

On World Refugee Day, Australian social workers urge the new parliament to fulfil its human rights commitments and give immediate attention to stopping the continued mistreatment and neglect of people seeking asylum and people who have been assessed as refugees, both offshore and onshore. AASW National President Christine Craik said, “A new parliament represents a new opportunity to break with Australia’s recent past treatment of refugees, and usher in policies that are in line with our international human rights obligations. “It is disappointing to see that the Australian government’s most explicit policy concerning people seeking asylum since becoming elected is to repeal the Medevac Bill, a hard-won policy at the end of the last Parliament, to begin to humanise offshore detention.” The only policies concerning refugees have been the cuts to services in the last budget. Ms Craik said, “Prior to the election, the federal budget reduced spending on two important programs for refugees. By extending the period of time before refugees must engage with employment services, the government will save \$78 million. It is disappointing that this money will not be diverted into employment programs to recognise the skills and expertise many refugees bring with them. “This cut is in addition to the two per cent reduction in settlement services which was also announced in the budget. Together, these changes have forced many to turn to the charity sector for support.” “Meanwhile, \$200 million was spent to reopen Christmas Island, which has no asylum seekers on it. Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton confirmed this on the weekend.” Since the Morrison government was elected, there have been reports of 70 suicide and self-harm attempts by 50 people on Manus Island and Nauru. Ms Craik said, “The purpose of the Medevac Bill is to make sure people get the treatment they need. If Australia is to be a leader in human rights, we need to make sure that happens. “As social workers, we know that the presence of community-wide hopelessness, which asylum seekers held without charge for six years and counting are experiencing, is damaging to mental health and wellbeing – in fact, it is often fatal. Just last week, Manus Governor Charlie Benjamin called on our government to remove the remaining men from Manus Island. “Now is the time for the government to stop stoking fear and racism and uphold the meaning of Australia’s signature to the Refugee Convention – we must show that we are ‘with refugees’, as this year’s theme proclaims. “We implore the government to reverse these cruel policies and make sure that Australia once again leads the world in human rights. “We must always remember, seeking asylum is a human right.”

ENDS Christine Craik is available for interview.

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