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Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
Department of the Senate
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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Submission in relation to the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Cashless Debit Card) Bill 2017

Introduction

Moreton Bay Region Access and Inclusion Group are a group of community members who live within the Moreton Bay Council Region and have an interest in improving access for all with needs for adjusted access, in particular, for people with disabilities to ensure they have community inclusion. We promote, consult with and lobby our council and government members who represent our communities with the view to developing better policies and fostering positive relationships for the people of our region affected by the issues with cover.

A number of community members have approached our group members and other organisation support group members of which we are part, with their concerns surrounding the Cashless Debit Card. Our group has researched income management strategies and their effectiveness and has closely examined the relevant information to this bill before the senate inquiry. It is for this reason we make this submission.

The Demand for Social Security Reform – Is the response justified?

Australia has one of the best Social Security systems in the world. Combined with other essential human services it ranks us 10th in the world in the Social progress index. We're even 3rd in the Mercer Melbourne Global Pension Index 2016. Internationally we are seen as progressive in terms of developing human rights, economic growth and providing the means to communities to enhance and sustain their quality of life. This bill as a part of the entire income management program reform seeks to impose on the human rights our citizens currently access.

Social Security has been an imperative part of Australia's socio-economic development since the first relevant legislation was passed in 1908. To begin regression of our successful policies now would be a terrible indignity to our past governments who worked so hard to ensure Australia always took care of its most vulnerable people. Several policies have already been implemented to ensure our social security system is fair and equitable and prevents future generations falling into the intergenerational dependence on income support traps.

The focus on prevention needs to start with kids in our education systems and following them throughout their schooling to develop and nurture a positive ethic and attitude toward employment. Some changes have already been implemented in this area that has seen a positive turn in social security dependency. For example, changing the way schools are referred to in assessment for funding needs. Many may recall the term used in NSW in the 1980s and 90s of Disadvantaged Schools. It was a program that enabled schools in areas

with a low socio-economic status demographic to apply for additional funding for both the school and individual students. Studies that lead to reports written for the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Conference in 2003 identified that a majority of students who went to these schools struggled harder to achieve after school life. Having always been identified as “disadvantaged” with an agenda that these students needed more assistance than average in order to achieve the same as others, it created a mindset that achievement was not possible without handouts. Education funding reforms in 2001 and 2009 were the beginning of changing this approach and thus altering the mindset that students were taught within the education system.

It's clear just from this example alone that by demonising people who are in vulnerable situations through no fault of their own, we only diminish their confidence and ambition to try to achieve and become self-sufficient.

Despite social security application and dependence rates stabilising and beginning to decline as the Nation's economic growth improved after recovery from the GFC, we find the current government agenda still seeks to portray our social security system as being in a state of disaster with dire consequences if the amount of payments to people isn't reduced. However there seems to be very little if any focus on reducing the actual expenses of the Human Services Department. Outsourced contracts issued by the department exceeded \$1.12 billion in 2014 jumping to \$1.6 billion in 2015 and still up at \$1.6 billion in 2016. Almost a million dollars was spent just in the category of Market Research in 2015 alone. What are they researching and in which market? If they want to know how their clients feel about them just read the Centrelink social media accounts for a start.

It is very difficult to swallow that people on social security supports living on amounts that keep them below Australia's poverty line are the ones who need to take a cut when billions of dollars in contracts are issued by the department every year for services which none of the staff in the 185 executive roles of the Department of Human Services seem to be capable of managing in house.

Referencing Social Security and the misuse of the term “Welfare”.

Under the Social Security Act the terms of reference to provisions under the legislation are quite specific. The Australian Government Guide to Social Security Law section 8 specifies the way in which provisions under the act should be referred to;

“It applies to all aspects of the Act that are directly implemented by staff in Centrelink or any other provider delivering relevant services. The Act itself is generally clear and self-explanatory and this Part explains how it operates rather than to paraphrase or summarise its provisions. When applying individual provisions from the SS(Admin)Act, delegates must play close attention to the words used in defining their scope. Key terms used are:

social security payment

social security benefit

social security entitlement

social security pension

service pension, and

supplementary payment.

The people not bound by this legislation it seems are the members of parliament who by whatever privilege, continue to refer to Social Security as “welfare”. More specifically the referencing to the Cashless Debit Card and related items and matters as welfare in the Amendment Bills and the Guide to Social Security Law section on CDC.

(See: 8.7.2.50 Welfare Restricted Bank Account (Cashless Debit Card Trial) Definition: Welfare restricted bank account means a bank account into which the restricted portion (8.7.2.20) of a participant's welfare payment will be paid.

8.7.8.10 Disclosure of Information to a Financial Institution (Cashless Debit Card Trial) referencing a CDC account as a “welfare restricted bank account”)

The use of the term welfare in place of all references to the key terms that should be used is a divisive move by the Minister to demonise people in the Social Security system to the rest of the community in order to obtain majority support. At the time of writing this submission, using the search mechanism on the Minister's website to search the keyword “welfare”, it located 175 Transcripts and Media releases that included the word “welfare”. In his Speech: “No child will live in poverty” - 30 years later, a new direction - Speech to the Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 20 July 2017 – the minister uses the word “welfare” 21 times. Not once was it in reference to a person's wellbeing. It is the only reference he uses now to refer to payments and services. Many terms used to refer to social security over the years have varied by none have had a more negative connotation than the term welfare. If people working in the department are told they must use the specified terms in order to prevent the negative associations for people who are seeking financial support, why are our members of parliament not being held to the same standard?

Impact on People with Disabilities and Potential Discrimination

The generalised use of the term welfare has also impacted on different groups of social security services. Marketing the card to the nation has seen a large shift in community attitude toward people who receive social security and recent other comments and policy changes to the disability sector of social security have impacted on how people with disabilities are being perceived. NDIS and the reform of taxation to fund the costs have also contributed to the negative perception of people with disabilities who are reliant on social security income. The generalisation of all social security payments under the term welfare has created a perception among a large sector of the community that people with disabilities are more capable of a working capacity than they actually are with little or no understanding of the obstacles in employment that people with disabilities still face today.

Examples of how this is affecting the disability community are often seen in responses to media coverage of disability issues or on social media. Here are some such examples:

In reference to disability parking;

“It's unfair that I have to drive around looking for parking all the time when the disabled get plenty of parking and they have nothing to do.”

“Disabled parking should only be during peak shopping times when the disabled are more likely to be out.”

Another commenter on social media referring to access provisions as “over servicing of a minority group who are incapacitating this country” told a person with a disability, “I won't try

to explain it to you any further as you obviously can't understand. I have a job to go to so that I can pay for your NDIS which I will never have access to. If that's not discrimination I don't know what is."

In reference to a woman who uses a wheelchair voicing her disgust at being told to leave a shop;

"Why don't you stop harassing hard working people. There's plenty of shops go to another one."

"Instead of embarrassing yourself just get your carer to get what you want. That's what the shop owner's taxes are paying for after all."

These comments show us the perception that because people with disabilities do not fit within their personal definition of tax payer, we should not be entitled to any say in political matters. There is always the assumption of a person with a disability that they don't work or don't contribute despite the fact that around 50% of the disability community is at least part time employed and around 30% of people with disabilities volunteer in their community. (ABS, Human Rights Australia, Volunteering Australia).

People with disabilities face enough barriers without public attitude that they are 'a drain on welfare' being perpetuated by the same government who give us slogans telling us that 'Everyone has a role to play'.

Many of our members have raised concerns about the terms and conditions and operational issues of the card including;

- Lack of a tap and go feature – people with motor function impairments, neurological conditions, and mobility device users already face ongoing issues with using EFTPOS facilities. The introduction of the tap and go feature has made it possible for them to make small purchases independently without the need to carry monetary cash. The lack of this feature on the card takes that capability away from them.
- Removal of independent control of payments and transfers – many members budget strictly to meet their expenses throughout the year which may include transferring funds to high interest savings accounts connected through their online banking. This is not allowed under the terms and conditions. Quite a number of people with disabilities live in shared housing arrangements with family or friends. Their payment arrangements are currently that they transfer their share of expenses via direct deposit transfer using phone or internet banking. This is not allowed by Indue.
- Direct Debit arrangements – Indue does not allowed direct debits. Many people with disabilities make arrangements with their service providers for utilities to automatically direct debit a specific amount each week or month to make bills easier to manage. It also removes the issues of forgetting to pay bills. This is not allowed by Indue.

These as well as a number of other issues raised with us have given us grave concern that the disability community will experience further discrimination by being forced into this arrangement in order to receive their social security payments.

We also strongly repudiate the implication that everyone who receives social security payments, especially people with disabilities, fall into the demographic of people that the government is claiming the objectives this card is aimed at.

We acknowledge comments from the Minister that there is no intention for people with disabilities to be included in the roll out in communities however, he has also stated it is not

his decision and that community panels with decide that for themselves. We would like to know how people with disabilities are represented on these panels. There were half as many people on DSP as there were on Newstart in the two existing trial areas. This has not given us any confidence in the Minister's intention whatsoever.

In conclusion

We do not believe that the Cashless Debit Card is the best method of addressing the issues of alcoholism, drugs and gambling in the community. Income management has already been in place in the Kimberley region for almost ten years and has shown very little success. We do not feel that this measure should be used as a blanket policy on all people who fit within a payment type, age or live in a specific area without assessing that person's individual needs. Mostly we do not believe that people with disabilities will in any way should be subjected to this restrictive and punitive measure with no justification.

Submitted by:

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