

Introduction

Following is the Benevolent Society's submission to the Community Affairs References Committee, Inquiry into ParentsNext. It is The Benevolent Society's strongly held conviction that withdrawing income support and pushing families and their children into greater poverty should never be the outcome of any government employment or income support intervention.

We know there is a strong association between families' socio-economic circumstances and the healthy development of their children. Parents living in poverty do not have access to the necessary resources to provide the care children need. The Benevolent Society believes that government policy that increases financial stress for parents is a policy that endangers the safe care and wellbeing of children.

The Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) that operates under the Government's Job Active policy framework is being used to pursue a punitive approach to 'welfare reform', resulting in a loss of income support and delivering greater hardship for individuals, families and their children. The Benevolent Society believes there is little evidence that such approaches work or that the barriers that prevent people from obtaining work can be addressed through income support penalties. The Benevolent Society believes that interventions that further disadvantage the children of families on income support cannot be supported.

The Benevolent Society is aware of parents who have found ParentsNext to be a significant help in accessing services that they have not been eligible to use under Newstart. Referral to the program has triggered support for literacy and numeracy courses, driving programs and education and training opportunities, which our clients view as helpful interventions. These examples show that properly targeted, meaningful assistance that responds to client identified need can deliver real benefits to parents. Unfortunately, the focus on compliance has for many clients, undermined the program's ability to deliver positive outcomes.

The Benevolent Society's submission to this Inquiry is informed by our first-hand experience as a service delivery organisation, our local knowledge of the communities we work in, and media reporting. Our child and family practice workforce in NSW and Queensland has provided direct input based on their experience of the roll out of the program in their communities.

Who We Are

The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity. We are a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation that has helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years. The Benevolent Society aims for a just society where all Australians can live their best life. The Benevolent Society helps the most vulnerable people in society, and supports people from all backgrounds including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We believe that building stronger communities will lead to a fairer Australia. We work in, with and through communities to improve the welfare of individuals and families.

Snapshot

The Benevolent Society is a secular non-profit organisation with 1501 staff and 650 volunteers who, in 2017/2018 supported more than 64051 children and adults in New South Wales and Queensland.

We deliver 86 different services with support from local, state and federal governments, businesses, community partners, trusts and foundations.

We support people across the lifespan, delivering services for children and families, older people, women and people with mental illness, and through community development and social leadership programs.

Our revenue in 2017/187 was \$ 149,500 million.

The Benevolent Society is a company limited by guarantee with an independent Board.

The Benevolent Society offer a range of services to all families to help them thrive, such as parenting support and coaching, early childhood development programs, and specialist support when challenges arise. Across NSW and QLD we provide services to vulnerable families where children have been identified as at risk, including Brighter Futures, Intensive case management programs, Fostering Young Lives, Headspace, Resilient Families, Communities for Children, Family Mental Health Support Services, Family Preservation and Intervention Programs and Family and Child Connect.

Terms of Reference

- (b) *the design and implementation of ParentsNext including:***
- (i) *the appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participants;***

The Benevolent Society is aware of incorrect referrals, including for grandparents, being made by Centrelink to ParentsNext providers. It is not clear to The Benevolent Society what oversight Centrelink has of the automated data-matching program that instigates referrals but the number of ineligible referrals suggests a substantial system problem that Centrelink has not been able to resolve.

Whilst providers are generally aware of the eligibility criteria, attempting to correct the referral with Centrelink is difficult and time consuming for both the ParentsNext provider and their client. There is a lack of transparency as to who at Centrelink is responsible for administering ParentsNext, phone contact is difficult, waiting times are long, and a clear process for resolving issues is not apparent.

One explanation for the confusion and lack of transparency may be a lack of trained Centrelink staff administering the program. For example, The Benevolent Society understands there are only three Centrelink staff to administer ParentsNext across the whole Central Coast region of NSW.

The Benevolent Society calls on the Government to immediately review ParentsNext administration staffing levels at Centrelink to ensure that there are adequate numbers of well-trained staff to effectively manage and administer the program.

- (v) *the interaction between ParentsNext, business, education and training providers, and health, community and social services;***

The Benevolent society has varying interaction with the ParentsNext providers in our shared locations and is unaware that any formal strategy for engagement with the local service community has been implemented by either providers or Centrelink.

A major concern for The Benevolent Society is the lack of detailed understanding of ParentsNext providers of both the needs of their clients and the service landscape that exists in the communities they are operating in. The child and family service sector is complex and multi-dimensional with particular service models finely attuned to specific community needs. Whilst the Benevolent Society believes referral to services such as playgroups or pre-schools can be a soft entry point for connecting parents to more specific therapeutic or targeted help, the lack of specialist skill of Parents Next providers is resulting in referrals that are inappropriate and work against connection to a service that may be of assistance.

For example, Benevolent Society staff have reported a parent with high anxiety and other mental health concerns being sent to a playgroup with over 70 other participants, causing the parent acute anxiety. Another example saw a young white Australian parent referred to a multicultural playgroup where she made racist comments to other parents who were unable to speak English. Both these examples show a lack of understanding of the local service network and inability to match parent's need with appropriate services.

The Benevolent Society is aware that a number of providers are advertising ParentsNext employment opportunities that require no formal qualifications and no experience. Whilst this is likely to be a contributing factor to inappropriate referrals, The Benevolent Society is also aware that the ParentsNext workforce is often carrying enormous caseload burdens that prevent the development of a suitable understanding of clients' needs or the service environment. Our staff are aware of individual ParentsNext workers with caseloads of between 170 and 250 active clients, meaning service or case management is limited to 20 minute appointments. This is clearly an inadequate timeframe for an effective interaction with clients and is a likely contributor to perfunctory assessments and inappropriate referrals.

The Benevolent Society calls on the Government to ensure ParentsNext organisations have appropriately qualified, skilled staff to assess client need and make informed referrals to support services.

- (vi) *the effectiveness of the communication between:***

- (A) Participants**
- (B) The Department of Jobs and Small Business**
- (C) Centrelink, and**
- (D) ParentsNext providers**

The Benevolent Society believes urgent improvement in communication between all parties is needed to explain the aims, benefits, rights of participants and intended outcomes for all parties involved in the program.

The Benevolent Society is deeply concerned that parents who find they have been breached for not attending one of our services believe that our organisation is responsible for, or complicit in, the breach and the loss of their benefits. This is completely contrary to the aims of our organisation and undermines our role as a supportive service that works with parents to provide safe care for their children. This loss of trust in our organisation can see families further disengage from support, increase the vulnerability of their children and result in poor outcomes for the whole family.

Benevolent Society staff report frustrated parents attending their services with little or no information about why they have been asked to attend, except the threat that they will lose their benefits. The Benevolent Society has found that many can be persuaded of the program's benefit when given a full explanation of the purpose and the opportunities ParentsNext can provide. Our staff feel that the aims and requirements of the program should be communicated by Centrelink and the ParentsNext provider, prior to their referral to our service to ensure parents have all the information they need to make informed decisions about what they need assistance with.

The Benevolent Society calls on the Government to implement multiple plain English information products that clarify the roles and responsibility of all participants and provide clear pathways to obtain further information or seek clarification on decisions or outcomes from the administrators.

- (vii) *measure if any, in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims and/or survivors of family violence;***
- (viii) *the appropriateness of the aspects of the program specifically aimed at communities with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and the appropriateness of the broader program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents outside target communities.***

In a service environment with punitive outcomes for non-compliance, the recruitment of skilled professionals with significant experience working with disadvantaged and vulnerable people is crucial. Whilst the Benevolent Society has seen some evidence of recruitment of skilled professionals, we are also aware of many ParentsNext positions requiring no formal qualifications at all.

Despite ParentsNext claiming a focus on Aboriginal parents there is little evidence that providers are recruiting a workforce with the skills, experience or indeed Aboriginality needed to work with Aboriginal clients. Similarly, there is little evidence that the ParentsNext workforce is qualified to work with client's experiencing domestic and family violence, mental health or other issues that may contribute to their difficulty in gaining employment.

The lack of recruitment of a skilled and trained workforce is a cause for significant concern and raises real questions about the ability and suitability of ParentsNext providers to understand client needs and refer them to appropriate services or activities. That employees with no formal qualifications or experience are monitoring and arbitrating compliance with the program is clearly unacceptable and should be addressed as a priority.

The lack of oversight and accountability for decisions made by ParentsNext providers is jeopardising the ability of parents to care for their children, provide for their healthy development and forcing disadvantaged families deeper into poverty. The Benevolent Society believes the administration of income support payments and the power to impose penalties should be the sole responsibility of properly resourced and trained government agency employees.

The Benevolent Society believes only the responsible government agency, which is accountable to Parliament, should have the ability to monitor and issue penalties to income support recipients.

(c) The appropriateness of the application of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) to ParentsNext and the impact of the TCF on participants

The Benevolent Society is critical of Commonwealth programs including ParentsNext that seek to denigrate Centrelink clients and create an environment of compliance and penalties. For many families, the suspension of payments for not meeting a ParentsNext requirement has led to significant financial hardship, requiring them to seek Emergency Relief, including food and shelter from our services. The Benevolent Society notes the many examples reported in the media of unjustifiable payment suspensions for non-compliance beyond the control of the participants. Examples such as women giving birth, lack of phone credit or phone coverage, and hospitalisation and illness have been well documented in the media and by advocacy bodies. In addition, participants, mainly women, have been forced to curtail study, change long-standing appointments or care arrangements to attend face-to-face compliance meetings or program designated activities that have little or no bearing on their employment prospects.

The Benevolent Society shares many of the concerns raised by a wide range of advocacy and social justice organisations about the punitive effect of the TCF and strongly believes that punitive responses to unemployment, for people who may be significantly disadvantaged across a range of measures makes no economic or social sense.

The Benevolent Society joins and supports Jobs Australia's call for Government immediately suspend the TCF to prevent further hardship for single parents and their children.