

QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING: 21 OCTOBER 2008

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP PORTFOLIO

(68) Output 1.5: Detention

Senator Hanson-Young asked:

Could you explain to me how the asylum seeker assistance scheme works?

Answer:

Background:

Created in 1993, the Asylum Seeker Assistance (ASA) Scheme operates through contract with the Australian Red Cross. It is funded by an Administered Appropriation with annual levels fluctuating from about \$3.5million to \$12million, currently at \$7.1million. Red Cross uses a capped percentage for its administration costs.

Approximately 50% of Protection visa applicants receive some ASA, and in 2007-08 1867 Protection visa applicants were assisted. The level of assistance provided depends on clients' individual circumstances, and is needs driven.

Types of support:

Depending on the circumstances, benefits may include:

- fortnightly income payment of 89% of the Centrelink Special Benefit for a family of equivalent composition;
- where an eligible ASA client requires accommodation or is expected to contribute towards accommodation costs, then the ASA Scheme provides the rental component portion of Special Benefit (reduced to 89%). (ASA clients able to reside with an Australian resident family member in the family home would generally not be eligible for the rental component);
- funded basic health care through a network of providers coordinated by the Red Cross;
- pharmaceutical subsidies equivalent to the PBS;
- torture and trauma counselling;
- bereavement assistance; and
- some other minor services.

Eligible:

Eligible persons are applicants for Protection visas at the primary stage (seeking a departmental decision) where more than six months has elapsed (about 5% of current recipients) or where an exemption criterion is met (95% of current recipients). Applicants meeting exemption criteria can also be supported throughout the Refugee Review Tribunal process. Exemption criteria generally cover the ill, minors, families with children, the elderly and some carers for these groups. Special Payments can exceptionally be made for groups beyond these eligible parties.

How it works:

All applicants for Protection visas are informed that for financial assistance during the process, applicants should approach the Red Cross (the current contract holder) in the nearest capital city.

The initial role of the Red Cross is to assess financial circumstances. Visa status is then confirmed with Onshore Protection staff of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Payments are not usually payable until 6 months have elapsed after visa lodgement without decision notification, except for groups exempted from this waiting period, in which case payment and other support can start immediately. The exempt groups include: minors; families with young children; the elderly; those incapacitated for work (whether or not work rights are held) due to illness including the effects of torture or trauma; carers for these groups; and some others.

Fortnightly in-person interviews are conducted by the Red Cross to check eligibility for continuing support, including income support payments, access to basic health care, pharmaceutical benefits, and other benefits. Where recipients who receive benefits under exemptions proceed to merits review after an unfavourable primary decision, support is generally continued without interruption. Support otherwise ceases when the visa decision is finally made, that is, twenty-eight days plus 7 working days after notification of the primary decision is sent. Where assistance is available at merits review, support ceases after the final decision of the Refugee Review Tribunal is handed down.

Beyond the RRT, persons are no longer regarded as asylum seekers, having exhausted the due process, and Special Payments are made only exceptionally.