

Letter-writing Guide for the Venerable People during COVID-19 crisis

When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you must not oppress him. You must treat the foreigner living among you as native-born and love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.
Leviticus 19:33-34

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'
Matthew 25:40

The Uniting Church, along with many community support groups, are concerned for the plight of the majority of workers on temporary visas who are currently ineligible for the Australian Government's COVID-19 relief package. While the Uniting Church is welcoming of the support measures that have been administered so far, it is vital that they are extended to include all people who have been working in Australia, regardless of their visa status.

What supports the Government has committed to:

JobSeeker – The Commonwealth and State Governments in Australia have provided positive support to people and businesses who will be impacted by the coronavirus crisis. Part of the package that has been put in place is an extra \$550 a fortnight payment to people on certain social security payments. The extra funds are to assist the hundreds of thousands of people who will lose or have lost their jobs as a result of the measures needed to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, however temporary workers are largely prohibited from accessing any such social security assistance.

JobKeeper – The Commonwealth Government has also positively intervened to provide a wage subsidy of \$1,500 a fortnight to keep people in employment through a JobKeeper scheme. The payment is equivalent to around 70% of the national median wage and is available to eligible employers to pay their employee for up to six months. However, most workers on temporary visas are ineligible.

The Problem:

At the moment, around 2.17 million people are living in Australia on temporary visas. The majority of people on temporary or provisional visas in Australia cannot access standard social security support, such as income and disability support programs. Many of these people are no longer able to return to their home countries with flights being cancelled and borders being closed.

Refugees – People on temporary visas who are refugees or have applied for asylum and have lost their jobs because of the coronavirus restrictions are particularly vulnerable. The Uniting Church knows of a growing number of refugees who have already lost their jobs because their employers are not able to access the JobKeeper payments due to the exclusion of their visa type. There is obviously no way for refugees to safely return to the countries from which they have fled and many are worried that they will breach their visa requirements if they are not working.

SHEVs – Refugees who hold a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) are anxious about the impact of the current pandemic on their ability to fulfil the requirements of this visa. SHEV holders may apply for a limited range of permanent visas if they can provide evidence they have met a pathway which requires them to work or study in a designated "regional" area for 3½ years without accessing Centrelink payments. SHEV holders who have already lost their employment are worried about accessing the Centrelink Special Benefits they would qualify for, as they fear this will impact upon their ability to fulfil the SHEV pathway. The arbitrary criteria of the SHEV pathway and people's worry about fulfilling them, may leave them destitute and even more at risk of COVID-19.

Medicare – Further, at this time, there is a need to ensure that people living temporarily in Australia have access to Medicare. Access to Medicare will encourage people to seek medical assistance at the first sign they may have coronavirus. The Uniting Church has experience of people from the Pacific Islands on the Australian Seasonal Worker Program delaying seeking medical assistance until they are very ill, because they have no sick leave entitlements. If they don't work they don't get paid. Currently, their access to the Australian healthcare system is only through private health insurance, where they are often forced to make large upfront payments before applying for reimbursement. It places the broader community at risk if a person living temporarily in Australia contracts the coronavirus and delays seeking medical advice and assistance.

The Solution:

The Federal Government needs to extend the JobSeeker and JobKeeper schemes to include all people who have been working in Australia, regardless of their visa status. Also, the SHEV pathway criteria urgently need to change in order to protect SHEV holders and the Australian community. People who have been contributing to the economy, paying taxes and are part of our communities deserve access to essential relief and Medicare. To ensure their safety and the safety of all Australians during this crisis, we need to make sure we include everyone in the support measures provided.

A true story from a member of the Uniting Church in South Australia

I had a man on the Bridging Visa ring me to say that today he got dismissed from his permanent full time job – just because the business owner can't claim the Jobkeeper payment for him – he and his wife own a restaurant – so things were bad enough before today but now he's needing big support. There were 61 people on the Bridging Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (known as TPVs & SHEVs) lost their jobs at the laundry today simply because the federal government won't allow businesses to get the JobKeeper subsidy for temporary visa holders – they are now destitute!

(Note: It was written by Catherine Russell who is a member of the Uniting Church congregation in South Australia. In the wake of COVID 19, Catherine along with another member of the Uniting Church, have been ringing people who were transferred to Adelaide from Nauru and Manus by the Australian Government and asylum seekers on Bridging visas to find out how they are and compiled a database of 200 families and individuals, recording their situation and needs. As many now have no income, Catherine has been distributing food, rent, mobile phone payments, car registration, pharmacy bills etc as needed to the people in need.)

Case study from Singapore

When #COVID19 first broke, Singapore was held up as an example of rapid and effective action. Yet cases are sky-rocketing in the city state, with close to 9000 active cases. So how did this happen?

They forget Singapore's launch migrant worker population. They didn't provide those people with the support they needed to stay safe.

Australia should take this very seriously. Presently Scott Morrison (ScoMo)'s commendable action has totally excluded refugees and people seeking asylum. Over 100,000 people are facing lost work and no income support. People can't pay their rent, can't buy food, can't stay safe.

We are calling for #NobodyLetBehind and urge the Prime Minister to ensure temporary visa holders have access to Medicare, income support and prompt visa renewals to ensure they remain lawful.

What You Can Do:

Write polite and respectful letters to your local Federal Member of Parliament and to:

The Hon Steven Marshall MP

Premier of South Australia

GPO Box 2343,

ADELAIDE SA

Phone: 08 8429 3232

Fax: 08 8463 3168

Email: premier@sa.gov.au

Salutation: Dear Premier of South Australia

The Hon Scott Morrison MP

Prime Minister

PO Box 6022

House of Representatives

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Points to make in your letters:

- Thank the government for the steps they have taken to support people during the coronavirus crisis.
- Ask that they extend JobSeeker support payments to all people living in Australia at this time who need them. Note that many people on temporary visas, including some people who have applied for asylum, are unable to return home and are not eligible for existing social security payments. No person should be left destitute due to the current crisis.
- Also, request that people living temporarily in Australia should be given access to Medicare at this time. Point out the serious health risks to these people and the wider community if they contract coronavirus and delay seeking medical advice and assistance because they do not have easy access to healthcare.
- Request that the JobKeeper scheme be extended where the job would be on-going if not for the COVID-19 crisis, regardless of who is in the job. People on temporary visas, including people who have applied for asylum and refugees should be eligible for the JobKeeper payment.
- Ask that the SHEV pathway criteria urgently changes to protect SHEV holders and the Australian community.