



Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Safety Net) Bill

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About UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network and is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

We give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provisions.

We are the largest network of social service providers in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people very year across urban, rural, and remote communities.

We focus on articulating and meeting the needs of people at all stages of life and those that are most vulnerable.

UnitingCare Australia welcomes this opportunity to submit to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee's Inquiry regarding the Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Safety Net) Bill 2023.

As UnitingCare Australia has consistently highlighted in recent submissions¹, there continues to be a critical need for investment in the income support system to ensure that payments are adequate and realistically meeting living costs for those receiving support. This includes ensuring the adequacy of payments such as Commonwealth Rent Assistance and the Energy Supplement to ensure that support is proportional to, and adjusted in accordance with, inflation and market price increases, to provide genuine financial relief to recipients.

Who is financially stressed?²

- 40% of those under 35 years old.
- 50% of renters.
- 80% of people relying on working age government allowances or payments.
- 45% of households living with a disability or long-term health condition.

We subsequently support the amendment of legislation as recommended through this Bill, namely:

- expanding qualification for parenting payment (single) to single principal carers whose youngest child is aged under 14 years (up from under 8 years);
- increasing the rates of working age and student payments by \$40 per fortnight, including jobseeker payment, youth allowance, parenting payment (partnered), austudy payment, disability support pension (youth);
- expanding eligibility for the higher rate of jobseeker payment to recipients aged 55 years and over who have been on payment for nine or more continuous months (reducing the qualifying age from 60 years); and
- increasing the maximum rates of Commonwealth rent assistance by 15 per cent.

¹ [Measuring What Matters Submission, 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission – Funding What Matters, Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Cost of Living](#)

² [Measuring What Matters Submission](#)

We note, however, that these amendments represent modest changes and will not facilitate the more comprehensive structural reform required to improve income support payment adequacy and reduce financial hardship.

As one of the largest provider networks of community services in Australia, the UnitingCare network has felt the increasing strain of financial hardship being borne by the community. As reported by our services and the people they support:

“There are some days that I can’t go out in the car due to the cost. We can’t afford to have the heater on at night. We use blankets and our house has damp. We can’t afford to use the electricity at night. We use torches instead of turning the lights on. The kids can’t have baths anymore.”

Emergency Relief Recipient

“We are increasingly supporting people that have no experience of needing to reach out to services like ours. Parents who are struggling to feed their family because of food costs. Unwell people who can’t meet the costs of their own care. Homeowners who are couch surfing between friends so they can Air B&B their homes to stay afloat.”

Financial Counsellor

We restate the recommendation forwarded in our 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission³ regarding the urgent need for full analysis and projection of social service needs, including increasing income support payments and allowances, to establish the necessary baseline for revenue. As detailed in our Cost-of-Living submission⁴, this involves:

- analysing the actual level of demand for services across the community;
- measuring the gap between current funding levels and the investment required to meet current and projected demand; and
- immediately increasing investment in the care sector and support services to cover total costs of service delivery.

³ [2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission – Funding What Matters](#)

⁴ [Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Cost of Living](#)

As highlighted in our Cost-of-Living submission⁵, we regard the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as evidence of the beneficial impact that adequate support and crisis relief funding can deliver. Research has highlighted benefits for individuals receiving COVID-19 related support payments, including:

- the ability to meet basic needs and improve long-term financial security
- improvements to physical and emotional well-being
- increased labour market engagement
- engagement in other forms of unpaid and productive work.

In conclusion, we support the passage of the Legislation and view it as a modest step towards addressing economic inequality and disadvantage in our community. We would welcome the opportunity to speak further to the content of this submission.

⁵ [Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Cost of Living](#)