

ParentsNext: examination of Social Security (Parenting payment participation requirements – class of persons) instrument 2021

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights

(MAY 2021)



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

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The Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 14,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, discrimination, and matters that influence people's quality of life.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

The right of everyone to an adequate standard of living is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, of which Australia is a signatory¹. In this context, the appropriate role of government is to create the economic, social and environmental conditions under which people will achieve this and pursue healthy, meaningful and rewarding lives. Furthermore, as a signatory to this Covenant, Australia has committed to recognize the right of everyone to social

¹ United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

security. It is arguable however whether the compliance-based nature of Australia's income support assistance acknowledges this right, particularly in light of the high numbers of ParentsNext participants whose payments are suspended for alleged non-compliance.² The AASW is therefore concerned about the proposed changes to *Class of Persons* located within this legislation. The proposed changes, whilst small, have the potential to significantly increase the number of people on Parenting Payment who will from 1 July 2021 be brought into the ParentsNext program.³ Eligibility will be expanded by including those with children aged as young as 9 months up to six years who receive an income support payment, those who live in any Jobactive region across Australia, and those parents who have not worked in the last six months, even if they have employment to go back to once they cease parental leave. It is not disputed that economic participation through employment is positive, but a personalised, responsive and empowering approach is necessary rather than a blanket rule. Employment has been valorised as the means for disadvantaged people to achieve dignity and participate in the social and economic life of the country. The converse of this, however, is witnessed by social workers who see the detrimental long-term impacts of stigmatisation of those not in the workforce, when they are at the same time contending with significant life issues impacting on their health and wellbeing and that of their children. The AASW welcomes the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry and our submission will address terms of reference 1 to 3.

Summary of recommendations:

- That the ParentsNext program be removed from the Targeted Compliance Framework.
- That ParentsNext be a voluntary program so women will no longer be at risk of having their income support payments suspended.
- That ParentsNext adopt a voluntary and holistic approach to supporting single parents to meet their education and employment goals.

Responses to terms of reference:

1. *whether and how it has been demonstrated that participants in the ParentsNext program who have had their Parenting Payment reduced, suspended or cancelled for non-compliance are able to meet their basic needs (and those of their children) in practice, such that they have an adequate standard of living, and whether and how this is assessed before payments may be affected;*

The AASW is concerned that current levels of income security and onerous requirements for workforce participation are creating entrenched poverty for those on income support, with particular issues for sole parents on Parenting Payment. Our concerns have grown since the removal of the COVID-19 supplement which has returned many single mothers and their children into poverty. Furthermore, and as stated above, the rates of women who have had their Parenting Payment suspended are high, in direct contravention of their children's right to financial security.⁴ ParentsNext

²https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024267/toc_pdf/ParentsNext.includingitstrialandsubsequentbroaderrollout.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf, p. 13

³ Senator Louise Pratt on 29 October 2020, Proof Hansard page 99

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

disproportionally targets the most disadvantaged women, those who are least able afford any reduction in income. This leaves women in the position of having to go without meals so their children can eat, limiting their use of heating in winter, and children going without social activities, such as sporting events and birthday parties.⁵ Social workers have told us that their clients have had their payments cut while escaping violent relationships as they were not able to meet ParentsNext obligations, leaving them at risk of returning to the perpetrator as a matter of financial necessity. The other risk of the punitive nature of the ParentsNext program is that women find it too difficult to navigate and therefore drop out of the income support system altogether.⁶ This can have a devastating affect on their family and lead to overall poorer outcomes for themselves and their children.

Recommendation:

- That ParentsNext be a voluntary program so women are no longer at risk of having their income support payments suspended.
2. *the extent to which the ParentsNext program operates flexibly in practice, such that it treats different cases differently (including for parents in regional areas and Indigenous parents);*

The AASW is concerned about the apparent targeting of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander mothers on ParentsNext. In 2019, 19% of ParentsNext participants identified as First Nations, of these 94% are women.⁷ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are already highly targeted in policies which erode self-determination and autonomy and leave many in poverty, policies such as the Cashless Welfare Card. ParentsNext also operates inflexibly as a whole with many women misdirected onto the program, including those who are already studying or working, those on parental leave with jobs to return to, and who are then penalised for not meeting requirements of the program due to these commitments. ParentsNext is forcing women to make the choice between going to class to further their education or to their employment, or risk their payment being suspended.

Recommendation:

- That ParentsNext be a voluntary program.
3. *the extent to which participation in the ParentsNext program meets its stated objectives of effectively addressing barriers to education and employment for young parents in practice, and whether making participation compulsory is effective to achieve those objectives;*

The problem of underemployment and unemployment in Australia is not one of individual discretion. The number of people in long term unemployment is rising even though Australia's welfare regime is one of the most tightly targeted in the world and imposes the most rigorous compliance requirements

⁵ http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/12203/5/BowmanWickramasinghe_Trampolines_not_traps_2020.pdf

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024267/toc_pdf/ParentsNext,includingitstrialandsubsequentbroaderrollout.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf, p. 29

in the world.⁸ In 2020 there were at least 8 times as many people looking for work, or more hours of work, than there are unfilled entry-level jobs.⁹ Even if every advertised job were filled by someone who is currently unemployed, there would still be many more unemployed people. This means that the answers to people getting jobs must involve some elements of structural and systemic changes. Furthermore, disincentives exist in the workforce that make it difficult for single women to take up employment. These structural deficits include limited family-friendly workplaces, the predominance of casual work, and the interaction of income support payments with employment income which can mean that after childcare expenses are paid it actually costs more for the woman to work.¹⁰

The community sector has experience in responding to complex needs such as those experienced by disadvantaged and single parents. That experience tells us that a successful response starts with a respectful, empathic and strengths-based approach to understanding the realities of daily life for a person living with poverty and insecurity. From that point alone, can tailored, multi-faceted responses be implemented; and structural and systemic improvements be designed. This approach is not reflected in the way that ParentsNext operates.

The program fails to take into account the existing skills and resilience of single parents who are doing their best to raise their children in the face of mounting pressures. And, as the Council of Single Mothers and their Children argue in their submission to the 2019 ParentsNext Inquiry, it stigmatises mothers and transforms the everyday activities that they are already doing, such as taking their child to the library or playgroups, from enjoyable to anxiety-inducing and punishing.¹¹

This is more pronounced for First Nations women and their children. People who experience stigmatisation internalise negative opinions and judgements, creating a negative self-image, which in turn, undermines their capacity for self-determination. It becomes more difficult for people in these circumstances to identify themselves as having the ability to shape their own lives either financially or socially.¹² In other words, the compulsory and punitive nature of ParentsNext reinforces existing stigma and denies women the freedom to make the best decisions for their family.

Recommendation:

- That ParentsNext adopt a strengths-based, individualized and holistic approach to supporting single parents to meet their education and employment goals.

Conclusion

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission.

⁸ Davidson, P. Faces of Unemployment, Sydney: ACOSS, 2016

⁹ <https://www.acoss.org.au/faces-of-unemployment-2020/>

¹⁰ http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/12203/5/BowmanWickramasinghe_Trampolines_not_traps_2020.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.csmc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CSMC-ParentsNextSenateComAffairs1February2019.pdf>

¹² Teresa Grahame & Greg Marston (2012) Welfare-to-work Policies and the Experience of Employed Single Mothers on Income Support in Australia: Where are the Benefits?, Australian Social Work, 65:1, 73-86, DOI: [10.1080/0312407X.2011.604093](https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2011.604093)



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