



11 October 2019

Our Ref: 2019/0877~0001

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: SOCIAL SECURITY (ADMINISTRATION) AMENDMENT (INCOME MANAGEMENT TO CASHLESS DEBIT CARD TRANSITION) BILL 2019

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs in response to the proposed Social Security (Administration) Amendment (Income Management to Cashless Debit Card Transition) Bill 2019.

The submission is not confidential and may be published on the Committee's website.

Background

The Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commission (NT ADC) administers the *NT Anti-Discrimination Act 1992 (the Act)*. We are a very small office charged with promoting the recognition of equality of opportunity in the Northern Territory (NT).

At the NT ADC, race related enquiries and complaints have been in the top two grounds of complaint in the past few years and for most of the Commission's history.

The concerns I raise in relation to the cashless debit card (CDC) are very similar to those raised about the imposition of income management generally, it impacts upon an individual's basic human rights and that it perpetuates disempowerment.

Specific concerns about the proposed Bill include:

1. The compulsory application of the cashless debit card (CDC) on income-management recipients

The CDC targets Aboriginal people in the NT regardless of their situation. It does not allow for voluntary participation, meaning approximately 23,000 Aboriginal people in the NT will be mandatorily placed onto the CDC system. The policy does not allow Aboriginal people living in the NT personal autonomy of their expenditure, it imposes controls and limits on their lives.

It involves a high-level of government intervention meaning that Aboriginal people are not free to deal with their money as they see fit or manage their own family's unique circumstances. It inflicts a one size fits all approach without any assessment of need or impact.

2. Lack of consultation across NT communities with Aboriginal people to explain the measures to be imposed upon them.

It is imperative that individuals impacted by the proposed amendments are provided with a thorough consultation and explanation of the changes and impacts. This would require use of interpreters and publication of documentation in language as well as easy read material for people with a disability.

3. Lack of a strong evidence base arising from evaluations of new Income management in the NT and the Cashless Debit Card trials in Ceduna and the WA goldfields upon which to justify the rollout.

The government asserts that the CDC is "community driven, bottom-up approach to tackling long-term welfare dependency, social harm and welfare-funded drug and alcohol abuse". However the lack of consultation with the NT population that will be affected by the cashless debit card does not support this.

There is a lack of evidence to support the claims that the mandatory CDC (and compulsory income management system) contributes to the reduction of social harm in areas with high levels of welfare dependency and how it supports vulnerable people, families and communities.

There is also a lack of information about the objectives to be achieved from the CDC and how this would be measured.

In effect the cashless debit card perpetuates the negative stereotype that Aboriginal people are incapable of dealing with financial matters, controlling cash and managing their own affairs.

4. The Minister's discretion to increase the percentage of the restricted portion of the payment.

It is concerning that the Bill allows for the Minister to exercise discretion to increase the percentage of the quarantined payment and impose the variation upon people residing in a specified area. In effect the Minister could increase the quarantined amount from the default 50% (70% for those on the child protection measure) to 100% of the payment. The variation of the restricted percentage would be imposed without consultation and does not consider an individual circumstances. The Minister's discretion could be exercised without criteria to inform the determination.

~~Yours~~ sincerely,

Sally Sievers
Anti-Discrimination Commissioner