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**Submission to the
Standing Committee on
Indigenous Affairs**

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About Anglicare Australia

Anglicare Australia is a network of independent local, state, national and international organisations that are linked to the Anglican Church and are joined by values of service, innovation, leadership and the Christian faith that every individual has intrinsic value. With a combined expenditure of \$1.82 billion, and a workforce of 20,500 staff and 9,000 volunteers, the Anglicare Australia Network contributes to more than 50 service areas in the Australian community. Our services are delivered to 450,000 people each year, reaching over 1.33 million Australians in total. Our services are delivered in partnership with people, the communities in which they live, and other like-minded organisations in those areas.

Anglicare Australia has as its Mission “partner with people, families and communities to build resilience, inclusion and justice.” Our first strategic goal charges us with reaching this by “influencing social and economic policy across Australia... informed by research and the practical experience of the Anglicare Australia Network.”

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Introduction

Anglicare Australia is pleased to contribute to the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs' inquiry on Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business. Our submission addresses Terms of Reference 1 and 2, and other issues related to employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This submission is based on our Network's experience of three punitive federal government programs and their impact on those we work with. We contend that the current employment services system is creating barriers for people, not removing them. We note major flaws with the discriminatory and widely condemned Community Development Program, which have not been fixed by recent reforms.ⁱ Compulsory income management measures are also undermining opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with no evidence of positive outcomes. Finally, the ParentsNext program is harming those who are subjected to it.

Anglicare Australia recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this country and acknowledges the continued spiritual, physical, social and cultural connections they have, sustained over at least 60,000 years. We also recognise that the experience of colonisation has resulted in complex presentations of trauma that affect many areas of life. In exploring these issues, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaged in the employment services system must be considered. The outcomes of those programs have been lacklustre at best and harmful at worst, and more income support is needed for those who aren't in the mainstream labour market.ⁱⁱ Finally, we offer Anglicare Australia's expertise on successful approaches to employment support and examples of programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Current approaches are failing

Workforce exclusion is an enduring problem in Australia, with some groups are more likely to be disadvantaged.ⁱⁱⁱ Anglicare Australia's Jobs Availability Snapshot shows that jobs simply aren't available for people with barriers to finding work. Our Snapshot shows that across Australia, there are at least five people competing for each job in their skill level, and that groups such as people with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are heavily over-represented. The Government's own review of employment services found that people with barriers to work are being failed by current systems.^{iv} This must be the starting point of any reform to employment support.

Since the late nineties, governments have had a narrow focus on 'work first' narratives – that is the fabled idea that if someone tries hard enough, a suitable job will appear. When governments have recognised employment market failure, they have failed to offer genuine support or direct investment to create employment opportunities. The 'work first' approach assumes a level playing field, where all unemployed people can find work if they are incentivised to do so. This philosophy ignores geographical disadvantage, social disadvantage, and the barriers to work faced by many job seekers. It also ignores evidence that social disadvantage affects job seekers' ability to retain employment.

Instead of recognising barriers to employment, government approaches have focused on a deficit model – an approach that blames people for their own exclusion. The result for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who can face structural barriers to employment, has been government policy failure. The Closing the Gap target to halve the employment gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people by 2018 was not met. In fact the employment gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians has widened over the past decade.^v

To fulfil its remit, this inquiry must consider how government employment policy acts as a *barrier* to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. The remainder of this submission focuses on two employment programs to illustrate this.

The Community Development Program

The Community Development Program (CDP) was introduced across remote Australia in June 2015 as a targeted program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Initially CDP participants were required to complete nearly twice as many hours than their non-CDP counterparts in order to receive income support. In 2019, that obligation was reduced to twenty hours per week, but this remains substantially higher than the hours that can be required of non-CDP participants. Unlike their counterparts in non-remote areas, obligations start immediately for people in remote areas. Participants in the mainstream Jobactive program can only be forced into participation of this nature after receiving employment assistance for one year.^{vi} This clear discrimination is inexcusable, especially given the challenges facing remote areas present – a lack of jobs and high cost of living – which the CDP does nothing to address.

Despite condemnation from community leaders and other experts, the CDP continues to impose extreme requirements and high penalties on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The number of fines issued under the CDP is much higher than other programs. As of 30 June 2019, 25,251 people were registered in the CDP. In 2018-19, there were over 54,000 payment suspensions for job seekers missing appointments, and over 37,000 payment suspensions for disengagement from an activity. Almost half of all of participants had a participation failure applied in the same time period.^{vii}

Anglicare Northern Territory, which works with clients subjected to the CDP, has found that it does not recognise cultural obligations. They have also found that the program is complicated to navigate, that engagement with Centrelink is not culturally safe, and that the compliance policies are far too punitive. These flaws mean that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are eligible for income support do not receive any allowance. Others are walking away from the program because its harsh settings make it harder to look for work. Our experience is that the CDP is simply putting pressure on families who are living in poverty and forcing them to pick up the costs. For those attempting to work with the program, breaches are not helping them gain a job. Instead they are pushed further into poverty, and this approach is harming whole communities.

Even if every eligible person were to receive payments under the CDP, the level of support remains far too low. Payment levels do not take into account the high cost of necessities, such as food and fresh water, in many remote communities. This in itself can be a barrier to those who want to invest in their own job readiness.

Compulsory income management

While not an employment services program, compulsory income management tools introduced by federal governments also deserve attention. These programs, including the Cashless Debit Card and compulsory income management as part of the Northern Territory Intervention, were introduced to address community and family dysfunction. They aimed to assist people to manage their lives and pursue positive opportunities, such as education and employment. These programs have particularly targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

After many years in operation and various iterations of these policies, including the unjustified extensions of trials, there is no evidence these programs are achieving their stated goals. Rather than repeat our arguments in detail, we recommend our submission to previous inquiries on income management and the extension of Cashless Debit Card trials.^{viii}

ParentsNext

ParentsNext is a pre-employment program for parents of young children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly over-represented in ParentsNext, making up eighteen percent of participants.^{ix} The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), an Anglicare Australia Network member, delivers a range of employment services and initially had high hopes for the support ParentsNext could deliver.

BSL has found that the impractical program design and punitive compliance measures are causing parents and their children distress and hardship. In the first six months of the demerit points system, suspensions were around 21 percent of the BSL's total caseload.^x Like the CDP, ParentsNext is harming families, and failing to assist people to find and retain work. Breaches and payment suspensions mean people can't pay their rent, transport their children to school, and may need to rely on emergency relief to feed their families. Instead of empowering people, ParentsNext has become another program that pushes people into poverty without providing genuine support.

Ending workforce exclusion

Research commissioned by the Anglicare Australia Network, *Beyond Supply and Demand*,^{xi} shows that person-centred approaches are far more effective in securing employment for people with barriers to work. This approach acknowledges and supports individual differences and situational factors, building on people's agency, strengths and aspirations.

Our findings underline the importance of partnership and capacity building, and the significance of quality employment with long-term support.^{xii} This means that recognising each person's strengths, preferences, aspirations and need for support. Acknowledging the circumstances which have caused a person to be excluded from the workforce cannot be ignored, as happens with simplistic 'work first' approaches. This too often leads to short-term employment outcomes that aren't sustained.

The value of the person-centred, capability-based approach that Anglicare Australia advocates for has been recognised in the Australian Government's own recent review and recommendations for changes to employment services,^{xiii} and has now been echoed by the Productivity Commission's draft report into the social and economic benefits of improving mental health. The Commission has strongly recommended the adoption of person-centred assistance for people with mental illness to assist them to find and keep work.^{xiv} These lessons are just as pertinent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Current employment services such as CDP and ParentsNext are discriminatory, narrow, and punitive. They are failing to increase employment rates for the people who have been forced into them.

Our Network knows there are far better ways to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into employment. For example, Anglicare Victoria's Buldau Yioohgen Big Dreams Leadership Academy supports Aboriginal young people to feel connected to their culture, history, spirituality, people, and country. The program is about building resilience and instilling pride in young Aboriginal people, providing them with opportunities and giving them the confidence to be active members of their community. The program brings together community, cultural and sporting groups to give help young people as they strive towards their educational, employment and leadership goals. It focuses specifically on challenging negative messaging about Aboriginal people and instead reminds participants that they are strong, proud and resilient. While not a sole focus for measuring the success of the program, participation in Buldau Yioohgen's has supported young Aboriginal people to secure employment.^{xv}

Anglicare Northern Territory promotes the idea of 'hybrid economies' when considering the economic and social sustainability of remote communities. In proposing the model, Professor Jon Altman has called for a combination of the two approaches along with a third, the 'customary' sector. The customary sector is made up of non-monetised activities, such as fishing, hunting and gathering, and art creation.^{xvi} We commend this research to the Committee as a strengths-based and place-based model for providing employment and opportunities in remote communities.

Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face lasting forms of disadvantage that stem from the damaging experience of colonisation and systemic discrimination. This is worsened by a weak job market in remote areas, and by an employment services system that is failing those it was designed to help. Participation and employment are crucial for building inclusive, thriving communities. Yet government programs are failing to help people find work, and are instead punishing them. Harsh penalties are applied carelessly and arbitrarily, leading to wide-reaching deprivation. This is the reality facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ParentsNext, CDP, and across employment services more broadly. Programs that push people into poverty are not fit to be considered employment support at all.

Anglicare Australia calls for an end to punitive approaches to employment services. Instead we need person-centred support and payments that meet people's needs. Locality and culture must also be considered in deep partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. If the Committee is serious about increasing employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it must recommend urgent reform to federal government programs that do the opposite.

ⁱ Scullion, N. (2018) [2018-19 Budget: Backing the economic aspirations of First Australians](#).

ⁱⁱ Saunders, P., and Bedford, M. (2017) [New Minimum Income for Healthy Living Budget Standards for Low-Paid and Unemployed Australians](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Goodwin-Smith, I. and Hutchinson, C. Australian Centre for Community Services Research (2014) [Beyond supply and demand: addressing the complexities of workforce exclusion in Australia](#).

^{iv} Anglicare Australia (2019) [Jobs Availability Snapshot 2019](#).

^v Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019) [Closing the Gap Report](#).

^{vi} Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (2019) [Inquiry into the adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia](#).

^{vii} National Indigenous Australians Agency (2019) [Community Development Program \(CDP\) June 2019 Quarterly Compliance Data](#).

^{viii} Anglicare Australia (2019) [Submission to Inquiry into Social Security \(Administration\) Amendment \(Income Management to Cashless Debit Card Transition\) Bill 2019](#).

^{ix} Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business (2019) [Supporting Indigenous Parents](#).

^x Brotherhood of St Laurence (2019) [ParentsNext Submission to the Senate's Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry](#).

^{xi} Goodwin-Smith, I. and Hutchinson, C. Australian Centre for Community Services Research (2014) [Beyond supply and demand: addressing the complexities of workforce exclusion in Australia](#).

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Department of Jobs and Small Business (2018) [I Want to Work: Employment Services 2020 Report](#).

^{xiv} Productivity Commission. (2019) [Inquiry into Mental Health: Draft Report](#).

^{xv} Anglicare Victoria (2019) [Buldau Yioohgen 'Big Dreams' Leadership Academy](#).

^{xvi} Altman J.C. (2001) [Sustainable development options on Aboriginal land: The hybrid economy in the twenty-first century](#).