



SUBMISSION TO SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON THE DISABILITY SUPPORT PENSION

Anti-Poverty Network SA¹ appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee's inquiry on the *Purpose, Intent, and Adequacy of the Disability Support Pension*.

As an organisation whose members, mostly, are people receiving income support payments, including the DSP, as well as people on JobSeeker who have applied for DSP, but have been unsuccessful, this is an issue of critical importance to us.

In this brief submission², we make the following recommendations.

¹ Anti-Poverty Network SA is a grassroots community organisation, led by people with direct experience of poverty and unemployment, that advocates for people on low incomes, our members include unemployed people, students, sole parents, pensioners, carers, migrants, and underemployed workers.

Since 2013, we have been speaking out about our grossly-inadequate, impoverishing income support payments; the punitive and harmful treatment of job-seekers by the employment services providers that administer the Government 'Mutual Obligation' regime; RoboDebt; Cashless Welfare; Work For The Dole; the understaffing of Centrelink offices; and on a wide range of other issues related to our poverty, unemployment, and our welfare system.

² References available on request.

- That the rate of the payment be raised to at least \$80 a day (\$550 a week), the JobSeeker rate during the early stages of COVID, from late-April to late-September of 2020.
- Remove the requirement that conditions be fully treated and stabilised, to acknowledge the fact that people can have widely fluctuating medical conditions, and that people's health can rapidly deteriorate because of disease, accident, or other sudden changes to their health.
- Limit the time period for the assessment of DSP applications to a maximum of three months.
- End the compulsory 'Program of Support' for people seeking to apply for the DSP.
- Reinststate the initial threshold of work hours for people with a DSP from 15 hours a week to 30 hours a week, when transitioning from DSP to employment, so that people have access to support services for longer.

Why \$80 A Day?

Last year, as part of its economic response to COVID and the accompanying economic shutdowns, the Federal Government temporarily raised the rate of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment, and other allowances, through the introduction of a \$250 a week COVID Supplement.

This COVID Supplement, which was not provided to people receiving the Age Pension, Disability Pension, or Carers Payment, was provided from late April to late September. It temporarily lifted JobSeeker to \$80 a day (\$550 a week), just above the Henderson poverty-line of \$540 a week.

From the end of September, the supplement has been mostly removed, through three cuts, with 90 percent of the additional \$250 a week now gone.

Ever since the COVID Supplement was announced, Anti-Poverty Network SA has called for it to be made permanent for allowance payments. We have also called for people accessing the DSP, and others³ who missed out on receiving the supplement, to have their payments lifted to at least the same rate of \$80 a day.

It is worth pointing out that, even when JobSeeker was doubled, far from being an excessive, lavish income, it was still only a minimum, adequate income.

A 2020 survey of people on \$80 a day, from ACOSS, indicated that many people on JobSeeker still experienced difficulties paying for essential items:

- 33% of people were still skipping at least 1 meal a week due to a lack of funds.
- 41.2% of people were still struggling to pay for medications, dental services,

³ We have also called \$80 a day to be a minimum income for those who currently have no access to income support whatsoever, like migrant workers and students.

psychology, physiotherapy and other healthcare costs.

Currently, the DSP is \$434 a week, or \$476 a week, including the Energy Supplement, and the Maximum Pension Supplement. While this is light-years higher than JobSeeker, at \$310 a week, it is still below the Henderson poverty-line.

We note that the partnered rate, being substantially lower than the single rate (as is the case for all income support payments), causes many people on the DSP to feel that they are financially dependent on their partners, that their financial independence has been curtailed. This is something that we heard from many of our members and supporters who are receiving the DSP, and who are in relationships.

A consistent payment rate, for both single people, and partnered people, would ensure those in relationships do not feel overly-reliant on the finances of their partner.

The ACOSS/UNSW 2018 Poverty report highlighted that just under 4 in 10 of the Australians living in poverty have a disability (739,200, or 38% of the nearly 2 million adults Australians who are living in poverty).

1 in 6 people with disability were living in poverty, compared with just over 1 in 10 Australians without disability.

ACOSS/UNSW said, "These numbers are likely to under-estimate poverty among people with disability as the poverty line doesn't take into account the extra costs of disability which many people experience: adjustments to the home, personal support and care, medical and pharmaceutical expenses and additional transport costs such as taxis."

NATSEM has since estimated the extra costs of living for households with:

- An adult with profound or severe disability needing an extra \$173 a week on average.
- Households with adults with mild or moderate disability needed an extra \$87 per week on average.

Accessing The DSP: An Impossible Gauntlet

The DSP is meant to give people with a disability a dignified, independent way of life, however over the past 20 years it has been repeatedly sabotaged.

In 2010-2011, 69% of applications to the DSP were successful, but by 2018 it had plummeted to 29.8%. The few who are successful are often left waiting for months, even years, to finally be approved and are forced into programs like Jobseeker while they wait.

This started with 'Welfare to Work', where you would be pushed away from the DSP

into employment-seeking programs, such as JobSeeker, if you were deemed able to work at least 15 hours a week. Politicians of the day justified this by suggesting it would move people off of income support into employment, but did nothing but tighten eligibility while providing no incentive to employ people with disability.

By 2019, 42% of people on Jobseeker had a disability.

"My mum applied for the DSP shortly after my father passed away. After jumping through countless hoops, she was rejected despite having a bad back, two hearing aids, and glasses. These weren't deemed as good enough to approve her application.

To add insult to injury she was placed on Newstart, now known as Jobseeker, and made to do volunteer work."

- Robbie

From here, things only got worse. In 2012, eligibility was further restricted to only people who have a fully diagnosed, treated, and stabilised condition. This effectively mandates some form of treatment as part of approval, ignoring what they want or whether treatment is appropriate.

The burden has shifted more and more to the application to demonstrate that they are worthy of support. They are expected to produce piles of documentation detailing their medical history and gathering doctor's recommendations, leading to many trips back and forth from their doctors to string of assessments.

Throughout this grueling process, a doctor overseeing their case can, and often does, overrule the applicant's personal physician, rejecting their findings or medical advice. This is not only neglect, but an insult to the skilled medical professionals who care for us.

It should come as no shock that many die while waiting, an average of 405 per year between 2016 and 2020.

"As a former employee of the Disability Rights Advocate Service (DRAS), what I was told was that pretty much 100% of applications (that are not automatic ones from kids at special schools reaching a certain age) are rejected, and the only way you get on the DSP is to appeal."

- Dave

"The application process looks terribly daunting, almost a trauma in and of itself. My doctor has suggested I apply, but as an ex-social worker I highly doubt I'd be accepted."

- Fi Bee

If they are found to not meet initial criteria, they are required to complete a 'Program of Support'. This usually means a 18-month stint on Jobseeker. Not only

is this a blatant delay tactic, but, because of the huge difference in payment between the two programs, it effectively steals over \$10,000 from each participant.

94% of people who complete this stage are accepted into the DSP. Clearly, they should never have been made to wait for the additional income they needed to meet their greater living costs.

"I've applied and been rejected twice. It's in review again. I'm wheelchair bound and dependent for shopping, cooking, cleaning, showering, food prep, any travel outside my house and sometimes transfers/speech etc.

'You're not disabled enough'.

That and being bullied and threatened constantly with 'we cannot accept your medical certificate because your disability is permanent, so go find work, although we recognise you literally cannot. If you don't, we will cut you off'.

The system is messed up!"

- Carly

This all leads to a degrading and exhausting process, where people with a disability are left waiting forever minus a day for support that still leaves them in poverty. People on the DSP are twice as likely to have trouble paying bills and more than four times as likely to skip meals due to lack of funds than the average.

"I'm on the DSP and I struggle. I can pay rent and bills (split with a housemate), but things like dental, new socks because mine have holes in them, or a heater for winter because the old one broke, all of those things are out of reach. DSP in my experience isn't enough to live a decent life. You can afford food and housing, but often I've had to sacrifice things I need because my medical expenses are so high."

- Lianna

"I don't even feel safe to even try and get a paid job because of the risk of being reviewed. That is my position at the moment and I know others in the same boat. The last time I studied I got reviewed and was quietly told it was because I was studying. 'If you can study, you can work'." - Jenny

It is unthinkable that we still allow this to go on. Any program that leaves so many people, some of our most vulnerable people, in deep poverty, is a program that is not compatible with basic decency and fairness.

For further info about Anti-Poverty Network SA and its submission:
or 08 8451 1589.