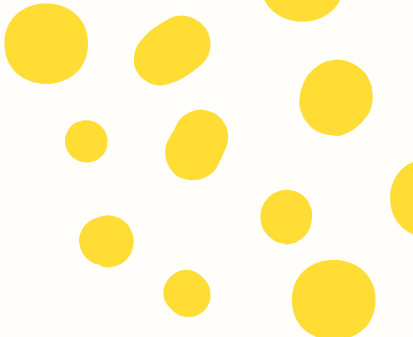




Failure of **fairness**

Fixing the safety net for
people seeking asylum

Asylum Seekers Centre | October 2025





About the Asylum Seekers Centre

Established in 1993, the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) was the first organisation in Australia to open its doors to specifically welcome and support people seeking asylum. We provide practical and personal support for people seeking safety in Greater Sydney, and advocate for fair and humane policies at every level.

In the last financial year, we supported approximately 4,600 people seeking asylum from more than 90 countries.

The Asylum Seekers Centre acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and acknowledges their continuing connection to the land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to their knowledge, their survival, and elders past and present. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, and this land always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

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Executive summary

The safety net for people seeking asylum has been steadily eroded over the past decade.

This report sets out how this safety net, or system of support, for people seeking protection in Australia has shrunk over the last decade with spending cut back by 93 per cent.¹ We identify key issues with the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program, including shrinking eligibility criteria, inconsistencies in the SRSS application process, a lack of support for people with mental health needs, the reactive nature of the program, a lack of coordination with other services such as Medicare, and a general lack of transparency and due process throughout the program. We also signpost the structural challenges which prevent people seeking asylum in the community from being self-sufficient in Australia and explore the double jeopardy that many people face when losing work rights and being denied government support simply because of their visa stage, even if they are lawfully engaging in the process.

Finally, our report sets out proposals for how the government can fix the safety net for people seeking asylum and restore fairness in line with the Australian Labor Party's pledges to do so before and after entering government.



¹ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING

HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary->

Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are 123.2 million displaced people worldwide, nearly double the figure from a decade ago and close to a record high.² Despite this, the treatment of people seeking asylum and refugees is deteriorating globally.

Among the 146 nations party to the Refugee Convention of 1951, the level of protection and support given to those who have fled war and persecution varies. Liberal democracies such as Spain, where all people including “irregular migrants” have access to public healthcare,³ and Canada, where all people seeking asylum have the right to work⁴ are among those states that have traditionally led the way in protecting those fleeing war and persecution.

Australia has a proud history of resettling refugees, including tens of thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ Later this year, Australia will welcome the country's one millionth refugee.⁶ However, this record of compassion contrasts sharply with policies that have damaged the nation's international reputation, such as offshore processing and indefinite detention. For people seeking asylum living in the community, the safety net has been stripped back dramatically over the last decade.

As an original signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Australia has committed to ensuring that:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”⁷

Yet, for people seeking asylum, this commitment is no longer being upheld.

² Global Trends, UNHCR, 12 June 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

³ Asylum in Europe, Country Reports, Spain, 12.05.25
<https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/spain/reception-conditions/health-care/>

⁴ Rights and Duties of Asylum Seekers, Canada, UNHCR, <https://help.unhcr.org/canada/rights-and-duties-3/rights-and-duties-2/>

⁵ The fall of Saigon: a crisis that changed Australia, Refugee Council of Australia, 29 April, 2025, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/fall-of-saigon/>

⁶ How Australia became home to a million refugees, Brittany Busch, Sydney Morning Herald, 22 July 2025, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/how-australia-became-home-to-a-million-refugees-20250715-p5mf63.html>

⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

The Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program - the only form of government income support available to people seeking asylum - has been systematically eroded, with spending on the program slashed from \$300 million in 2015-16 to just \$20.2 million in 2025-26.⁸ In recent years, restriction of the eligibility criteria has excluded thousands of vulnerable people from essential support, leaving many facing hunger, homelessness, and deteriorating health.

The Labor government, re-elected in 2022, has acknowledged the need to create a fairer, more supportive safety net for those who flee to Australia seeking protection. In its 2021 National Platform prior to the 2022 Federal Election, the Labor Party set out that:

“Labor’s policy should be framed to provide a positive and compassionate approach by a Labor Government to the treatment of refugees, rather than a reaction to the punitive and cruel approach of the Coalition Government. Refugees and those seeking asylum in Australia are to be welcomed under a Labor Government as assets who enhance this nation and our economy and provide positive contribution to our strong multicultural society.”⁹

The Labor Party’s National Platform documents both before and after the election specifically referred to support for people seeking asylum, with the party’s 2023 document stating:

“People seeking asylum will have means-tested access to appropriate social services, including income, crisis housing, healthcare, mental health, community, education and English as a Second Language support during the assessment of the claim for protection.”¹⁰

After being returned to office for a second term, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese spoke about Australia’s values and Australians choosing to show courage in adversity and kindness to those in need.¹¹

Despite these commitments, this promise has yet to be realised. With living costs rising and vulnerable communities hardest hit, now is the moment for the government to act to repair the safety net for people seeking asylum and deliver on its pledges of fairness and compassion.

⁸ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary-ROA-FINAL3.pdf>

⁹ ALP National Platform, March 2021, <https://alp.org.au/media/2594/2021-alp-national-platform-final-endorsed-platform.pdf>

¹⁰ ALP National Platform, August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

¹¹ Election Night Speech - The Hon. Anthony Albanese, 3 May 2025, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/election-night>



What is the SRSS program

People seeking asylum are automatically disqualified from mainstream support services such as Centrelink, NDIS, and public housing. Instead, very few are eligible for support through the SRSS program while they are awaiting their refugee status decision.

The SRSS program provides needs-based support to eligible people seeking asylum who are unable to support themselves due to physical and mental health issues, or hardship. The program is grounded in the fundamental principle that vulnerable people in crisis need support to engage in the process to resolve their immigration status.

Support offered through SRSS includes financial assistance, healthcare, and case management.¹²

SRSS recipients receive roughly \$49 a day, capped at 89 per cent of the JobSeeker allowance. This equates to less than half the average daily rent in Sydney¹³, leaving those in need of support without enough money to cover other basic living expenses such as food and utilities.

Despite this, the availability of SRSS still offers a lifeline to people seeking asylum and can help them meet their basic needs and secure access to necessities such as housing. Yet currently only around 2,000 people receive this assistance.¹⁴



A brief history of support for people seeking asylum

Since 1992, Australia has introduced several support programs, from the Asylum Seekers Assistance Scheme (ASAS) and Community Assistance Support (CAS) to SRSS, to assist vulnerable people seeking asylum unable to meet their basic needs while awaiting visa outcomes. But since 2016, spending on the SRSS program has been cut by 93 per cent, with the first budget cuts appearing in the 2016-17 Federal Budget.¹⁵

¹² Immigration Status Resolution Service, Department of Home Affairs, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/status-resolution-service/status-resolution-support-services>

¹³ Weekly Rents City: Sydney, SQM Research Sydney, <https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php?region=nsw-Sydney&type=c&t=1>

¹⁴ Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), Refugee Council of Australia, 16 February 2024, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss/>

¹⁵ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary->

Year / Government	Policy / Program	Key Features	Funding / Numbers
1992 – Keating (ALP)	Asylum Seekers Assistance Scheme (ASAS) introduced	Provided basic healthcare and living support for people seeking asylum without access to Medicare or social services.	-
2005 – Howard (LNP)	Community Care Pilot (later CAS) & Community Detention Program introduced	CAS: support for vulnerable people seeking asylum unable to meet needs. Community Detention Program: residence in community under reporting conditions, with NGO casework support.	-
2013–2014 – Abbott (LNP)	Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) introduced	Consolidated ASAS, CAS & Community Detention Program. Provided casework, financial support, healthcare, counselling. Six tiers from intensive to minimal support.	-
2017 – Turnbull Govt (LNP)	SRSS eligibility restricted	Fewer people eligible, funding reduced.	Funding: \$245.8m budgeted, \$139.8m spent. ¹⁶ Recipients: 18,671 (June 2017) ¹⁷

¹⁶ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary-ROCA-FINAL3.pdf>

¹⁷ Question on notice no. 738, Senator Nick McKim, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, 2023-24 Supplementary Budget estimates, <https://www.aph.gov.au/api/qon/downloadestimatesquestions/EstimatesQuestion-Committeeld6-EstimatesRoundld22-PortfolioId20-QuestionNumber738>

2018–2020 – Morrison (LNP)	SRSS scaled back	Continued cuts.	\$93.4m spent (2018–19) down to \$39.5m (2019–20). ¹⁸ 5,482 recipients (June 2019). ¹⁹
2022 – Albanese (ALP)	Inherited reduced SRSS	Scaled-back safety net.	Spend down to \$15m. ²⁰ Only around 1,600 recipients. ²¹
2024–25 – Albanese (ALP)	Current SRSS status	Minor increase in numbers supported.	\$20.2m actual spend (budget \$17.3m). ²² 1,500–2,000 people supported. ²³

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By comparison, successive governments have spent \$13.35 billion on offshore processing since the policy was introduced in 2012.²⁵ The Albanese government has allocated \$581 million for offshore processing in the 2025-26 Budget.²⁶

¹⁸ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary-RCOA-FINAL3.pdf>

¹⁹ Question on notice no. 738, Senator Nick McKim, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, 2023-24 Supplementary Budget estimates, <https://www.aph.gov.au/api/qon/downloadestimatesquestions/EstimatesQuestion-Committeeld6-EstimatesRoundld22-Portfoliold20-QuestionNumber738>

²⁰ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025

²¹ Question on notice no. 738, Senator Nick McKim, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, 2023-24 Supplementary Budget estimates

²² Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025

²³ Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), Refugee Council of Australia, 16 February 2024, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss/>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Analysing the 2025-26 Federal Budget: What it means for refugees and people seeking protection, Refugee Council of Australia, 27 March 2025, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/analysis-2025-26-budget/>

²⁶ Table 2.2.1: Budgeted expenses for Outcome 2, Department of Home Affairs, Entity resources and planned performance, Federal Budget 2025-26, p.38 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/Budgets/2025-26-home-affairs-pbs-department-of-home-affairs.pdf>

Government spending on SRSS as year ends (\$mil)



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As of December 2024, approximately 2,089 people receive support through the SRSS program in Australia.²⁸

To put this into context, in June 2017, 18,671 people were in receipt of SRSS support,²⁹ meaning the number of individuals receiving support now is down nearly 90 per cent on eight years ago despite the fact that monthly applications for protection visas have remained steady for much of this period, with a slight dip during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰

²⁷ Appendix C, 2025-26 FEDERAL BUDGET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFUGEES AND PEOPLE SEEKING HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION, Refugee Council of Australia, 2025 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-26-Budget-Summary-ROA-FINAL3.pdf>

²⁸ Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), Refugee Council of Australia, 16 February 2024, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss/>

²⁹ Question on notice no. 738, Senator Nick McKim, Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Home Affairs Portfolio, 2023-24 Supplementary Budget estimates, <https://www.aph.gov.au/api/qon/downloadestimatesquestions/EstimatesQuestion-Committeeld6-EstimatesRoundld22-PortfolioId20-QuestionNumber738>

³⁰ Statistics on people seeking asylum in the community, Refugee Council of Australia, 28 September 2025, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/2/>



Fundamental flaws in the SRSS program

Shrinking eligibility criteria

In Australia, a person seeking asylum applies for a protection visa to obtain formal refugee status. If their initial application is denied, they have the right to appeal the decision. Should the appeal also be unsuccessful, they may request a judicial review if a legal error is identified. If this review is unsuccessful, the final step in the process is to seek ministerial intervention, where the Minister for Immigration can intervene in the case.

Even at the latter stages of the process, applicants are still exercising their legal right to challenge decisions. Judicial review and ministerial intervention are integral parts of the system, and provide an opportunity to uncover significant flaws or errors in earlier decisions. In some cases, these stages reveal serious oversights that may not have been addressed during previous stages of the process or consider changes in circumstances.

People awaiting judicial review or ministerial intervention are classified as “finally determined” under the lens of SRSS and as such, are excluded from SRSS support except under narrow “exceptional circumstances”. These include:

- *Significant mental health barrier impacting your ability to resolve your immigration status and actively engage in preparations to depart the country*
- *Significant physical health barrier impacting your ability to resolve your immigration status and actively engage in preparations to depart the country*
- *A life expectancy of less than 12 months³¹*

This narrow definition of so-called exceptional circumstances excludes many others who are in the “post-[administrative] review” stages and are unable to work due to legitimate reasons - such as no working rights, caring responsibilities for young children, domestic and family violence, suffering an injury in the workplace, or physical and mental health issues.

Departmental policy documents from 2017 illustrate a more inclusive policy. At that time, people seeking asylum were considered eligible for SRSS if they:

³¹ Immigration Status Resolution Service, Department of Home Affairs, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/status-resolution-service/status-resolution-support-services>

- *Have an unresolved immigration status and engage with the Department in resolving their immigration status such as:*
 - *a departmental primary decision*
 - *an independent merits review decision of a primary refusal*
 - *a final decision as per the fast track process*
 - *assistance with the next steps in resolving their immigration status after a negative merits review outcome³² [Now the Administrative Review Tribunal]*

Crucially, there was no requirement to demonstrate "exceptional circumstances" for those in the post-review stages, nor was support contingent on being on a departure pathway.³³

Inconsistencies in the SRSS application process

In addition to the shrinking of eligibility criteria and financial cuts to the program, there are a number of other fundamental flaws with the current SRSS program. Organisations supporting people seeking asylum, such as the ASC, have witnessed numerous cases where individuals are denied SRSS support, even when they seem to meet the already strict eligibility criteria. These include the case of a man in a coma who should have been granted support on account of the serious nature of his medical condition, but caseworkers were told his case could not be reviewed until he was conscious.

Case study: SRSS ineligibility based on visa stage

Ahmad* was waiting at the judicial review stage for more than five years. Despite being diagnosed by a psychologist and a psychiatrist as unfit to work - a clear criterion for SRSS - his initial SRSS application was denied due to his visa stage.

After a second SRSS application was submitted by ASC on behalf of Ahmad, he was granted medical support, but denied full SRSS benefits including the financial support he so urgently required.

Today, Ahmad has exhausted community support, is medically unfit to work, is without income support, and faces imminent homelessness.



³² Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) Programme Operational Procedures Manual (Version 5) 2017, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017, p5-6, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2017/FA171001038-documents-released.pdf>

³³ Ibid.

Mental health needs are overlooked

Caseworkers at the ASC report that SRSS more readily accepts physical over mental health conditions, despite the high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among people seeking asylum.³⁴ Support is often only triggered by repeated suicide attempts or hospitalisation.

“People seeking asylum are disproportionately likely to experience mental health issues and these conditions are among the most common barriers to participation in society for our clients. Waiting until someone is hospitalised to offer support is neither humane nor preventative.”

- Keelin Macdonald, Client Services Manager, Asylum Seekers Centre

SRSS is reactive, not preventative

People often only gain SRSS after they've reached a crisis point, whether it is homelessness, hospitalisation, or destitution. Our caseworkers have observed that there is no clear mechanism to provide short-term or preventative support, even when caseworkers flag escalating risks early.

“The inconsistency in timing often pushes people into worse mental and physical health before help is available. As a result, many are forced back into a cycle of crisis and dependency, frequently turning again to community organisations like the ASC for essential support.”

- Daan Hartog, Complex Caseworker, Asylum Seekers Centre

Disconnection between Medicare and SRSS

Caseworkers at the ASC have observed there is no integration between SRSS support and Medicare access. While the SRSS program can include health-related support, recipients are still often left without the more comprehensive health coverage afforded through Medicare, exacerbating poor outcomes and placing additional strain on community health providers.

³⁴ Tomasi, A et al. Understanding the mental health and help-seeking behaviours of refugees, Australian Institute of Family Studies, July 2022, <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/short-articles/understanding-mental-health-and-help-seeking-behaviours-refugees>

Lack of transparency and due process

When an applicant for SRSS support is unsuccessful, they are typically not provided with an explanation for the decision, nor are they given the opportunity to appeal the decision through the contracted SRSS provider. Introducing greater transparency, due process, and procedural fairness around SRSS applications - including a formal right to appeal decisions perceived as incorrect or made in error - would help ensure the program is more equitable and transparent.



The human cost of restricting support

The progressive erosion of the SRSS program has had devastating effects on people seeking asylum, especially those at the final stages of their legal appeals. Hundreds of people in the ASC's community alone are forced into poverty and destitution, having been denied basic support despite not having the right to work or being unable to work for serious physical and mental health reasons.

"Since the gutting of SRSS, we've seen a growing number of people cut off from all support simply because of their visa stage. People and families have been pushed to the brink, facing homelessness, hunger, and preventable health crises. We see this on the frontlines every day - people skipping meals, sleeping rough, unable to access basic healthcare. The impact is devastating. It's not just hardship - it's the slow breaking of people's spirits. We are witnessing broken souls."

- Felicia Paul, Client Services Manager, Asylum Seekers Centre

At the ASC, half of the people we provided casework support to in the last financial year were either experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Meanwhile, the Refugee Council of Australia estimates that around 5,000 people seeking asylum in Australia are living in crisis or destitution, including 2,000 in Sydney alone.³⁵ In the City of Sydney, nearly 1 in 5 people sleeping rough have uncertain visa status.³⁶

³⁵ Refugee Council's Letter to NSW Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Refugee Council of Australia, 2 June 2025, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/refugee-councils-letter-to-nsw-minister-for-housing-and-homelessness/>

³⁶ Homelessness on the rise in Sydney's Inner City, Sydney Times, 27 March 2025, <https://www.sydneysydneytimes.net.au/city-of-sydney-news/homelessness-on-the-rise-in-sydneys-inner-city/>

Case study: Family left in crisis due to visa stage

Sahar*, a mother with three young children, arrived with her husband and is waiting for judicial review of their protection case. They are not eligible for the SRSS program because they are seeking review by the courts. Her husband was getting some casual work, but this was reduced over the Christmas period. He took his own life in recent months, leaving the family distraught and with no income.

Sahar's caring responsibilities and her serious health conditions mean she is unable to work. With no access to SRSS payments and limited charity support going towards her rent, she struggles to access food for her children and herself, often keeping the children home from school because she has nothing to pack in their lunch boxes. She also has an overdue electricity bill of more than \$1,000 and fears her energy will be cut.

Sahar's situation highlights how a family in need has been cut off from vital support simply because of their visa stage - even though the family is in crisis and the welfare of children is being compromised.



It is important to note that people in the so-called post-review stages are also typically barred from working. This leaves them in double jeopardy - unable to earn income legally and ineligible for government support - even if they remain engaged in the asylum process and pursuing their rightful avenues of appeal.

Considering the vulnerability of people who have come to Australia to flee war and persecution, it is intolerable to retraumatise them by barring them from working and withdrawing SRSS support when they still have pathways to achieve protection. The Labor Party's National Platform document from 2023 stated:

"Labor believes as a nation we must not harm people seeking refuge."³⁷

³⁷ ALP National Platform, August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>



Work rights and legal limbo

Many people seeking asylum in Australia are ready to work but denied the ability to do so, often as a result of their visa stage. In particular this impacts people in the post-review stages of the process who then face the double jeopardy of being denied the right to work and denied government support, even while they continue to engage with the government and reside in Australia.

Worse, a single day without a bridging visa can mean immediate loss of work rights and Medicare access.³⁸ Caseworkers at the ASC are particularly concerned that this may occur even when the visa gap is caused by bureaucratic delays from the Department of Home Affairs.

Combined with the barriers to accessing income support through SRSS as outlined above, the lack of consistent work rights creates dire circumstances for people seeking asylum and leaves many individuals vulnerable to work exploitation.

Even those eligible to work face systemic barriers. Many have formal qualifications that go unrecognised in Australia, forcing highly skilled individuals into low-paid or unskilled jobs. Meanwhile, the short-term nature of bridging visas - often lasting just three to six months - leave people in limbo and employers hesitant to hire. A recent survey of ASC clients found 75 per cent of respondents were unemployed, underemployed, or in casual or part-time roles.

The uncertainty created by short-term bridging visas imposes serious barriers in the lives of people seeking asylum. Addressing this uncertainty is critical to ensuring fair treatment and the ability for people to live with dignity while they await the outcome of their protection claims.

As the Labor Party's 2023 National Platform stated:

"A fundamental principle in treating those seeking protection with humanity is to provide as much certainty as possible. An aspiration of certainty in all matters around people seeking asylum, including the duration of assessing refugees' claims, must underpin Australian policy."³⁹

³⁸ Ministerial Intervention after an ART Decision Under Section 315, Refugee Advice and Casework Service, September 2025, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64dacc5af8652400c34fe0d/t/68d32c6b12842b472070b308/1758669931028/6.02+Ministerial+Intervention+Plane+Arrival+s351.pdf>

³⁹ ALP National Platform, August 2023, <https://www.alp.org.au/media/3569/2023-alp-national-platform.pdf>

Case study:

Lack of work rights leads to destitution

Ali* arrived in Australia in 2016 and is still awaiting the outcome of his request for ministerial intervention in his asylum case. After losing his work rights, he struggled to support his family. Over time, his health deteriorated and he developed a serious heart condition, accruing over \$20,000 in medical bills.

Ali has applied for SRSS but remains in limbo, without work rights or support.

He says, *"It is very difficult for me, my wife and my daughter who were born here. Since I lost work rights, we all eat less food and we are struggling. We can't pay the rent and have had to borrow money from friends. This has been the case for over 5 years now."*

"If I had work rights and was able to do work, I could help my wife and feed my daughter."



Many people seeking protection in Australia are willing and able to work, support themselves, contribute to the community, and pay taxes - but are not legally permitted to do so. Granting the right to work restores dignity, promotes self-sufficiency during the asylum process, and encourages continued engagement with the government throughout that process.



Conclusion and recommendations

The erosion of the SRSS program - through successive funding cuts and restricted eligibility criteria - has forced many people seeking asylum into poverty, homelessness, and despair. At the Asylum Seekers Centre, we witness this every day. With half of our casework clients currently experiencing homelessness or facing imminent homelessness, it's clear what happens when diminishing support systems collide with a cost of living crisis.

This report has outlined the systemic flaws in the SRSS program, traced the impacts of policy changes and restricted eligibility, and highlighted the human cost of an inadequate safety net. But this situation is not inevitable. With the right policy settings, the Australian government can restore a more compassionate, functional, and fair system - one that helps people seeking asylum avoid destitution, remain engaged in the process with the Department of Home Affairs, and rebuild their lives with dignity while they await an outcome on their claim for protection.

As this report has set out, in order to be effective and fair, SRSS access must be restored for all people seeking asylum who meet the vulnerability criteria, at every stage of the asylum process.

A return to more personalised, needs-based support - as seen under the former Community Care Pilot and Community Assistance Scheme which were merged into SRSS (Band 5) - would better meet the needs of people seeking asylum in crisis. Government data shows that a previous case management pilot with vulnerable migrants achieved a 93 per cent compliance rate.⁴⁰ Increased engagement with SRSS would improve oversight, helping to prevent or promptly resolve lapsed bridging visas, and reduce the number of people living without legal status.

Support organisations including the ASC have also called for the introduction of a crisis pre-screening tool to better identify vulnerable applicants in urgent need of SRSS support. Under the current eligibility system, key vulnerabilities - such as serious health issues, domestic violence, or prolonged destitution - can go undetected. A crisis tool would mean more timely processing, better-targeted support for people seeking asylum in the community, and greater engagement in the status resolution process.

Finally, granting work rights to all people seeking asylum in the community would ensure more people are able to support themselves and contribute to their communities, reducing reliance on government support programs like SRSS.

⁴⁰ There are alternatives, International Detention Coalition, 2015, p11
<https://idcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/There-Are-Alternatives-2015.pdf?>

Eliminating short-term three-month bridging visas, which create uncertainty and hinder access to meaningful employment, would create a fairer, more sustainable system for people seeking asylum while supporting economic participation.

With Labor's return to government in 2025, the Albanese government has a real opportunity to honour its commitments - made both before and after its election to government in 2022 - by restoring a more compassionate, fairer support system for people seeking asylum.

This is not a partisan issue. It is about ensuring those who have fled the worst of the world are met with the best of Australia: a country that provides basic support to people seeking protection and fairness at a time when people seeking asylum and refugees are under increasing threat around the world.



Key recommendations

Restore SRSS access

- Reinstatement of SRSS support for all people seeking asylum who meet the vulnerability criteria, regardless of their visa stage.
- Develop a crisis assessment tool for services to identify people who require urgent access to SRSS, particularly those at post-administrative review.

Enable the right to work for all

- Ensure all people seeking asylum living in the community remain on a valid visa with work rights and Medicare, enabling them to support themselves.
- End policies that strip people of work rights and Medicare due to visa delays outside their control.
- Abolish three-month bridging visas to ensure that people seeking asylum are not trapped in a state of uncertainty while they live lawfully in the community.



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