



19 September 2016

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Education Committee
PO Box 6100
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Canberra ACT 2600

Submitted online

Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2016

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

The importance of early childhood education

FECCA highlights the importance of child care and early childhood education for CALD children. The quality of life of migrant and refugee children is directly affected by their access to appropriate early childhood education and care services.

Child care and early childhood education hold a key place in the wellbeing of families and their local communities. They provide key opportunities for children's development and social engagement, and for enabling families to engage fully in the labour market, each of which is important in contributing to stronger families.¹

Child care and preschool attendance have been consistently found to affect early child development.² Children of migrants and refugees may not have much or any exposure to English language at home, so early childhood education is particularly important for the development of their language skills. Child care also provides an important opportunity for

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Child care and early childhood education in Australia', Facts Sheet 2015, 2.

² Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Financial disadvantage and children's school readiness', *Family Matters* No. 83 (October 2009), 24.

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migrant children to be exposed to Australian social culture, assisting with their later transition to formal schooling.

FECCA believes that the right resources must be invested into early childhood development and education to ensure that children from CALD backgrounds develop a sense of belonging, have access to adequate support and are empowered to preserve and develop their cultural identity.

The National Foundation of Australian Women (NFAW) highlights the dual role of the child care system – increasing labour force participation and improving individual child development. FECCA believes that both of these objectives must be central to the design of child care policy.

The Bill engages the right to education, which is not referred to by the Explanatory Memorandum. According to article 29 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full, and encourage children to respect their parents, their cultures and other cultures. Article 30 of the *Convention* says:

Children have the right to learn and use the language and customs of their families, whether or not these are shared by the majority of the people in the country where they live, as long as this does not harm others.

Culturally and linguistically diverse workers in Australia

Many people from CALD backgrounds are employed in insecure work which is often low paid, unsustainable, dangerous and isolating. Women from CALD backgrounds are overrepresented in insecure employment fields which include industries such as manufacturing, accommodation, food services, cleaning and labouring. They are more likely to be employed on a casual basis and to be at a disadvantage negotiating terms of employment. CALD workers may have working hours which differ greatly depending on the availability of work. Further, migrants and refugees experience higher levels of unemployment due to a range of factors, including discrimination, education background, skills recognition, language barriers and lack of Australian work experience.

Employees from non-English speaking backgrounds generally have poorer employment outcomes in Australia compared to native English speaking workers. Many migrants and refugees are earning at or below the minimum wage. Newly arrived migrants (particularly those without English) are more vulnerable to poverty and disadvantage.³ As an example, 38 per cent of skilled stream migrants and 58 per cent of family stream migrants have incomes of less than \$600 a week.⁴ Humanitarian stream migrants overwhelmingly earn less than the minimum wage. 72 per cent of Humanitarian stream migrants have incomes of less than \$600 a week, 21 per cent earn between \$300 and \$599 per week, and almost 42 per cent of these migrants are in the lowest income group (\$1 to \$299 per week).⁵

FECCA is concerned that the three-tiered activity test will disproportionately affect CALD families due to the high proportion of CALD workers, particularly women, in insecure and

³ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Bridging our growing divide: Inequality in Australia* (December 2014), 103.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Understanding Migrant Outcomes – Enhancing the Value of Census Data, Australia, 2011*, available at:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3417.0Main%20Features22011?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3417.0&issue=2011&num=&view=>

⁵ Ibid.

variable employment. Unemployment and low or variant work hours, should not affect access to child care.

Complexity of the Child Care Assistance Package

We believe that the Child Care Assistance Package is complex and families will have difficulty understanding what subsidies are available to them, particularly when their work hours vary week to week. Safeguards built into the package, including the Additional Child Care Subsidy, require parents to fill out additional forms which may be an additional burden on CALD families who do not have adequate English literacy. This may further disadvantage vulnerable children.

Recommendations

FECCA recommends that all children have access 24 hours of early education and childcare per week, regardless of whether a child's parents meet the proposed activity test.

The process for applying for the additional child care subsidy should be simplified and take into account the difficulties that vulnerable families may have filling out paperwork to apply for additional subsidies.