

Introduction

National Women's Safety Alliance (NWSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, and in particular provide comment on the ParentsNext pre-employment program.

As one of the six National Women's Alliances, the NWSA brings together 276 individual and organizational members, including those who provide services to and advocate for the wellbeing of single mothers, and women with children who have endured domestic and family violence.

We endorse the submission to the Committee made by the National Council of Single Mothers and support their longstanding calls for the program to be overhauled and rebranded, and for participation to be voluntary. We also support their work in gathering data and testimonies from participants of the ParentsNext program as an authentic window into the lives of vulnerable participants in this mutual obligation program.¹

Background

The introduction of the *Welfare-to-Work and Other Measures Act*, which came into effect in 2006, represents a turning point in how parenting was perceived by both the political narrative and the policy framework of Australia's welfare system. Prior this period, parenting payment was paid at a pension rate with no mutual obligation and no expectation that parents of children in receipt of the payment be required to work or undertake formal education or other activities.

This framework recognised the caring responsibilities of recipients and permitted parents to meet the needs of their children without onerous levels of intervention and surveillance by government services.

¹ [18 NCSMC \(2\).pdf](#) & [23 Council of Single Mothers and Their Children.pdf](#)

ParentsNext started as a geographically targeted 'young mums' pre-employment program. Touted as giving young single mothers, who were assumed to have lower education levels, the opportunity to consider potential job paths as their children aged. The scheme's geographic targeting however saw it morph into a form of post-code monitoring, mostly concentrated in locations with high Indigenous populations and high levels of financial and social disadvantage. From July 2018 it was rolled out across Australia and henceforth made a requirement for tens of thousands of single parents, 80% of whom are women², in order to continue receiving their meagre parenting payment entitlement (a means tested payment for low-income families). Survey analysis conducted by the Council of Single Mothers in 2019 and 2021, of ParentsNext participants recorded both an increase in payment suspensions and an increase in pressure on their already stressed budgets between the two survey years.³ In regard to the program's effectiveness as a pre-employment program only 8% of respondents to the 2021 survey felt the program assisted them in thinking about their career paths.

Assumptions underpinning the ParentsNext model are deeply flawed

There are several implicit assumptions behind the ParentsNext design that are both pejorative and deeply flawed in logic. Principally the program assumes that single mothers are either selectively unemployed, welfare dependent or simply disinterested in their future job outcomes. Further, rather than perceiving of parenting and child-raising as a contribution to Australia's future economy, the model implies that parenting in itself is not labour intensive and otherwise an essential component of healthy society.

Additionally, as a pre-employment program, ParentsNext links participants with a service provider enlisted to support them in developing a job plan and identifying career relevant mandatory activities which they must undertake in order to receive their parenting payment. Again, the model assumes that '*another*' is best placed to manage a single-parent's life, locking them in a cycle of mandated

² [Labour Force Status of Families, June 2022 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

³ [23 Council of Single Mothers and Their Children \(1\).pdf](#)

activities that often have little or no relevance to future employment outcomes. Testimonies by the Council of Single Mothers indicate that ParentsNext plans developed by service providers would mandate attendance at playgroups or children's swim classes, which single mothers had been undertaking prior to being assigned to the program. For many this created the spectre of surveillance over routine parenting activities that were now perceived by authorities as being 'job-ready' activities, draining the enjoyment a parent may otherwise have derived from participating in activities with their child.⁴

Ultimately, the greatest design flaws of the scheme appear to be that for all the stress, surveillance and trauma, the scheme does little to address the most significant barriers to employment faced by Parenting Payment recipients. These barriers are well-known; a low payment that entrenches poverty and makes undertaking routine job search activities impossible (such as paying public transport and parking costs or buying suitable attire), a gender skewed labour market and occupational profile, and lack of access to affordable or ad-hoc childcare services. The inflexible nature of the program's Participation Funds in job-relevant activities such as obtaining a driver's license has also been documented.⁵

ParentsNext disproportionately impacts on women with lived experience of poverty and violence

Single mothers make up around 80 per cent of single parent households in Australia. These households are among the most impoverished in Australia, and typically have lower income, higher rates of insecure employment and lower self-reporting of positive health.⁶ A 2021 survey by YWCA Canberra of 1206 women living in Canberra found that of single parent respondents, 61% said they did not have sufficient savings to pay their housing costs for two payment cycles if they

⁴ [ParentsNext Report \(2\).pdf](#) (p. 20)

⁵ [ParentsNext Report \(4\).pdf](#) (p. 22-23)

⁶ [Australia's children, Parental health and disability - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

were to lose their income.⁷ In the same survey, 30% of single mothers described their financial circumstances as being either financial crisis or financial stress.

Significantly, for single mother families it has been reported that around 60 per cent are single parenting because they made the brave and difficult decision to leave a violent relationship or household.⁸ This juxtaposes the long-repeated and misguided narrative of “*why doesn't she just leave*” and instead paints a confronting reality for those women who do just that.

The lived reality for those women who become single parents after leaving violence can be one where they have insufficient income to support their families, with half relying on welfare payments as their main source of income. For women who leave a household due to violence, the deprivation they encounter is so severe it is estimated that around 8,000 are forced to return to their perpetrators to avoid homelessness and more than 9,000 become homeless, an impossibly deprived choice to confront.⁹

For many ParentsNext participants this is the context of violence, acute stress and deprivation that clouds their interaction with a punitive social welfare measure whose outcomes have never even been robustly measured,¹⁰ where they are assigned ‘busy work’ activities by job service providers not trained in understanding trauma, and where they endure harsh penalties for non-compliance or for administrative errors or arbitrary determinations of their service provider.¹¹

⁷ [Portrait-of-women-in-canberra-2021-FINAL-Digital.pdf \(ywca-canberra.org.au\)](#) p. 25

⁸ [Violence or poverty: A dire choice for many Australian women | University of Technology Sydney \(uts.edu.au\)](#)

⁹ [Nowhere to go - The benefits of providing long term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence — Equity Economics](#)

¹⁰“The department has advised that no independent evaluations of ParentsNext have been conducted, nor is there an intention to do so. This raises concerns as to the depth and independence of the evidence-base on which the department has relied in order to establish the extent to which the ParentsNext program is effective to achieve its stated objectives” Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, Inquiry Report [ParentsNext Report \(2\).pdf](#), p. 98.

¹¹ [16 Brotherhood of St Laurence \(1\).pdf](#)

Recommendations:

1. Undertake a complete overhaul and rebrand of the ParentsNext program, including making participation voluntary and removed from policies of mutual obligation.
2. Increase the Jobseeker rate (the Parenting Payment benchmark), to an adequate rate that is sufficient to accommodate both routine job search expenses and basic discretionary spending.
3. Undertake an independent and comprehensive review of the ParentsNext scheme to quantify outcomes and measure the impact on participants.