

Submission:

Purpose, intent and adequacy of the Disability Support Pension

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the *Purpose, intent and adequacy of the Disability Support Pension* for consideration by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

Families presenting to family services often have complex needs and require holistic and coordinated supports to address the challenges they face. The child and family services sector in Victoria works with a high number of families with disability. A survey conducted by the Centre in June 2021 shows that around 60 per cent of practitioners' caseloads involve families with disability (whether a parent, child or both). We also know that a high number of families supported by our sector access social security payments.

The Orange Door in Victoria supports women, children and families experiencing family violence or needing support with the care of children. Member agency feedback indicates that women supported by The Orange Door often have difficulty gaining access to the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and can experience significant hardship when they are shifted from Parenting Payment to JobSeeker Payment when their youngest child turns eight.

We know that many women who have experienced family violence incur Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) from abusive partners,¹ however proving eligibility for DSP can be challenging. Members have told us of doctors not completing paperwork and reports in the correct way to provide adequate evidence, but we also know that eligibility changes to the DSP have restricted access in recent years. A report by the Parliamentary Budget Office found that policy changes in 2006, 2012 and 2015 which tightened the eligibility criteria for the DSP have resulted in an increased proportion of people who receive social security payments receiving the JobSeeker Payment.² According to the report:

these changes contributed to a reduction in the share of new applicants granted access to the DSP from an average of 63 per cent during 2001-02 to 2010-11 to 43 per cent during

¹ Gabbe, B, Ayton, D, Pritchard, EK, Tsindos, T, O'Brien, P, King, M, Braaf, S, Berecki-Gisolf, J & Hayman, J 2018, [The prevalence of Acquired Brain Injury among victims and perpetrators of family violence](#), Brain Injury Australia, Sydney.

² Parliamentary Budget Office 2020, *JobSeeker Payment: Understanding economic and policy trends affecting Commonwealth expenditure*, Report No. 03/2020, Parliamentary Budget Office, Canberra, p. 11.

2011–12 to 2014-15 ... Collectively, these policy changes have affected both men and women with a more pronounced impact on women as evident in the increased number of female recipients.³

This is deeply concerning, as the JobSeeker Payment for a single person with no children is only 65 per cent of the DSP (including the Pension Supplement and Energy Supplement). It has been clearly established that the JobSeeker Payment is below the poverty line and does not provide sufficient income to achieve an adequate standard of living. The 2019 Senate inquiry into the *Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia* found that Australia's unemployment payment is not meeting its objective of ensuring a minimum standard of living. Evidence reviewed by the committee showed that the low rate of payments, combined with poorly designed mutual obligations and employment services, create a barrier to employment rather than providing the support people need to find and access work.⁴ While it is not acceptable for anyone to be living in poverty, people with disability face additional barriers to employment and often face additional living costs.

Additionally, member agencies have reported that the application process, eligibility assessments and appeal processes for the Disability Support Pension are lengthy, onerous and stressful. Often women experiencing disadvantage do not have the capacity to fight decisions they do not agree with because they are dealing with multiple, co-occurring challenges in their lives.

The Centre recommends that the Committee investigate these issues in detail and make recommendations that would secure adequate income and support for all people with a disability, particularly those experiencing violence and/or with complex needs.

³ Ibid, pp. 12-13.

⁴ Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2019, [*Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia*](#), Australian Government, Canberra.