

Energy concessions for asylum seekers

Thousands of people seeking asylum, fleeing war and persecution face a new challenge when resident in Victoria; keeping the lights on.



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of Australia



Community Groups Victorian Parliamentary Briefing

December 2015

Asylum seekers deserve affordable utilities

A statement from community groups.

There are over ten thousand people seeking asylum living in suburbs and towns across Victoria, struggling with the cost of living pressures, including increasingly unaffordable energy and water bills.

While other Victorian residents on low-incomes are eligible for state concessions that subsidise their utility bills, people seeking asylum on bridging visas, who survive on significantly less income, are not.

Leading consumer and asylum seeker advocates are calling on the Victorian Government to give asylum seekers on bridging visas a helping hand by offering them concessions on water and energy bills. This would mirror Public Transport Victoria's decision to create the Asylum Seeker Concession Card to reduce transport costs in 2013.

Research commissioned by the group, conducted by Economists at Large, found that such a commitment is estimated to cost \$2.4 million in 2015-16, increasing to \$3.4 million by 2018-19, for a total of \$11.7 million over the four year period.

Over the same four year period, state budget net operating surpluses of greater than \$1 billion are forecast in every year; the burden of the concessions proposal represents just 0.2% of this amount.

High energy prices are a problem for all Victorians, with prices in Melbourne increasing by 84% in the last seven years. Energy costs are just one of the challenges people seeking asylum face in the community. This small change would make a world of difference.

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Suburb*	Number of MA, BVE** holders
Dandenong	1708
Springvale	555
St Albans	501
Doveton	415
Sunshine	395
Noble Park	374
Lalor	302
Dandenong North	296
Thomastown	284
Glenroy	261
Broadmeadows	255
Sunshine West	254
Sunshine North	222
Reservoir	215
Werribee	206
Epping	205
Albion	205
Shepparton	203
Footscray	163
Hoppers Crossing	162

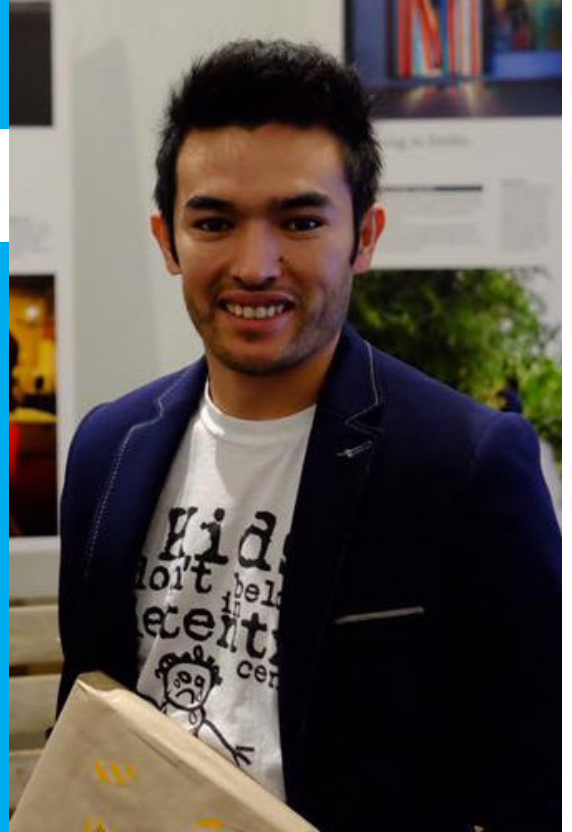
* Top 20 towns and suburbs.

**Arrivals by boat on bridging visas.

Source: Australian Border Force. June 2015.

Bridging visas: The facts

- There are 10,902 asylum seekers living in Victoria on bridging visas.
- The Department of Immigration and Border Protection suggest that transition from bridging visa to temporary protection visa will take 3 years.
- Many people seeking asylum do not have work rights or Centrelink support in Australia and find themselves in situations of absolute destitution. Those who do receive Centrelink support receive only 89% of the already very modest Newstart allowance.
- For those not receiving Government support, they typically rely on charities such as that provided by Lentara Uniting Care, which includes a basic living allowance of \$100 for each person per month and a \$37.60 Myki allowance.



The power of new beginnings

Mohammad Ali Baqiri travelled to Australia by boat at the age of 10. He was fleeing Afghanistan and persecution of the Hazara minority. After initially being processed at Christmas Island he spent three years on Nauru, before being settled in Dandenong at age 13, in 2004. Mohammad has recently completed a double degree in Business and Law.

Mohammad has achieved so much in his short time in Australia, but admits he was lucky at first to have the financial support of his older brother who was already settled in Melbourne.

“I think if we didn’t have my brother’s support, we would have struggled trying to balance our financial status. First it was the rent! Because there were 8 of us staying in the house, we were using too much water, gas and electricity ... (and) the money we were receiving from Centrelink wasn’t enough.”

When Mohammad speaks to newly arrived asylum seekers he finds families struggling to manage day-to-day.

“They are worried about finding a house to rent and how expensive it is in Victoria ... the fact that daily expenses are going through the roof, as there is not work available for them as well as the restrictions based on their visa.”

Electricity prices in Melbourne have surged 84% in the last seven years. For Mohammad anything that eases cost-of-living pressures for people seeking asylum would make the world of difference. Whether it is connecting with family overseas or cooking the evening meal, energy plays a “major role” in the lives of Victoria’s asylum seekers.