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**Submission to the inquiry regarding ParentsNext: examination of Social Security
(Parenting payment participation requirements – class of persons) Instrument 2021**

To the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the ParentsNext preemployment program.

This submission is based on my deeply qualitative, narrative interview research undertaken into “lived experiences of ParentsNext”. This research is ongoing. Anthropological research does not take as its goal the task of evaluating policy success or failure. To date, all of my 15 interviewees have been women, hence my use of the term mother throughout this submission. I am interested in learning about these mothers’ whole lives. This method produces in-depth knowledge and insights into how a program such as ParentsNext fits into the broader trajectory of women’s lives.

My submission highlights three central concerns with ParentsNext.

First, I highlight that when ParentsNext participants have their Parenting Payments reduced, suspended or cancelled for non-compliance they find it difficult to meet the basic needs of their household. I draw the committee’s attention to concerns that aspects of ParentsNext potentially breach international human rights law, particularly the rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, and the rights of the child. Further, my research shows that these difficulties might be keenly *felt*, and erode the wellbeing and confidence of caregivers.

Second, I highlight that ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse.

Finally, I emphasise my research participants’ frustration at the disconnect between their own, articulated request for financial support to realise their aspirations, and ParentsNext’s emphasis on participation in mandated activities.

These concerns lead me to recommend that ParentsNext be **redesigned as a voluntary program**. Further, I recommend that all **participants are made fully aware of the Participation Fund**. Senator the Honourable Michaelia Cash states that from 1 July 2021 the Participation Fund will be available to both Intensive and Targeted Stream participants. It is imperative that the availability of these funds is communicated to participants, and that participants are granted **the right to direct those funds towards activities that they nominate as beneficial to them, in pursuit of their own life goals**.

These issues are illustrated through the use of real-life stories of individuals negatively affected by their participation in ParentsNext. My hope is that committee members appreciate that these matters concern real people, with real lives. Moreover, these people are mothers already dedicated to undertaking vitally important care labour.

The issue of "non-compliance" and the impact of payment suspensions

I interviewed single mother of two teenagers and a toddler, Natasha, who resides in a regional NSW town.¹ Natasha's ParentsNext caseworker sent her a form to fill out. Originally the form was 4 pages, double-sided. The caseworker scanned and sent her only pages 1 and 3. Natasha's fortnightly payment was halved after Natasha returned the form incomplete, *having called her caseworker and requested the missing pages to no avail*. The reduced amount didn't cover her rent, but her private landlord was understanding and a friend "turned up at my place with... you know, she'd gone and got some groceries for me".

No doubt the committee is well aware that according to journalist Luke Henriques-Gomes, 85 per cent of the 33,620 parents on ParentsNext "who had their income support temporarily cut off [in the 2018-9] financial year" were found not to have been in the wrong.² Indeed, this was the case for Natasha, whose full payment was quickly reinstalled, after having to depend on a friend to feed her children over the weekend.

The effects of this temporary payment suspension, however, **were not simply material**. Natasha has "kids to provide for". She told me "there's a whole heap of guilt and shame when you can't meet your minimum requirements. Like your kids' absolute basic needs." ParentsNext's putative aim is to assist parents in becoming work-ready. I submit that confidence in one's role as a mother is critical to this aim.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this submission.

² Henriques-Gomes, ParentsNext: 80 per cent of recipients who had payments suspended not at fault, data shows. September 15 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/sep/15/parentsnext-80-of-recipients-who-had-payments-suspended-not-at-fault-data-shows>

Senator Cash states that participants now have two business days within which to resolve “non-compliance”. While this is welcome news, it does not address the fundamental and unhelpful dynamic core to ParentsNext’s design. Natasha was not the only busy mother who described to me their “anxiety” about the monitoring demands of ParentsNext and the time and labour involved in having to contact caseworkers and providers to correct decisions. Caseworkers do not necessarily work full-time, and can prove hard to contact. It is also **unacceptable to place the onus on mothers to correct systemic errors in order to ensure their social security entitlements are paid**. The high rates of payment suspension with this program are extremely concerning, as they potentially breach international human rights law, particularly the rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, and the rights of the child.

ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse

I interviewed university-educated Stacey about her situation, and the role of ParentsNext in aiding or impeding her determined attempts to rebuild her life after relocating to a new place in order to escape a violent relationship. Stacey was sorely in need of support, as she had very little assistance with her child after her move. Stacey had a car registered in her ex-partner’s name. However, because of his controlling behavior, he refused to transfer the registration into her name. “And he constantly doesn’t pay his fines,” she told me, or his registration fee. “And it’s my car that gets cancelled. ... And I’ve been caught driving it a few times, not knowing that it was actually not registered. Um, so I can’t physically drive anywhere, anyway, like to get to the, to the appointment.”

Stacey was grateful for the flexibility her caseworker *did* extend, agreeing to conduct appointments over the phone rather than in-person. However, Stacey became angry recalling the imposition of these phone calls, which essentially entailed a caseworker calling to check if Stacey’s son still attended GympaROO – an activity that Stacey had chosen and enrolled him in *before* being placed on ParentsNext, and for which she bore the whole cost. Stacey relayed the following, distressing series of events:

I rushed my child out of the pool when his swimming lesson finished—he didn’t get a shower or changed—so I could rush him to the nearby park so I could speak on the phone for my ParentsNext appointment. My case manager didn’t call. I had other things to do, but put them on hold for the phone appointment.

Then, the following week:

I had a call from my case manager at a time when I was about to have a sleep. ... My son was sleeping so I was about to sleep. I'd been at the hospital 'til 5:30am with him vomiting all night. ... Realising the script and medication had fallen out of the pram I was upset. I had no car, rege had been cancelled, so I put him in the pram at 1:30am and walked him to the hospital and walked home in the dark with the pram [and a reissued script] at 5:30am. ... I had no food as we were due to go celebrate Christmas away for an early Christmas with relatives. We were unable to go away. I had a cry whilst my son was still sleeping and then ordered food online but [it] wasn't being delivered 'til that night. I'd had about an hours' sleep. My case manager called as I was about to lie down. I thought I'd lose my payment if I didn't answer.

Patently, Stacey did not benefit from participating in ParentsNext at this juncture of her life. Her case worker's unwillingness to countenance an exemption was deeply resented and, I am sure the committee will agree, inexplicable. I am concerned that **ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse** (as well as in other circumstances).

The inappropriateness of the "support" made available under ParentsNext

ParentsNext mandates participation in activities, but the benefits of this participation are not always clear. Further, some of my research participants expressed frustration at the lack of meaningful support available to them through ParentsNext after they requested financial support to realise their aspirations.

Natasha, introduced earlier, has held a variety of sales and administrative roles; at the time of our interview she was volunteering with three different community groups and caring for her toddler. This volunteering was initiated prior to her compulsory enrolment in ParentsNext: her participation plan involved her agreeing to *keep* volunteering, which she is passionate about and had no intention of discontinuing. In fact, Natasha told me unhappily, working alongside other committed volunteers, "I didn't want them to think I was doing my volunteering work just to satisfy my ParentsNext requirements."

Natasha was initially enthusiastic about the support ParentsNext promised to provide, as she aspires to pivot to a new career once her toddler starts school. However, when she asked her caseworker about a contribution towards a counselling course, this request was denied.

Eloise is a single mother who aspires to complete high school through TAFE and then pursue higher education. Since she had already decided to enrol in TAFE, she elected to



put this in her participation plan. "And in retrospect, I would've picked something else to be my participation plan so I could go to TAFE without stress and do it at my own pace and not with payments getting cut hanging over my head," she told me. Like Natasha, deciding to do something of one's own volition and being compelled to do it produce very different feelings surrounding that activity. Another interviewee told me she *stopped* attending a local playgroup, which she had previously enjoyed, because once she attended as a condition of her participation plan, she felt "insulted and degraded," and "it drained the joy out of it".

Stacey, introduced earlier, requested financial support to support her registration fees with a professional body and learned that this was not available to her.

Finally, Svetlana *did* receive funding to commence a Certificate IV Business, as well as assistance to purchase a laptop. This arrangement seemed fantastic, of course, but Svetlana found herself ill-equipped to successfully complete this course online, and instead had the dispiriting experience of finding it "too hard" and thoroughly overwhelming. Svetlana's plans to study clearly needed much more careful attention and might have been usefully scaffolded. While it is encouraging that Svetlana's ParentsNext caseworker was willing to support her intention to return to study and the formal workforce, such support needs to be tailored and sincere. Svetlana characterised her caseworker as "overworked, jaded and cynical". She had "bunches of files" and "look like she was over it". It is little wonder that Svetlana seems to have been enrolled in an inappropriate activity.

In sum, I recommend ParentsNext be discontinued in its current form. This program might usefully be redesigned as a **voluntary program**, provided **real financial support** was available to participants when it served to help them **realise their own life goals**.

I thank you for the opportunity to share some of my research findings with the committee.

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