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For immediate release

NEWS RELEASE

NHS Charges Threaten Refugees' Health, warns JRS-UK

The Jesuit Refugee Service in the United Kingdom (JRS - UK) has called on the British Government to withdraw a clause in proposed amendments to legislation regarding National Health Service charges. It claims that by expecting asylum seekers to pay for medical treatment, their physical and mental health could be seriously damaged, and it might even lead to the health of the wider public being put at risk of infectious or contagious diseases.

The JRS's remarks come in the charity's response to the Consultation over the 1989 Regulations concerning NHS charges to overseas visitors. One amendment to them would prevent failed asylum seekers being exempt from NHS charges. The JRS's response asserts it would be impossible to claim payment from individuals in these circumstances, saying it would be "costly, time consuming and in the end unsuccessful".

The point is reiterated in relation to NHS staff who, the JRS says, should not be expected to determine the status of someone's claim for asylum, nor become a "second-tier immigration service". Hospital staff who suspect that a person may be staying in the UK without authorisation should not be expected to inform immigration officers, asserts the JRS, claiming that such actions could prevent sick people from seeking treatment.

"It is ... our opinion that the proposed exclusion from the 12-month residency exemption of any person identified as being in the UK without proper authorisation be withdrawn from the new Regulation 4(b)," the JRS's submission concludes.

For further information, contact Louise Zanré, Director, JRS-UK on 020 8847 3555 or Ged Clapson (Communications Officer, British Jesuits) on 07778 218671.