



**Supplementary Submission to the House of Representatives Select
Committee Inquiry on
Workforce Australia Employment Services: ParentsNext**

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Background

Settlement Services International (SSI) appreciates the opportunity to make this supplementary submission on ParentsNext.

As noted in our previous submission, SSI delivers ParentsNext in NSW in the Inner West and South-West of Sydney. In Queensland, Access Community Services, a subsidiary of SSI, delivers ParentsNext in Brisbane South-East, Wivenhoe and Townsville (including Mt Isa). Due to the locations where SSI and Access deliver this program, a large proportion of participants are from cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, especially in NSW, but we also work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and others in these regions. In addition, SSI delivered the initial trial of ParentsNext in the Bankstown area of SouthWest Sydney.

As set out in our previous submission, SSI supports the intent of the ParentsNext program as a pre-employment program providing targeted early intervention to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency, many of whom have multiple and complex needs. We believe it plays a crucial role in the suite of the Federal Government's employment-related programs in supporting disadvantaged parents of young children, mostly women, to engage in pre-employment activities and build social connections in their local community.

However, as outlined in this supplementary submission, SSI supports changes to the design and implementation of ParentsNext to improve participants experience and outcomes. In particular, we support removing the use of compulsion and the Targeted Compliance Framework from the design of ParentsNext.

Our submission also includes recommendations to promote greater professionalisation of the ParentsNext workforce. Specifically, SSI supports the introduction of mandatory minimum qualifications and requirements for providers to provide initial and ongoing professional development.

Staff training and qualifications

Currently, it is up to each provider of ParentsNext to make decisions about its staff profile including minimum qualification and skill levels. As the Committee suggests in the Workforce Australia Employment Services Inquiry Submission Guide,

"The evidence is that there has been a de-skilling of the employment services sector workforce since outsourcing and privatisation and that the sector's workforce is predominantly female, low paid and without post-school qualifications"¹.

SSI believes that greater professionalism of employment service workforce is imperative to improve service quality and outcomes. This is particularly important for ParentsNext given the high proportion of participants with complex issues including combinations of mental health, alcohol and other drug abuse, disability, and domestic and family violence.

¹ Parliament of Australia. (2022). *Submission Guide: Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services*, p35.

SSI supports introduction of mandatory minimum qualifications which should be specified in the contract and the Service Offer Commitment and monitored by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. There are similar contractual requirements in other Federally-funded programs such as the Humanitarian Settlement Program, managed by the Department of Home Affairs.

Specifically, we suggest that all staff should have a minimum diploma level in career counselling and/or case management or be willing to commence gaining this within the first six months of employment. Further, at least 25% of the workforce should be at diploma level for career counselling or willing to upskill within the first six months.

In addition to minimum qualifications, a strong focus on induction and training on commencement with ongoing professional development is essential to upskill and professionalise the ParentsNext workforce. Providers commitment to provide professional development should be included within the tender process, the contract and the service offer commitment and monitored by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

At SSI, as part of induction all staff are required to complete mandatory training requirements within the first three months, for example, on child protection procedures, culturally responsive practice, work health and safety and privacy awareness. Our employment services staff also have ongoing training in areas such as career counselling, trauma informed practice, supporting people experiencing domestic and family violence, mental health awareness, emotional intelligence, leadership and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Continuing to invest in and build the professional capacity and capability of our staff is a key pillar under SSI's *Employment Services 2023-2026 Strategic Roadmap*. The Roadmap set outs our intent that 25% of our employment services workforce will hold relevant professional qualifications by 2024; 50% by 2025; 90% by 2026.

Recommendation: The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations should establish mandatory minimum qualifications for all employment services programs, including ParentsNext. The minimum qualifications should be specified in the contract and the Service Offer Commitment and monitored by the Department.

Recommendation: ParentsNext providers should be required to set out their commitment to provide initial and ongoing professional development in the tender process. This should be set out in the contract and service offer commitment and monitored by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Compulsory participation and sanctions

SSI believes, as an overarching principle, that everyone should be able to exercise agency and control over their pathways to employment. Ultimately this leads to stronger and more sustainable employment outcomes. Accordingly, SSI supports removing the use of compulsion in the design and delivery of all employment programs including ParentsNext.

SSI's Refugee Employment Support Program, funded by the NSW Government, demonstrates strong outcomes with voluntary participation and without the need for compulsion. In 2021-2022, of 1,000 RESP clients, 46% gained employment and 42.5% commenced education.

The suspension of Parenting Payments has major negative impacts on parents and young children and compromises the capacity of parents to provide for the basic needs of their child. As well as financial hardship the threat and/or imposition of financial penalties can result in acute anxiety and mental distress.

SSI is concerned that parents whose first language is not English are particularly at risk of being non-compliant and having payments suspended, particularly when employment services providers lack skills or capacities to work with people from CALD backgrounds. Notably, analysis by ACOSS shows a disproportionate incidence of suspensions of CALD parents, relative to the caseload of people from CALD backgrounds in ParentsNext.²

In SSI's experience, many of the CALD participants that we work with are highly motivated to gain employment commensurate with their skills and qualifications which makes compulsion unnecessary. However, for other client cohorts, particularly those with more complex needs, the use of compulsion can be counterproductive and undermine the level of engagement in the program. Trust and rapport is critical to programs of this nature, so that participants are open to expressing their aspirations and challenges and get the support they need.

If a parent does not engage, in SSI's experience there is always an underlying reason or barriers to engagement. While providers need to have a strategy to address barriers, the Government also has a role in promoting voluntary engagement. In the past, SSI could reach out to Centrelink social workers to follow up with participants and work with them to address barriers. SSI suggests that this approach should be reinstated.

As set out above, SSI strongly supports removing the use of compulsion from ParentsNext so that participation is completely voluntary. However, if any aspects of compulsion remain, this should be designed to realistically accommodate the caring responsibilities of parents with young children. Currently, people in receipt of Parenting Payments can be referred to ParentsNext with compulsory participation when their youngest child turns six months, if they are assessed as being disadvantaged or an early school leaver. Many women with children aged six months have high levels of caring obligations, particularly when they have other young children. In these circumstances participating in ParentsNext activities, can become an additional difficulty and demand on their time, rather than a form of support.

Further, if any element of compulsion and sanctions remains it is vital that robust ongoing processes are established to monitor how this is implemented by region, ParentsNext provider and participant

² Australian Council of Social Service. (2022). *Inquiry into ParentsNext, Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*, Submission no. 62, p7.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Submissions

characteristics to ensure consistency across the program. Anecdotally, SSI and Access have heard of variations in the implementation of suspension of payments between providers with some failing to grant appropriate exemptions for reason such as illness, pregnancy or family violence.

Recommendation: The Targeted Compliance Framework and associated Centrelink payment suspensions should be removed from ParentsNext.

Recommendation: If parents do not engage in ParentsNext providers should be able to refer to Centrelink social workers to follow up with participants and work with them to address barriers and promote voluntary engagement.