

NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION LEGAL SERVICES

WORKING TO ACHIEVE IMPROVED JUSTICE OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Statement:

I am reading this statement on behalf of the National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services Forum (the **Forum**). The Chairperson, Antoinette Braybrook, is unable to attend due to Sorry Business.

The Forum is comprised of 14 Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services member organisations across Australia that provide holistic, specialist, culturally safe legal and non-legal supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing or at risk of family violence. Over 95% of the clients nationally are women and children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience extreme levels of poverty and disadvantage resulting from punitive, racist and discriminatory government policies.

There are many examples of this, but today the Forum will highlight the disproportionate impact the ParentsNext social security program is having on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, our mothers, carers and nurturers.

ParentsNext affects mostly women (around 95%) and almost all affected women are single mothers. It imposes onerous reporting requirements and demeaning conditions on mums to attend numerous appointments and activities to comply with the requirements of the program.

Not meeting these conditions results in financial penalties and means that a participant's income is at risk of being suspended. Alarming, payments can be cancelled entirely, and a 4-week wait to re-apply can be imposed. This puts women and their children in extremely vulnerable positions and is likely to result in psychological distress for mums and their children.

In 2018, despite making up only 19% of all participants in the program, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents made up 24% of all payment suspensions. ParentsNext is prejudicing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and placing them at an even further disadvantage. The recent changes to the ParentsNext program fail to address the issues that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women being disproportionately impacted by this punitive program.

In the Forum's work, nationally we see firsthand the impact ParentsNext is having on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, mothers and especially those escaping family violence. Their priority is safety, not rigid and unrealistic bureaucratic requirements. The added stress and difficulty of meeting these requirements and potential financial penalties can be a barrier to escaping violence and compromise women's safety and put their lives at risk.

The impact of ParentsNext on mothers is especially dire in remote and regional communities. In these communities, employment opportunities are limited or sometimes non-existent. Additionally, there are other compounding factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women such as lack of transport that perpetuate the cycle and make the ParentsNext program a punitive one.

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ParentsNext is not helping. It is pushing our mothers deeper into poverty.

ParentsNext is another barrier; another violation of human rights to be financially secure; to be safe and to be supported. It prevents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mums from growing their kids strong in culture and identity.

Poverty is not a choice, it is direct result of systemic failure.

The Forum would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide an opening statement to this inquiry and strongly urges the government to abandon ParentsNext.