

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT)

Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Inquiry into Social Services Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Income Support) Bill 2021

Public Hearing: Tuesday 9th March 2021

Question on notice from Senator Rachel Siewert:

New changes to mutual obligations include an audit of job applications to check if applications are “meaningful” and “genuine” – what impact will this have for First Nations people, particularly in remote communities?

10th March 2021

APO NT Response

The current Bill includes tougher mutual obligation requirements for jobseekers, including a requirement for jobseekers to submit more applications and the audit mentioned by Senator Siewert.

As noted in the committee hearing, APO NT has concerns about the punitive arrangements of mutual obligations that are designed to spur jobseekers on to find paid work. This is particularly infeasible in areas where there are not enough job vacancies.

Expecting Aboriginal jobseekers in remote areas to submit twenty job applications a month would mean:

- People would have to apply for jobs that are a long way from where they live and would be impractical for them to undertake, even if they were successful
- A huge amount of time would be spent on meaningless applications, that could be better spent on caring for family or undertaking training
- Aboriginal jobseekers who are unable to submit twenty applications, due to low literacy or other reasons, may be penalised by suspension of their income support payment. It is incredibly unfair to penalise people for not applying for enough jobs where these jobs do not actually exist.
- Many people would need support to prepare job applications. If there is no service provider dedicated to providing such support, then remote residents may need to seek this support from other service providers in the community such as art centres, schools and clinics. This would have a negative impact on the capacity of those services to deliver their primary function.

APO NT suggests that similar impacts would be felt as a result of the proposed audit mentioned by Senator Siewert. If an audit is undertaken to determine the genuineness of job applications, then it is likely that Aboriginal jobseekers in remote communities will be some of the hardest hit.

Due to literacy levels and experience in both work and applying for work, an Aboriginal jobseeker in a remote community would be at greater risk of failing to demonstrate having made a “meaningful” attempt at a job application. The requirement that all applications are “meaningful” and “genuine”, on top of the work required to address the sheer volume of twenty applications per month, would place pressure on other services to provide support to jobseekers and attempt to help them reduce their risk of having payments suspended.

It is also worth considering what kind of organisations are best placed to support Aboriginal jobseekers in urban and remote settings. Many of the job service providers in urban and remote areas are not Aboriginal community controlled organisations. APO NT believes where possible, Aboriginal organisations should be supporting Aboriginal jobseekers. Such organisations may be better able to provide culturally sensitive support to jobseekers and could support them to find work opportunities within their networks. Jobseekers in both urban and remote areas should also be able to access volunteer opportunities as approved “activities” in order to gain experience and job skills with supportive organisations.

Ultimately, APO NT would like to see the resources currently used to penalise jobseekers and administer unwieldy mutual obligation requirements diverted into real job creation for Aboriginal people. This will be far more impactful than any adjustments to the mutual obligations and penalties system as it will actually give people an alternative to remaining on the social security system indefinitely.