-a-stand/social-justice/refugee-and-asylum-seekers/>

² <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/uca-statements/item/1105-shelter-from-the-storm>

-
- refugees should be able to find hope, shelter and restoration from the despair and persecution from which they have fled;
 - people seeking asylum and refugees should not be used for political point scoring or as a distraction from other policy issues;
 - punishing a vulnerable group of people (asylum seekers) in order to deter others ('people smugglers' and other asylum seekers) is immoral.³

Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) background

Due to external factors, people seeking asylum (whether by boat or plane) often need support in order to survive in, and transition to, the Australian community, while their claims for protection are being processed. This support has been provided in recent years through the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program. The program provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of Newstart allowance), access to basic casework support, and access to torture and trauma counselling.

In 2018, the Department of Home Affairs is changing its SRSS policy to restrict eligibility and access to this crucial base level of support. To qualify for support, people seeking asylum will need to provide evidence to demonstrate they meet a high threshold of vulnerability, including:

- *severe physical health barriers that are ongoing (a permanent disability, or cognitive impairment);*
- *severe mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place;*
- *single parents with pre-school aged children (children under six),*
- *pregnant women with significant health complications;*
- *someone who is a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability;*
- *a major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood, etc).⁴*

It is expected that very few people will be able to provide the required levels of evidence to demonstrate they fit the new restrictive criteria, leaving thousands at risk of homelessness and destitution. The new rules are being rolled out progressively, initially targeting single adult men and women with work rights, and to be targeted at other groups over the coming months, including families with children.

The potential 'savings' from a restriction of eligibility to access the basic support of the SRSS program are miniscule, compared to money spent on offshore processing alone⁶.

Consequences of changes to eligibility to SRSS

- People seeking asylum currently receiving support through SRSS will be exited from the program, likely to be given less than 4 weeks' notice of their income support, casework and access to counselling being removed.⁵
- People will likely need to make heartbreaking choices between, for example, purchasing vital medication and paying rent, parents will probably forego their own meals to enable their children to be able to eat and people will be more likely to end up vulnerable to exploitative work practices in an attempt to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads.

³ <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/uca-statements/item/1105-shelter-from-the-storm>

⁴ https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Factsheets_and_policy_briefings/Status_Resolution_Support_Service_Payments/How_have_the_rules_for_receiving_the_SRSS_Payment_changed/

⁵ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/takeaction/roofovermyhead-resources/>

- The cuts to who is eligible for SRSS will mean that over 10,000 people currently on the program could lose access to basic income assistance, a caseworker, and torture and trauma counselling. Thousands more will not be able to access this life-saving support if they need it again (for example, if they lose their jobs).⁶
- Pregnant women, families with young children and survivors of torture who do not meet the heightened vulnerability criteria set by the Department will be left without any form of income to pay rent, pay for prescriptions, or even get enough food for each day.

Mover: Mark Brisbane

Seconder: Sophie Lizares

For enquiries contact Geoff Bice, Social Justice Consultant 9260 9800

⁶ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/SRSS_facts_figures.pdf