



AASW

**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Senate Community Affairs
Legislation Committee*

*Re: Social Services Legislation Amendment (Drug
Testing Trial) Bill 2018*

April 2018

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INTRODUCTION

Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 10,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, social inclusion, and discrimination.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession, recognised internationally, that pursues social justice and human rights, and supports individuals, families and communities to improve their wellbeing. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing, and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

Normally the AASW welcomes the opportunity to submit to inquiries around proposed legislation as an important aspect of the democratic process. As an opportunity for decision-makers to hear and consider the evidence and experience of experts and practitioners, it is a vital ingredient in informed policy making. The AASW participated in this process last year when the proposal for drug testing of income support recipients was first presented as part of the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill. The committee's reports resulting from this process indicate that the inquiry heard extensive evidence of the conceptual, practical and ethical problems with this proposal. The AASW is dismayed that the evidence has been ignored and that the proposal has been presented to Parliament again.

RESPONSE

The proposal for a two-year drug testing trial at three sites has multiple insurmountable flaws:

1. There is no evidence that people who are receiving income support payments abuse alcohol or other drugs at a higher rate than do the general population.¹
2. There is no evidence that substance abuse is the cause of those people being unemployed.²
3. There is no evidence that drug testing of people without a job leads to those people finding employment.³
4. There is no evidence that drug testing results in decreased drug use by those people.⁴
5. Trials that have been conducted overseas have shown that mandatory drug testing is expensive to implement and has no economic benefits.
6. Trials conducted overseas and local anecdotal evidence suggest that the most likely result is an

¹ Australian National Council on Drugs [ANCD], *Position Paper: Drug testing*, Canberra, 2013.

² ANCD, 2013

³ ANCD, 2013

⁴ ANCD, 2013

increase in homelessness and the crime rate.⁵ While this will lead to added costs for society as a whole, these costs are minor compared with the hardship that this measure will create for already vulnerable, marginalised people.

7. The projected increase of \$10 million in treatment services will be inadequate to treat the existing waiting list for treatment, let alone the extra people who might be referred to treatment because of this measure. An expert has described it as: 'A drop in the ocean'.⁶

8. The bill proposes to enforce income management on people who test positive but there is no evidence that income management assists people find employment. The evaluation report of the income management trial reported only that people were *more motivated to look for work*.⁷ There is no evidence that income management resulted in people finding employment.

9. The bill does nothing to increase the availability of paid work available in the three trial sites, nor to address the government's lack of an overall job creation strategy. It assumes that the only reason for unemployment is the behaviour of the unemployed person, ignoring the lack of employment opportunities in the three areas where the trial is proposed.

CONCLUSION

Parliament's process of inquiry and reporting has delivered the government an overwhelming conceptual and practice based case for this proposal to be permanently removed from public debate. The fact that the government is defying this conclusion leaves it open to accusations that its motivation is to punish and humiliate the people who are already the most economically and socially disadvantaged. The AASW calls on the government to demonstrate that this is not the case by withdrawing this bill.

Recommendation

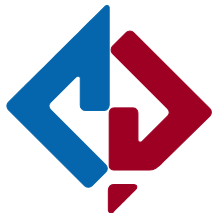
The AASW recommends that this bill be rejected.

Submitted by and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Pty Ltd

⁵ Australian National Council on Drugs, *Position Paper: Drug testing*, Canberra, 2013.

⁶ Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, *Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017 Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2017, p. 30.

⁷ ORIMA Research, *Cashless Debit Card Trial Evaluation*, Melbourne, 2017.



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