

**AASW**

**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Senate Standing Committee  
on Community Affairs*

*Re: Social Services Legislation Amendment  
(Drug Testing Trial) Bill 2019*

**September 2019**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 12,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, social inclusion, and discrimination.

### The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession, recognised internationally, that pursues social justice and human rights, and supports individuals, families and communities to improve their wellbeing. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their 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

AASW members work across a wide range of practice settings including health, mental health, addiction, homelessness, family support, aged care, family violence and disability. Regardless of the field of practice in which they are employed, social workers observe that the challenges and difficulties experienced by their clients are compounded by the poverty and restriction of opportunity that are caused by inadequate levels of income support. This submission draws on members' experience as well as expert research, both of which indicate that this proposal ignores the underlying structural causes of unemployment and misunderstands the nature of addiction.

The AASW is disheartened that, for the third year in the row, the government is persisting with this proposal compulsory drug testing; and continues to ignore the plethora of evidence against it, as well as the lack of support for it among community and healthcare organisations. As an opportunity for decision-makers to hear and consider the evidence and experience of experts and practitioners, it is a vital ingredient in informed policy making. The AASW has already participated in this process in 2017 and 2018 when the proposal for drug testing of income support recipients was previously presented to parliament. The committee's reports resulting from this process indicate that the inquiry heard extensive evidence of the conceptual, practical and ethical problems with this proposal. Therefore, the AASW recommends that this bill be rejected.

## RESPONSE

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The proposal for a drug testing trial has multiple insurmountable flaws.

1. There is no evidence that people who are receiving income support payments abuse alcohol or other drugs at a higher rate than do the general population.<sup>1</sup>
2. There is no evidence that substance abuse is the cause of those people being unemployed.<sup>2</sup>
3. There is no evidence that drug testing of people without a job leads to those people finding employment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug testing*, Canberra, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug Testing*, Canberra 2013

<sup>3</sup> Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug Testing*, Canberra 2013

4. There is no evidence that drug testing results in decreased drug use by those people.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it may lead people to adopt more dangerous drug use patterns or to disconnect from health services entirely.<sup>5</sup>

5. The bill proposes to enforce income management on people who test positive on one occasion, regardless of whether this constitutes problematic use. Previous inquiries heard expert evidence that mandatory drug testing will increase stigma and marginalisation of people who are already vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> Social workers know that supporting people to make meaningful long term change in their lives requires empathy and collaboration, rather than the coercion and discrimination within this proposal.

7. Trials conducted overseas and local anecdotal evidence suggest that the most likely result is an increase in destitution, homelessness and ill-health among people who already experience poverty.<sup>7</sup> AASW members, who see the impact of extreme hardship on all members of a family and community, are extremely concerned about the flow on effect of these punitive measures.

6. Social workers understand the complex nature of addiction. People who are struggling with drug use require treatment; and denying income support to these people is not a form of treatment. In fact, people with substance abuse problems who are placed on income management or have their payment cancelled, will face *additional* barriers to accessing medication and services that aid in their recovery, such as opioid substitution therapy<sup>8</sup>.

8. The projected increase of funding for treatment services will be inadequate to treat the existing waiting list for treatment, let alone the extra people who might be referred to treatment because of this measure. An expert has described it as: 'A drop in the ocean'.<sup>9</sup>

10. The bill proposes to enforce income management on people who test positive but there is no evidence that income management assists people find employment. Income management does nothing to increase the availability of paid work available in the three trial sites, nor to address the government's lack of an overall job creation strategy.

## CONCLUSION

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The income support system was originally intended to create the basis for political and social cohesion by enshrining a commitment to fairness and equality. By contrast, both fairness and equality are missing from these measures which ignore evidence and punish people for being poor. By promoting a narrative which shifts community attention away from the lack of adequate services for vulnerable people and which blames people for their own vulnerability, the government is demonstrating that it is driven by ideology, not compassion.

Submitted by and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Pty Ltd

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<sup>4</sup> Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug Testing*, Canberra 2013

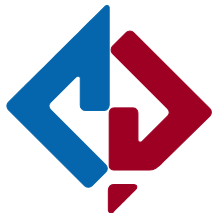
<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Dr M. Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee social Services Legislation amendment (Drug testing) bill, Canberra, 23 April 2018, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Maher, Prof L. Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee social Services Legislation amendment (Drug testing) bill, Canberra, 23 April 2018, p18

<sup>7</sup> Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug testing*, Canberra, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Maher, Prof L. Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee social Services Legislation amendment (Drug testing) bill, Canberra, 23 April 2018, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017 Report, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2017, p. 30.



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