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Proposed inhumane changes to Migration Act cannot be allowed to pass: CAPSA

The passing of the Immigration Amendment Act (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2020 would be unnecessarily cruel and have a significantly detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable people, says the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA).

The amendment is due to be debated after Federal Parliament resumes on October 6, and if passed, would insert new provisions regarding prohibited items in immigration detention facilities and broaden seize and search powers including strip searches without the requirement for a warrant.

Prohibited items could include mobile phones and internet-capable devices, which for many people in immigration detention are the only means of contact for families, advocates and legal and health support.

“We are extremely concerned about the impact this Bill would have on already precarious mental health and wellbeing of people in immigration detention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has never been a more crucial time in our history to be treating people with dignity and compassion,” says Julie Edwards, CEO of Jesuit Social Services and co-chair of CAPSA.

“Mobile phones are often a vital lifeline for people in detention, and critical to the wellbeing of people seeking asylum who are detained in Australia. Phones allow people to maintain connection with their children and other loved ones overseas and to receive valuable support and advice from advocates and legal representatives.

“Due to COVID-19, people held in immigration detention facilities have not had visits from friends, supporters and advocates since March. An unnecessary and inhumane move to remove access to one of the sole means of communication for people held in immigration detention during this time will have an enormously detrimental impact on their mental health and well-being in already precarious times.

“It would also fail to acknowledge or address that many people in immigration detention are particularly vulnerable given their often traumatic histories and the indefinite nature of their detention.”

Ms Edwards says that it is imperative that independent Senators listen to the concerns of groups including the Australian Medical Association and the Law Council of Australia, as well as human rights organisations and refugee advocates, and vote against the Bill in coming weeks.

“The painful human toll of immigration detention in Australia has been well documented, and we have heard many tragic stories about deaths, mistreatment and significant mental health problems. The impact of these changes could be catastrophic – we urge our political leaders to emphasise the importance of care and compassion and ensure this Bill does not pass.”

CAPSA is a national initiative to influence hearts and minds in the Catholic community towards a more just, compassionate and humane welcome of people seeking asylum.

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