



Wednesday 8 July 2020

Community lawyers call for residents to have access to emergency leave

Community lawyers are calling for public housing residents to have access to emergency leave, with reports that some public housing residents have been prevented from leaving in the event of a medical or other emergency, despite an exemption under the lockdown act permitting such leave.

Inner Melbourne Community Legal Centre, which provides free legal assistance to disadvantaged people in the City of Melbourne, says that denying emergency and compassionate leave is a human rights violation. It has created distress among people who feel they have been 'imprisoned', compounded by the militaristic police presence.

"It's a clear violation of their human rights, and a breach of the detention direction itself, which specifies that people may leave their homes on health, emergency or compassionate grounds," said Damian Stock, CEO, Inner Melbourne Community Legal Centre.

"We have heard disturbing first-hand accounts of people attempting to seek permission to leave for significant medical reasons, but have either not heard a response after making the request to the 1800 support line, or been refused by on duty police officers," he said.

"Although the powers are broad and far reaching, people's human rights must still be protected. These include the right to be treated with dignity and respect, receive healthcare and health items, and obtain information about the lockdown and legal rights," he said.

"While resources have been made available to residents to help them understand the lockdowns, they are only in English and the information does not communicate their right to leave or how they can request to do so," said Mr Stock.

"It is vital that this legal safeguard is urgently and clearly explained to residents in their own language and via the right communications channels, and made accessible through a clear process."

"For people who already have an experience of trauma the feeling of being detained with no rights is causing untold damage to both mental and physical health, and we have already seen this," said Mr Stock.

Over the next day as the hard lockdowns continue and reports emerge of escalating tensions, lawyers from Inner Melbourne Community Legal and other community legal centres will be at the estates helping residents negotiate leave and get access to necessities, as well as observe conditions and police activity.

Further help:

A dedicated phone number has been established to provide free legal information and advice for public housing residents in lockdown.

- 1800 113 432 (8am-6pm Monday to Friday)
- 0434 136 501 (For urgent after-hours legal advice, operating until Friday 10th July)

A legal rights fact sheet is available here: <https://imcl.org.au/news/housing/covid-19-government-lockdowns-of-public-housing>

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