

28th April 2021

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600
Anita Coles
Committee Secretary

Dear Anita,

RE: ParentsNext: examination of Social Security (Parenting payment participation requirements – class of persons) Instrument 2021

Zoe Support Australia is a place-based not for profit Community Service Organisation operating in Mildura. Zoe Support Australia offers clients a wraparound, holistic and place-based service. We provide advocacy, practical support, and assistance to enable higher education and employment outcomes and develop confidence, self-esteem and personal skills. Our services aim to increase social connection, inspire mothers to achieve their goals and create opportunities for learning.

Zoe Support Australia has established four Zoe Centres and the Little Sprouts Op Shop & Café in Mildura. Through these facilities, we provide:

- Intensive casework by a team of qualified case managers, including Integrated Family Services for high-risk clients;
- Family Day Care provided by qualified Early Years educators;
- Advocacy and referrals with valued partners in health, education, welfare, employment and housing;
- Parenting programs, such as positive parenting, birthing and breastfeeding classes;
- Antenatal consultations and onsite medical visits in partnership with local health providers;
- Practical and housing assistance, including the provision of clothing, furniture and baby items and support to complete rental and public housing applications;
- Pre-accredited courses in a wide-range of subjects, including cooking, baking, sewing, literacy, numeracy, retail and hospitality through our status as a registered Adult, Community and Further Education Learn Local provider;
- Support to enrol in and complete accredited education;
- Study Hubs with computers, internet and printing;
- One-on-one and group tutoring provided by qualified teachers;
- Transport assistance provided by two 'Butterfly Buses' to take mothers and children to education, medical and other appointments;
- Supported playgroups;
- Social programs, such as the Zoe Pride Netball team; and
- Peer mentoring.

Zoe Support Australia shares clients with Job Active agencies in Mildura who are mandated to be engaged in the ParentsNext program. There has been a collaborative working partnership with the agencies who hold this funding and we do see referrals come through. There have been cases where ParentsNext funding has been approved to pay for a client's accredited courses, which has been beneficial for the clients who would otherwise not be able to enrol in accredited courses, due to fees.

However, with the young mothers we support, case workers have seen that the program being facilitated at Job Active locations have provided a number of barriers for young mothers.

These include:

- Mandated appointments booked without an option for clients to change these times to suit their daily routines
- The offices are not child friendly
- There is no transport offered to attend appointments
- No tailoring to clients' needs in regards to anxiety and/or mental health support
- No home visits
- No advocacy for the client
- Not running any of the programs

Furthermore, we believe young mothers who are mandated to be engaged in ParentsNext from when their newborn is only 6 months old have not been provided with the opportunity to bond with their child and support an ongoing routine in such a short time frame.

There have been numerous occasions of our clients calling our caseworkers because they were having trouble reporting, for various reasons. When clients did not report and their payments were then suspended, it left young families with no money to feed their family and/or pay the rent for that week, with no evidence that additional support was provided by the Job Active agency to ensure their basic needs were met before payments were suspended.

We have also seen evidence of a past client being enrolled in an accredited course, with the course paid for by ParentsNext, including purchase of a laptop for the young mother. Once the enrolment occurred, there was no further support to enrol their child in childcare or discussion around transport, given the client had no driver's license or vehicle. The client never attended the course and was eventually withdrawn. Further, another shared client with high social anxiety was expected to enter a local TAFE and enrol herself in a course without support to do so. This shared client moved into the Zoe Integrated Family Services program and has been supported to attend weekly pre-accredited Learn Local courses. She has since completed Food Handler's and Barista course qualifications with intensive support from a Zoe Support Family Services Practitioner. While ParentsNext seems to be a good starting point for young mothers to engage in education or their community, there does not seem to be ongoing support to remain engaged, leading to wasted resources and lack of outcomes. Young mothers need specialised and intensive support and would be better suited to ongoing case management and support, rather than being incentivised through financial payments.

As a registered Community Service Organisation recently achieving all QIC Health and Community Services Standards 7th Ed and Human Services Standards (HSS), where these standards continually

referred to listening to the client voice and ensuring that the client is aware of his/her rights and responsibilities, some questions I would like to ask:

- Have clients engaged in the ParentsNext program been asked for their feedback/input?
- What programs and/or education support would these clients see as a supportive and engaging for them to attend?
- Should young mothers be penalised for not engaging in mandated programs? Or would an approach where they can access ongoing support to engage in programs/education suited to both their employment goals and parenting journey be more beneficial?

Would it not be more positive to see young mothers engaged because they have had input into the outcomes and can see the benefit of engaging in the program for their future and their families?

Kind Regards,

Merinda Robertson
Manager