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PRESS RELEASE

Visa Consultants Advised to Be Transparent in their Advertising

Many Fijians seeking to apply for the Pacific Engagement Visa Ballot (PEV) are being left in the dark about what they are actually paying for when engaging Visa Consultants. While it is acceptable for these consultants to charge for their services, the Consumer Council of Fiji has noted growing concerns about the lack of clarity in how these fees are explained and presented to clients, and what services are being offered.

Under the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) scheme, applicants are first required to enter a ballot. Entry into this ballot does not constitute a visa application, nor does it guarantee that a visa will be granted. Only individuals whose names are successfully drawn from the ballot will receive an invitation to lodge a permanent residence visa application with the Australian Department of Home Affairs, at which point the official visa application fees will apply. The Council has, however, identified that some consultants are failing to make this distinction clear to applicants, potentially leading to confusion and misleading expectations.

The Council has noted instances where consumers are asked to pay lump sum amounts without being provided with a clear breakdown of the charges, specifically, the portion allocated to the consultant's service fees versus the portion relating to the official PEV process.

A recent TikTok advertisement by a visa agency falsely claimed: "In just FJD \$80, you can have the life-changing opportunity to get a PR to Australia." This is misleading. The official cost to enter the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) ballot is only AUD \$25. The additional amount charged by the agency is simply a consultancy fee. More importantly, this payment only covers entry into the ballot and does not provide permanent residency. Even if a person is successful in the ballot, they must still complete the visa application process and pay further fees.

Council Chief Executive Officer Seema Shandil said that misleading advertising by some agencies is creating false hope for applicants. "Applicants deserve full transparency. We have seen cases where people are led to believe that paying a lump sum will secure them permanent residency, when in fact only a small portion of that payment covers the official ballot fee. The rest is a consultancy charge, and entry into the ballot alone does not guarantee a visa. If you are paying a consultant, you should know exactly how much of your money is going towards

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their services and how much, if any, is being paid to the relevant authorities. More importantly, consumers must be told upfront that success in the ballot is only the first step, and further application fees will apply,” she said.

The Council is urging Visa Consultants to clearly disclose all costs in writing and explain the PEV process in plain language so that consumers can make informed decisions. By managing client expectations from the start, consultants can build trust and prevent misunderstandings that could damage their reputations.

Consumers who believe they have been misled about visa fees or the application process can contact the Council on the toll-free number 155 or email complaints@consumers.fiji.org for assistance.

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