

19 September 2016

Attn: Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees

UNITED VOICE'S SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE FAMILY ASSISTANCE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (JOBS FOR FAMILIES CHILD CARE PACKAGE) BILL 2016

About United Voice

United Voice, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) union represents early childhood directors, teachers and educators across Australia. We have members in every state and territory working in both large organisations and smaller centres. We are proud of the work we do – educating over one million young Australians and maximising the contribution their parents make to the economy. Together we work with all stakeholders including employers, sector advocates, peak bodies and parents to provide the best possible early education experience for Australian children and progress the agenda for a well-funded high quality ECEC system.

In January 2016, United Voice made a comprehensive submission to the previous Senate Inquiry into the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2015.

We note that there have been no substantive changes to the funding package in its latest iteration apart from delaying the onset of additional funding until mid-2018. This legislation amendment repeats the same mistakes that made it unacceptable to a clear majority of ECEC stakeholders previously.

Given the short timeframe for this Inquiry and given the almost identical nature of the package to its predecessor, we hereby broadly reiterate our earlier position. To this effect, please find enclosed United Voice's January 2016 submission for consideration by the Senate, in addition to the core critiques offered below.

1. This package continues to undervalue early childhood educators

The proposed legislation continues to dismiss via omission the role of the ECEC workforce in delivering high-quality early education opportunities. Qualified educators typically earn \$20.61/hour. This low pay is the chief barrier to ensuring we attain and sustain a qualified and experienced workforce to provide Australia's children with the best possible start in life.

The benchmark price funding model in this package does not recognise professional wages as an intrinsic cost of providing high quality ECEC. Children, educators, parents and the Australian economy would benefit from a model that funds professional wages – this is one of the last policy hurdles to achieving a world-class system.

United Voice calls on the Senate to recognise the role of government in addressing the large and

growing ECEC workforce's fight for professional wages and to work with all sector stakeholders to ensure the success of the ECEC workforce's equal pay case.

2. The activity test unduly penalises disadvantaged children

Access to early childhood education and care should best be understood as a right held by a child irrespective of her parents' capacity to work or inability to pay. Accessible, high-quality ECEC should be recognised for its potential to bear significant social and economic dividends in the short, medium and long term, both for that child and for the society she is a part of.

ECEC should not be seen solely as a means to increase workforce participation statistics. This legislation demonstrates a lack of understanding of the multifaceted power of ECEC and offers an overly crude conceptualisation of government subsidy as merely babysitting exchanged for work that is meted out coercively and in a way that ignores any number of reasons behind some parents' incapacity to engage in a requisite activity. This erroneous rationale has survived in the present legislation amendment despite overwhelming evidence presented by academic researchers and educators that tying ECEC access to workforce participation was both unethical and ineffectual. We invite the Senate to reconsider the arguments and evidence presented by expert stakeholders in the previous round of submissions in January 2016 which shed light on the potential for quality ECEC to radically improve the life chances of disadvantaged children.

United Voice considers it unacceptable for the government to withhold early learning opportunities from the children who need it the most. We recommend amending the activity test to ensure that all children have access to at least two days (or 24 hours) of subsidised ECEC each week.

3. Retain the Budget Based Funded Programme (BBF) and targeted subsidies for disadvantaged children

This legislation does not adequately justify replacing existing targeted subsidies with the Child Care Safety Net. Numerous experts have expressed concern at the lack of clarity around the Child Care Safety Net and its capacity to ensure equal access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and to children who are otherwise vulnerable and disadvantaged.

United Voice recommends continuing funding for the BBF programme and mobile services. We furthermore call on the Senate to recognise the critical role played by Aboriginal Child and Family Centres in closing the gap through the provision of sustainable funding into the future.

4. Families have waited far too long for fee relief

United Voice considers it unacceptable to delay the introduction of fee relief to families until July 2018. The government must commit to implementing the additional \$3 billion by July 2017 at the latest.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Gibbons
ASSISTANT NATIONAL SECRETARY