

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

Parliament House

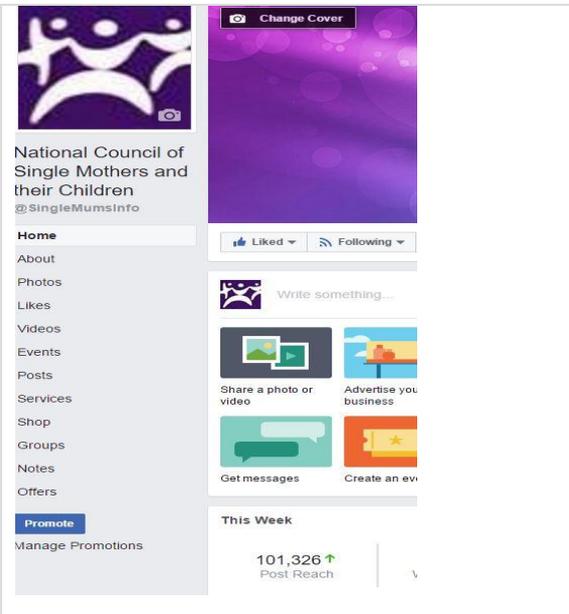
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary,

**Social Services Legislation Amendment (Payment Integrity) Bill 2017 Social Services**

The National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc are privilege to appear before the committee via telecom on Thursday 31 August 2017 at 12.00pm – 12.45pm.

	<p><b>The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated (NCSMC) is an organisation dedicated to single mothers. NCSMC provides information, referrals and advice to single mothers through our electronic platforms.</b></p> <p><b>We respond to individual requests for assistance. Furthermore, our post can reach over 100,000 per week, a significant electronic footprint.</b></p>
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NCSMC seeks the inclusion of women`s voices and their lived experience through our main Facebook page and from our online surveys. This ensures that women are informed of the purpose and the context of our work, that their names will be deleted and or changed. The sharing of other identifying information will be at the women`s direction and with their approval. NCSMC does not directly approach women who had sought our assistance as we believe that a decision to share an experience is deeply personal and it must be given in a considered and free manner. It is the direct lived experience that has shaped this short-submission.



National Council for Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

Eliminate and respond to violence, hardship and inequality for single mothers and their children

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## Response to Proposals

**Persons 55 to 59 years:** Persons 55 to 59 years of age currently engaging in 30 hours of volunteering per week will instead have to work for 15 hours and volunteer for 15 hours to satisfy their activity requirements.

Women were quick to point out that if paid work was an option, they would have prioritized that over a voluntary option due to the financial gain. NCSMC raises the question on behalf of the persons who cannot find paid work for 15 hours per week. Does this result in them *not satisfying their activity requirements* and loose access to social security? If this proposition is correct, it would be unfathomable, and the only option for the Committee is to comprehensively reject the proposal.

***I'm finding job search difficult at 49... lord knows how hard it would be at 59..***

***As if I would not take paid work any day! We struggle every week, I have learnt not to eat in the mornings.***

***I take two buses to get to my voluntary work, I meet those 30 hours, my dream is to find work that will pay my Bills. I can't find it now, how will that change?***

***I do all the unpaid care for my three sons, I volunteer more than 30 hours. My working week is 24/7, I just don't get paid or the kudos. What does this mean if I can't find 15 hours of paid work?***

**Removal of intent to claim:** We resolutely oppose this measure as the beginning of a payment from first date of contact is to ensure that there is no waiting time and that there is the means to provide the basics such as shelter, food, heating (cooling) and health care. We also point out that there is a mandatory one week wait for various payments including Newstart and know firsthand the hardship that this causes. To delay payments until all paperwork is presented and meetings are attended would cause a high degree of hardship. Furthermore, we are deeply concerned for women leaving violent situations and our advice to them is to contact DHS and commence contact when safe to do so, and from a safe location. We advise women to do this as soon as possible knowing that some women will not have access to any of the household finances.

***Paper work lost but thankfully they had the date of my first contact and a receipt for my paper work. I have now been waiting 9 weeks and I phone every day. I am already stressed can't imagine what it would be like if this 'removal of intent was real'***

**Paper work gets lost, we get different advice, this would be a shambles.**

***I contacted DHS from my friend's phone, I knew I had to leave, his violence, his outburst. Long wait but they were fantastic, it was a social worker, and we were set to go. No, Do NOT MAKE THIS CHANGE.***

## **FTB Part A**

NCSMC has advocated and raised awareness of the extreme value and critical nature of Family Tax Benefits including supplements. Our submissions over recent years spoke to the targeted nature of our system and therefore any reduction affects the families who need it the most. The chipping away of the thresholds whilst families across Australia are in housing stress is reckless, especially as the Government has not undertaken any comprehensive review, since the late 1980's. In 2017 Australia does not have a stated understanding of what families require so they can stay a step away from poverty. We seek a halt to the proposed changes to the taper rates for FTB Part A for families with a total income of \$94,316 or more. We seek a halt to all reductions until there is a review like the Harmer Review. Decisions need to be undertaken in an informed context.

***I know I seem rich to some. I have four children and my annual pay is just above this amount, I also pay for child care and some informal care to work these extra hours. I am tired but blessed and believe me that extra helps. I still struggle with my mortgage and will do an annual review for the best rates. Every cent helps. The ridiculous thing is child support does not do any calculation for a fourth child. Apparently, that child does not cost anything. Fix child support and we would all be better and leave our family payments alone.***

## **Job Seekers**

Increasing compliance framework and the discretion of job providers without a review to include the experience of job seekers is an incomplete and unbalanced picture. It appears that most national policies will include the voice and experience of those who will need to live with that policy, except when it comes to job seekers. NCSMC suggests that no change occurs until such a review has occurred.

***Let me tell you about my shunting between Centrelink and the job agency. Apparently, I had missed an appointment. The knowledge that I did not know of the appointment and had never missed previous appointments was somehow irrelevant. A couple of days, shuttling between both agencies, oh and throw in 'the need to phone a number in Victoria' occurred before my suspension was withdrawn and my payment reinstated. There is absolute power that Centrelink holds over mine and my son's life. It is easy to get 'lost' within the Centrelink and Job Agency 'system'. My crime, I missed an unknown appointment and no one could or would help for several days.***

## **Job Seeker Payment**

Simplification should not take precedence over a sensible approach and therefore payments that have a clear purpose such as bereavement, widow, sick leave etc should remain distinct. The Job Seeker payment is underpinned by a compliance and mutual obligation framework. NCSMC is assuming that the stated payments in the Bill (bereavement, widow, sick leave etc) will have an exemption process to both the compliance and mutual obligation framework. Therefore, this nullifies the aim of *simplification*. NCSMC assist women who do not

understand or have knowledge of the domestic violence exemptions and it is our concern that this confusion would be transferred to the Job Seeker Payment as it becomes the one catchment payment.

**Drug trials and reasonable excuse.** Our knowledge in this area is like any other lay person as its outside of our knowledge. However, we are always worried when ‘trials’ for unemployed persons are rolled out. It is often at great expense, based more upon assumption than facts, evaluations are not transparent and it’s usually underpinned by a negative view of the unemployed person. Women and children affected by hardship will often feature in the federal budget as their assistance is reduced and called a ‘cost saving measure’. We don’t want resources directed from social security into new trials. We also note the advice from drug and alcohol specialist such as Dr Nadine Ezard, clinical director for alcohol and drug services at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital.

*‘there was no evidence the drug testing would increase jobs or help people with substance abuse issues to return to the workforce’*

[Click here](#) for media report.

#### **Liquid Asset Waiting Test**

Women who have \$36,000 will need to wait six-months before a payment. We understand that this could affect women who have a redundancy and or part of a divorce settlement. Either option is a ‘life challenging event’ and the prospect, if not employed, is to stretch the money to cover all living cost for the next six-months. This would add an unnecessary level of stress. NCSMC believes that the current timeframes and amounts are more acceptable.

We trust that the Committee will determine that this legislation will not proceed, and that the Committee will be diligent in reviewing these measure against our Human Rights obligations. We point to *access to social security* and the *rights of the child* as they appear to be a at odds with a range of these proposals.

Yours faithfully

Terese Edwards

Chief Executive Office