



Media Release

7 April, 2017

St Vincent de Paul Society slams threatening letters that are pushing vulnerable asylum seekers over the edge

The St Vincent de Paul Society has condemned the Federal Government for targeting asylum seekers in the community with letters that threaten to cancel bridging visas, cut off critical support payments, and withdraw the right to claim asylum.

Since December 2016, the Department of Immigration has sent out more than 1000 letters to asylum seekers who arrived in Australia by boat between August 2012 and January 2014, and who have not yet finalised their application for refugee protection.

The group arrived under the Federal Government's 'fast-track' assessment process, but have waited years before they were finally invited by the government to lodge their asylum claims. Many have sought assistance from legal assistance services, which typically have waiting lists of over 1000 due to the loss of government funding.

The letters instruct the recipient to contact the Department and lodge complex application forms amounting to more than 60 pages for refugee protection, all in English, within 60 days. If they do not meet the deadline, they could lose their right to claim asylum, welfare payments and access to Medicare.

"These letters are causing immense distress to people who are already extremely vulnerable," the Society's National Council CEO, Dr John Falzon said.

"Threatening people with destitution, and with the prospect of being barred from protection, creates very real risks to people who have suffered enough.

"This group of asylum seekers has been kept in limbo for years. They cannot lodge a claim for permanent protection, and have been subjected to ongoing uncertainty, enforced poverty, constantly-shifting government policy and convoluted bureaucratic processes.

"For many, the toll on their health and well-being has been devastating."

Dr Falzon also voiced concern that, with the threat of sanctions, some asylum seekers may lodge poorly prepared applications that omit relevant evidence and jeopardise their chance of receiving refugee protection.

"We call on the government to immediately restore funding to legal assistance services, and to ensure that those yet to make an application are given appropriate time and support to do so.

“They should not be threatened with re-detention and the loss of benefits during this time.”

Over the coming year, the Department plan to send letters in batches to approximately 12,000 asylum seekers, including families. So far, the letters have targeted people who were invited to apply for refugee status in 2015 and in early 2016. Over thirty asylum seekers are known to have had their welfare payment cut off.

MEDIA CONTACT: BELINDA CRANSTON 0400 845 492 or media@svdp.org.au