

# Labor Senators' Dissenting Report

1.1 Labor Senators do not support the Social Services Legislation Amendment (No. 2) Bill 2015 (Bill) in its current form.

1.2 In particular Labor Senators do not support the proposed changes to the Centrelink social worker role under the vulnerable measure of income management.

1.3 Labor Senators do not support any changes that alter the role of a Centrelink social worker in making initial determinations to place people on income management; and reduce the ongoing interaction with people on income management.

1.4 Submissions made to the inquiry highlight concerns with changing and reducing the role of Centrelink social workers in assessing and providing ongoing support for people on income management.

1.5 In line with the concerns raised through the inquiry, Labor Senators oppose changes that go to the vulnerable welfare payment recipient measure of income management and the role and requirement of a social worker.

1.6 In relation to the proposed changes to the assessment by a Centrelink social worker under the vulnerable measure, ACOSS expressed their disapproval stating:

ACOSS strongly opposes the move to reduce the capacity for social workers to make assessments about whether or not an individual meets the vulnerability criteria and would benefit from compulsory income management. The more broadly and inflexibly the policy applies, the greater the risk of capturing individuals who may not be assisted by or may experience harm from mandatory controls over financial decision making.<sup>1</sup>

1.7 The ACOSS submission went on:

[W]e are very concerned that, instead of moving towards careful individual assessment, this Bill will make the imposition of compulsory income management an administrative decision exercised by Centrelink Officers without social work qualifications, against rigid external criteria, not focussed on the best interests of the individual affected.<sup>2</sup>

1.8 In their submission to the inquiry the Commonwealth Ombudsman expressed similar apprehensions about the impact of the reducing the role of social workers in making assessments under the vulnerability measures, stating:

We are concerned that these proposed amendments could leave open the way for IM [income management] to be applied to customers in circumstances where it will not assist them and could be detrimental to their

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1 ACOSS, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

2 ACOSS, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

wellbeing. This is because the amendments would seem to remove many of the existing safeguards.<sup>3</sup>

1.9 Labor Senators share these concerns and believe income management should be appropriately targeted to vulnerable individuals and families who will most benefit.

1.10 In relation to the reduction of compulsory contact between income management clients and Centrelink social workers, Uniting Care Australia stated that they:

view this measure as undermining the potential for building individual confidence in income management strategies, noting the need for interpersonal communication as a fundamental mechanism to build individual capacity.<sup>4</sup>

1.11 Labor Senators share this concern. Continued support and interaction between very vulnerable people and families who are participating in income management is critical to ensure people are supported to stabilise their lives by prioritising money for housing and rent, food, utilities and items for children. The Centrelink interaction also helps to support individuals who may be very socially isolated.

### **Recommendation 1**

**1.12 Labor Senators recommend amending the Bill to remove all sections that change the vulnerable welfare payment recipient measure of income management.**

### **Recommendation 2**

**1.13 Labor Senators recommend removing parts of the Bill that alter or reduce the role or requirement of a social worker in income management.**

**Senator Carol Brown**

**Senator Nova Peris OAM**

**Senator Claire Moore**

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3 *Submission 5*, p. 8.

4 *Submission 2*, p. 3.