

I am writing to you to establish how you intend to address the inequity to Single Parents and their families announced recently by the Federal Government.

### **Some history on my experience**

The relationship I was in became violent due to the children's fathers build up of anger, frustration and a spiral of illicit drug use, alcohol abuse, a lack of anger management, gambling and other addictions. I fled that relationship with my 18 month old and whilst pregnant with my youngest child with the fear of being "knocked off", and the kids being "taken down the National Park and gassed" as was promised. At no point in time had I imagined embarking on a journey involving violence and single parenting and non payment of child support. This occurred 12 years ago and should be over and done with but it is not.

To protect my children I keep a low profile. I try to reduce my internet footprint to very little exposure, to ensure our location is secure. The children both suffer anxiety which I believe stems from Domestic Violence which didn't actually end, until access visitation was removed when my son was 2. After that, only I was targeted for harassment and punishment, and this has continued faithfully until 12 months ago. We are all hyper vigilant and practice a high degree of personal safety.

I was self employed in Professional Services Industry. Both my children have disabilities which are not intellectual and therefore not funded nor accommodated in the education system. 5 years ago, I sold the business to concentrate on assisting my youngest child and facilitate medical appointments. He has since been diagnosed with ADHD - Inattentive (a neurological disorder - not poor parenting), Dyslexia (a disorder which affects Language skills and the ability to decode letters) and Dysgraphia (the inability to control a pen nib and continues to attend remediation classes one morning a week to learn how to write and communicate in a written format).

Because my children are not catered for within the system and because they require a high level of support, I am on Parenting Payment Single. I currently pay \$420 a week in rent (and it is substandard with "added creatures") with no prospective of this price going anyway but higher. We attempt to live to a budget which after paying essentials (rent, utilities, insurance etc) we are left with \$75 per week - that's **\$25 per person per week**, to pay for the following; educational costs (including the "Non Compulsory" school fees which MUST be paid if you want your child to actually have access to a textbook and not be ostracised by the teachers and students, compulsory incursions and excursions the schools deems necessary and any extra tuition, in our case Writing Remediation each week.), medical expenses (not many specialists bulk bill, and try getting access to mental health services) and medical scripts, clothing including school uniforms, shoes and normal day wear, toiletries, repairs & maintenance on household items (like lawnmowers to ensure the property is "maintained" and we don't get evicted), children's activities (even if the activity is free, somehow I need to transport them to the activity) and of course, food. I need to feed 2 growing children and myself a "healthy balanced diet" on whatever money is left over. Thank goodness there are food banks around to access some staples through - unfortunately they generally seem to be of the belief that it is ok to sell food past its best

before and use by date, so there has been a couple of instances where my children have taken rotten food to school.

I want to work, but the education system is unable to accommodate my children, the school wishes me to be available during the day to come at a moment's notice to pick up my child. The children understand they are not catered for and in turn become either disengaged (my eldest) or taciturn (my youngest) which is all interpreted as anti-social behaviour and then duly punished rather than being addressed appropriately. This is a horrible circle for children to be in and teaches them to be powerless. There is such a lack of investment in training for teachers to recognise disabilities and how to accommodate them in the classroom. The Department of Education does have policy and procedures which fly in the face of discrimination legislation. At the end of the day, no one wants a fight on this, we just want children to be educated - so why is it so hard to achieve this and why has it cost me, personally, so much? I feel like I have to educate the educators and this is quite a scary proposition. I have sold my business, cashed in my super fund, spent my life savings on trying to facilitate a good start for my children. The cost to access services is incredibly expensive and fragmented. I have no resources left.

I personally suffer from chronic health conditions and have been diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, disassociation and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Before life as a single parent, the only condition I had was ADHD. My physical and mental health, have alarmingly declined in the past 10 years and I do believe that the stress of parenting kids with special needs while having no firm housing and having no physical or emotional support has compounded this situation greatly.

I can not see a way forward. It was hard before, but losing another \$60 a week is gut wrenching. However, I refuse to be victimised and powerless. I am outraged that the Federal Government is so out of touch with the most vulnerable in our society - our kids. We are being dehumanised. It is almost like the Government is corralling single parents into unhealthy relationships and/or work practices to keep statistics looking good. I am not after pity and I know there are many, many families in a similar boat. However, I do not use drugs and so do not have a drug problem, also I am not out of jail, I am told that this is how you climb higher up the list for public housing. I would be at the end of the list for public housing.

I have worth and so do my children. We are good people who contribute to our communities. How can I articulate my fear of not being able to support my children, being forced to go out to work and having DoC's tell me they are home alone and that I am putting them at risk and taking them away and placing them in foster care? There was a position about 12 months ago, 4am to 8am, 4 mornings a week. I spoke to Centrelink about it and the response was "Let me get this straight, you have two children with disabilities and you want to leave them alone for 4 hours? Do you really think that is a good idea?" I can not find work between schools hours. I medicate my son before school and as soon as he gets home in the afternoon. There are no jobs which allow 3 months leave (even unpaid) which are between school hours to allow me to care for them in school holidays. Where are the employment solutions being offered? Even Government positions, Local, State and Federal do not offer flexibility and even the part time job shares that are advertised, can not

accommodate a “flexitime” workforce who can only work around their young vulnerable family.

I live in a crevice for services and agencies. In a part of \_\_\_\_\_ which isn't serviced by charities' and agencies and is not served by charities and agencies in \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_. It's like a black hole. Even if we find someone willing to help, the magnitude of stress that we (children included) live with daily is often beyond the agency worker to cope with. They do not know how to assist us and often want to “refer” us to someone else. This begins lots of circles but doesn't actually achieve much for us as a family – at least nothing tangible.

I am not asking for anything other than fairness and equity. The new changes will increase my barriers to work, not remove them. We already live in poverty. We also live in one of the richest countries in the world - how can this be? I am an educated, professionally qualified woman who is also primary carer of children with disabilities and as such can not provide for my children. I am at the mercy of Government policy which, with all due respect, seems to be based on rumour and innuendo rather than hard facts of actually how single parents live. We are not “riding the sheep's back” by any means. An articulate article addressing many of my concerns appeared on the ABC site <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3997940.html>

Thank you for taking the time to read this, I do understand it is a lot to absorb