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Page 1 of 1

Govt chases love cheats

ANNIKA SMETHURST

THOUSANDS of couples pretending to be single to claim higher welfare cheques will have to prove they are not in love to keep their entitlements — and they'll need a witness to back their story.

As part of a Budget dragnet to catch welfare cheats, a series of tougher restrictions will be placed on eligibility criteria for single-parent payments.

From September next year, feuding parents will have to find a third party to back up

claims their relationship is over after the Department of Human Services estimated that up to 15,000 people in romantic relationships were incorrectly receiving single-parent payments.

Witnesses caught making a false declarations about a relationship could be jailed for up to a year.

Single parents are entitled to a base payment of \$264.50 a fortnight more than parents in recognised relationships.

That equates to an extra \$6800 a year.

Centrelink recognises marriages, same-sex and de facto relationships and customers with multiple partners but will

only pay the single-parent payment where there has been a "physical as well as an emotional separation".

A woman was jailed for two years after she claimed \$90,326 in single parenting payments over a seven-year period.

In court she was found to have repeatedly made false statements to Centrelink to hide the fact she was living with a man she later married.

Another claiming to be a single mum was jailed for 18 months after pleading guilty to fraudulently claiming more than \$60,000 for single-parent payments over eight years.

The Government estimates 7400 parents receiving single-parent benefits will see their payments reduced and a further 7400 will have their payments axed.

Social Services Minister Christian Porter said the rationale was simple. "People should only be receiving the payment to which they are entitled," he said.

The nation's peak welfare body, the Australian Council of Social Service, described the policy as an "unnecessary intrusion into people's lives".

Chief executive Cassandra

Goldie said 33 per cent of single parents lived in poverty and were already forced to prove they had used up all their savings and were looking for work.

"This kind of surveillance is only one step away from the bad old days when Centrelink would do home visits to check

how many pairs of shoes were at the front door," she said.

She said the crackdown would predominantly target single women with children, adding: "This measure is further stereotyping and penalising single parents on low incomes."

Labor's shadow minister for human services Linda Burney said there were concerns about what the change could mean for women leaving violent relationships or people who may not want to disclose their private details to others.

Committee: CA Leg. Committee

Tabled Document

Inquiry: 2017-18 Budget Estimates

Date: 1 June 2017

Witness: Senator Pratt

Organisation: