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To the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the **ParentsNext preemployment program** as part of the **Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services**. I understand the Committee is particularly interested in views and recommendations on ParentsNext's: policy objectives; eligibility and compulsory participation requirements; and funding and service delivery arrangements, among other matters. I will comment on these three topics in turn.

My submission is based on my deeply qualitative, narrative interview research undertaken into "lived experiences of ParentsNext". Anthropological research does not take as its goal the task of evaluating policy success or failure. Rather, between 2019-2021 I conducted interviews with 19 women about their experience of ParentsNext and their broader life stories. My aim was to understand people's experience of the welfare system on their own terms and in their own words. This submission draws on my forthcoming book, *Who Cares? Life on Welfare in Australia* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2023).

I also append a copy of my submission into a 2021 inquiry into ParentsNext, which highlights: when ParentsNext participants have their Parenting Payment reduced, suspended or cancelled for non-compliance they find it difficult to meet the basic needs of their household; ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse; and my research participants' frustration at the disconnect between their own, articulated request for financial support to realise their aspirations, and ParentsNext's emphasis on participation in mandated activities. Many of these points are also relevant to this inquiry.

**ParentsNext policy objectives:**

ParentsNext's putative aim is to assist parents in becoming "work-ready". This is a laudable aim, but it is not as uncomplicated as advocates for this program assume. The instrument used to enforce ParentsNext requirements is the "Participation Plan". Via an individually negotiated Participation Plan, ParentsNext participants commit to attending either activities related to



parenting, such as a playgroup, or activities more obviously tied to the goal of securing future employment, such as volunteering or study. The negative effects associated with the digital monitoring of these activities is dealt with later in this submission. For now, I highlight that the nomenclature of this program (“participation plan”) communicates to parents of babies and/or small children that they are deemed to be not “participating” in society. That is, caring for children is rendered value-less and an unproductive or even problematic way for them to spend their time. This implicit devaluing of the work of parenting and the disrespect of their current role was keenly felt by some of my research participants. One story in particular illustrates this point.

Eloise is a single mother of one child.<sup>1</sup> She aspires to complete high school through TAFE and then pursue higher education. Eloise was aware of the stigma surrounding both sole parenting and, particularly, becoming a young mother. “Dumb girls have babies,” was her bitter summary of the social narrative surrounding her circumstances. Eloise told me, “I think especially as a single mum, there is a pressure for me to go to uni or to get a job or to be doing something like that. And I want, I want to be house mum, I want to stay at home.” Eloise continued, “I love being a mum! ... Like I’m very excited about being a mum. I think it’s great.” However, “there’s no room socially to do that, even though essentially what I’m doing is, is saving childcare space. I’m doing a job that if I was doing it for someone else’s child, I would be getting paid \$30 an hour and I’m doing it 24/7 cause I chose to and I’m okay with that.” Parenting, Eloise later told me, “is the first thing I’ve ever felt I was kind of good at ... .”

Eloise’s confidence and wellbeing was clearly nurtured by being in the caregiving role. To be clear, I have no interest in advancing a moral position about whether the parents of pre-school aged children should stay home to parent them, or use long day care so that they can do waged work. Instead, I submit that **parenting itself should be recognised and supported as a legitimate contribution to society**. Parents of all backgrounds should be able to make their own decisions surrounding the pre-school years; this is what Eloise expressed when she talked about there being “no room socially” for her decision to focus on the work of caring for her child at this point in her life, even if she had broader aspirations for her future. Without a Higher School Certificate, Eloise was well aware she faced two options: low-wage work while the care of her child was undertaken by a feminised, low-wage workforce, or the unpaid but deeply rewarding work of caring for her own child. The first option is socially sanctioned and the second socially suspect, **a hierarchy that ParentsNext reinforces**.

As to Eloise’s more direct experience of ParentsNext, she agreed to enrol in TAFE as part of her Participation Plan because she was already planning on studying. However, she told me, “[I]n retrospect, I would’ve picked something else to be my Participation Plan so I could go to TAFE

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this submission.



without stress and do it at my own pace and not with payments getting cut hanging over my head." (For complex personal reasons, Eloise was later forced to put her TAFE studies on hold.) Eloise here echoes a theme of many of my interviews. Mandatory participants in ParentsNext perceive they are essentially being coerced to agree to an activity on condition of receiving an income. Coercion changed their relationship to that activity irrevocably. For example, attending a playgroup *when that attendance was being surveilled* caused one of my interviewees to develop an intense aversion to a formerly valued local playgroup.

### **ParentsNext eligibility and compulsory participation requirements:**

As the Committee is aware, ParentsNext is integrated with the Targeted Compliance Framework, which is also used to monitor unemployed person's "mutual obligations". Many of my participants spoke of the anxiety associated with digital surveillance of their compulsory participation requirements. Far from feeling supported to achieve their goals, they described themselves as under constant supervision and suspicion. Again, specific stories illustrate this point.

Shelby, a single mum and domestic abuse survivor told me, "The reporting I cannot stand. I have three different alarms in my phone to remind me to report and sometimes you get interrupted and then you just ... you totally forget and then you're not paid. Your rent's due, all my credit card repayments are due, my loan's due." Shelby added, "And like, I don't even have WiFi. I sort of had it on minimum, like not really much data ... just to kick my costs down, but I've had to increase that and have internet just in case. All that sort of stuff."

My interviewee Ayesha, who holds two postgraduate degrees, commented, "It sometimes felt like a game of, you know, they are trying to catch me doing something wrong." Aboriginal single mother of two children, Trish, was even more blunt: "I feel like I have a target on my back."

Megan, a part-time TAFE teacher and single mum of a child with special needs, also tired of the "constant reporting, which also takes a psychological toll, the constant reminder, constant stress, like the anxiety ... It's that constant threat of getting your money taken." In fact, so motivated was Megan to escape the fortnightly reporting regime that she negotiated to sign a new participation plan by enrolling in an online course. (ParentsNext participants who are studying report less frequently, confirming they remained enrolled in their studies.)

Megan sketched in full for me the absurdity of her situation. She was undertaking casual contract teaching at a regional TAFE campus. Yet she was told by her ParentsNext case manager that the hours she spends working were not sufficient to exempt her from ParentsNext. I have a full teaching load in my role at Macquarie University, and this conclusion offended me! But the actual hours you spend teaching in the classroom *are based on many more spent preparing*, I ventured.



"I knowwwwww!" Megan responded. However, because Megan's contract specified the exact number of hours she spent in the classroom, she was deemed a compulsory participant in ParentsNext.

Next, Megan's ParentsNext case manager identified a "long-term goal" for Megan: keep the teaching job. "No shit, Sherlock," Megan said to me. And so, when I met up with Megan she was dipping in and out of an online "random aromatherapy course", which she enrolled in purely to secure a release her from the demands of fortnightly reporting. I cannot imagine the Committee's members think Megan's compulsory participation in ParentsNext serves anyone except the employment service provider contracted to deliver this program (and the providers of this online aromatherapy course).

**ParentsNext's funding and service delivery arrangements, including whether these enable providers to effectively tailor to meet participant needs:**

I refer the Committee to an enlightening recent study by social policy analysts Siobhan O'Sullivan, Michael McGann and Mark Considine, which introduces the reader to employment consultants previously employed as hairdressers, in hospitality and as flight attendants.<sup>2</sup> They are part of a volatile and highly feminised low-paid workforce that has been markedly deskilled and deunionised since welfare delivery was privatised and subject to tender processes, and the emphasis has shifted to enforcing conditions.<sup>3</sup> A constant theme of my interviews was frustration with such frontline staff at various providers, who either refused or found themselves unable to tailor the program to meet participants' expressed needs.

It is important to note that many of research participants strived to empathise with their case managers and to make clear that their frustration lay with the program itself, and especially the reporting regime, rather than individual case managers. Some of my participants, however, were scathing about their patronising and degrading treatment at the hands of case managers, who introduced errors into CVs and gave highly inappropriate and personal advice.

In two memorable interviews, I collected tales of energetic providers who tailored ParentsNext to meet participant needs and collaborated with them to support their life goals after listening closely to what their clients hoped next to do. The remaining 17 experiences of my interviewees ranged from mixed to negative. The majority of interviewees agreed to keep doing something they were already doing, and which they had independently initiated.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Sullivan, McGann and Considine. 2021. *Buying and Selling the Poor*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183–4.



One interviewee, who started a family young and whose partner was doing an apprenticeship, asked her ParentsNext caseworker to help pay for the costs of driving lessons so she could gain her licence, which would have made an appreciable difference to her employment prospects. The caseworker agreed to this request but was quickly replaced with another caseworker who reversed the decision. (High turnover of staff is a feature of the sector, as I am sure the Committee is aware.) Another sought assistance to join a professional body, but this request was declined.

A program that makes funding available to parents on low incomes to assist them in realising their plans for the future is of course worthy of support. However, **I recommend the Albanese Government discontinue ParentsNext in its current form.** This program might usefully be redesigned as a **voluntary program**, on the condition that **real financial support** was available to participants to help them **realise their own life goals**.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to share some of my research findings. I am above all deeply grateful to the busy mums who took the time to talk with me tell their stories.

Dr Eve Vincent



**\*COPY OF SUBMISSION MADE TO 2021 SENATE INQUIRY\***

Dr Eve Vincent  
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**Submission to the inquiry regarding ParentsNext: examination of Social Security  
(Parenting payment participation requirements – class of persons) Instrument 2021**

To the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the ParentsNext preemployment program.

This submission is based on my deeply qualitative, narrative interview research undertaken into “lived experiences of ParentsNext”. This research is ongoing. Anthropological research does not take as its goal the task of evaluating policy success or failure. To date, all of my 15 interviewees have been women, hence my use of the term mother throughout this submission. I am interested in learning about these mothers’ whole lives. This method produces in-depth knowledge and insights into how a program such as ParentsNext fits into the broader trajectory of women’s lives.

**My submission highlights three central concerns with ParentsNext.**

First, I highlight that when ParentsNext participants have their Parenting Payments reduced, suspended or cancelled for non-compliance they find it difficult to meet the basic needs of their household. I draw the committee’s attention to concerns that aspects of ParentsNext potentially breach international human rights law, particularly the rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, and the rights of the child. Further, my research shows that these difficulties might be keenly *felt*, and erode the wellbeing and confidence of caregivers.

Second, I highlight that ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse.



Finally, I emphasise my research participants' frustration at the disconnect between their own, articulated request for financial support to realise their aspirations, and ParentsNext's emphasis on participation in mandated activities.

These concerns lead me to recommend that ParentsNext be **redesigned as a voluntary program**. Further, I recommend that all **participants are made fully aware of the Participation Fund**. Senator the Honourable Michaelia Cash states that from 1 July 2021 the Participation Fund will be available to both Intensive and Targeted Stream participants. It is imperative that the availability of these funds is communicated to participants, and that participants are granted **the right to direct those funds towards activities that they nominate as beneficial to them, in pursuit of their own life goals**.

These issues are illustrated through the use of real-life stories of individuals negatively affected by their participation in ParentsNext. My hope is that committee members appreciate that these matters concern real people, with real lives. Moreover, these people are mothers already dedicated to undertaking vitally important care labour.

### **The issue of "non-compliance" and the impact of payment suspensions**

I interviewed single mother of two teenagers and a toddler, Natasha, who resides in a regional NSW town.<sup>4</sup> Natasha's ParentsNext caseworker sent her a form to fill out. Originally the form was 4 pages, double-sided. The caseworker scanned and sent her only pages 1 and 3. Natasha's fortnightly payment was halved after Natasha returned the form incomplete, *having called her caseworker and requested the missing pages to no avail*. The reduced amount didn't cover her rent, but her private landlord was understanding and a friend "turned up at my place with... you know, she'd gone and got some groceries for me".

No doubt the committee is well aware that according to journalist Luke Henriques-Gomes, 85 per cent of the 33,620 parents on ParentsNext "who had their income support temporarily cut off [in the 2018-9] financial year" were found not to have been in the wrong.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this was the case for Natasha, whose full payment was quickly reinstalled, after having to depend on a friend to feed her children over the weekend.

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this submission.

<sup>5</sup> Henriques-Gomes, ParentsNext: 80 per cent of recipients who had payments suspended not at fault, data shows. September 15 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/sep/15/parentsnext-80-of-recipients-who-had-payments-suspended-not-at-fault-data-shows>



The effects of this temporary payment suspension, however, **were not simply material**. Natasha has “kids to provide for”. She told me “there’s a whole heap of guilt and shame when you can’t meet your minimum requirements. Like your kids’ absolute basic needs.” ParentsNext’s putative aim is to assist parents in becoming work-ready. I submit that confidence in one’s role as a mother is critical to this aim.

Senator Cash states that participants now have two business days within which to resolve “non-compliance”. While this is welcome news, it does not address the fundamental and unhelpful dynamic core to ParentsNext’s design. Natasha was not the only busy mother who described to me their “anxiety” about the monitoring demands of ParentsNext and the time and labour involved in having to contact caseworkers and providers to correct decisions. Caseworkers do not necessarily work full-time, and can prove hard to contact. It is also **unacceptable to place the onus on mothers to correct systemic errors in order to ensure their social security entitlements are paid**. The high rates of payment suspension with this program are extremely concerning, as they potentially breach international human rights law, particularly the rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, and the rights of the child.

**ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse**

I interviewed university-educated Stacey about her situation, and the role of ParentsNext in aiding or impeding her determined attempts to rebuild her life after relocating to a new place in order to escape a violent relationship. Stacey was sorely in need of support, as she had very little assistance with her child after her move. Stacey had a car registered in her ex-partner’s name. However, because of his controlling behavior, he refused to transfer the registration into her name. “And he constantly doesn’t pay his fines,” she told me, or his registration fee. “And it’s my car that gets cancelled. ... And I’ve been caught driving it a few times, not knowing that it was actually not registered. Um, so I can’t physically drive anywhere, anyway, like to get to the, to the appointment.”

Stacey was grateful for the flexibility her caseworker *did* extend, agreeing to conduct appointments over the phone rather than in-person. However, Stacey became angry recalling the imposition of these phone calls, which essentially entailed a caseworker calling to check if Stacey’s son still attended GympaROO – an activity that Stacey had chosen and enrolled him in *before* being placed on ParentsNext, and for which she bore the whole cost. Stacey relayed the following, distressing series of events:





I rushed my child out of the pool when his swimming lesson finished—he didn't get a shower or changed—so I could rush him to the nearby park so I could speak on the phone for my ParentsNext appointment. My case manager didn't call. I had other things to do, but put them on hold for the phone appointment.

Then, the following week:

I had a call from my case manager at a time when I was about to have a sleep. ... My son was sleeping so I was about to sleep. I'd been at the hospital 'til 5:30am with him vomiting all night. ... Realising the script and medication had fallen out of the pram I was upset. I had no car, rego had been cancelled, so I put him in the pram at 1:30am and walked him to the hospital and walked home in the dark with the pram [and a reissued script] at 5:30am. ... I had no food as we were due to go celebrate Christmas away for an early Christmas with relatives. We were unable to go away. I had a cry whilst my son was still sleeping and then ordered food online but [it] wasn't being delivered 'til that night. I'd had about an hours' sleep. My case manager called as I was about to lie down. I thought I'd lose my payment if I didn't answer.

Patently, Stacey did not benefit from participating in ParentsNext at this juncture of her life. Her case worker's unwillingness to countenance an exemption was deeply resented and, I am sure the committee will agree, inexplicable. I am concerned that **ParentsNext providers are insufficiently flexible, responsive and supportive in circumstances where their client is a survivor of domestic abuse** (as well as in other circumstances).

### **The inappropriateness of the "support" made available under ParentsNext**

ParentsNext mandates participation in activities, but the benefits of this participation are not always clear. Further, some of my research participants expressed frustration at the lack of meaningful support available to them through ParentsNext after they requested financial support to realise their aspirations.

Natasha, introduced earlier, has held a variety of sales and administrative roles; at the time of our interview she was volunteering with three different community groups and caring for her toddler. This volunteering was initiated prior to her compulsory enrolment in ParentsNext: her participation plan involved her agreeing to *keep* volunteering, which she is passionate about and had no intention of discontinuing. In fact, Natasha told me unhappily, working alongside other committed volunteers, "I didn't want them to think I was doing my volunteering work just to satisfy my ParentsNext requirements."



Natasha was initially enthusiastic about the support ParentsNext promised to provide, as she aspires to pivot to a new career once her toddler starts school. However, when she asked her caseworker about a contribution towards a counselling course, this request was denied.

Eloise is a single mother who aspires to complete high school through TAFE and then pursue higher education. Since she had already decided to enrol in TAFE, she elected to put this in her participation plan. "And in retrospect, I would've picked something else to be my participation plan so I could go to TAFE without stress and do it at my own pace and not with payments getting cut hanging over my head," she told me. Like Natasha, deciding to do something of one's own volition and being compelled to do it produce very different feelings surrounding that activity. Another interviewee told me she *stopped* attending a local playgroup, which she had previously enjoyed, because once she attended as a condition of her participation plan, she felt "insulted and degraded," and "it drained the joy out of it".

Stacey, introduced earlier, requested financial support to support her registration fees with a professional body and learned that this was not available to her.

Finally, Svetlana *did* receive funding to commence a Certificate IV Business, as well as assistance to purchase a laptop. This arrangement seemed fantastic, of course, but Svetlana found herself ill-equipped to successfully complete this course online, and instead had the dispiriting experience of finding it "too hard" and thoroughly overwhelming. Svetlana's plans to study clearly needed much more careful attention and might have been usefully scaffolded. While it is encouraging that Svetlana's ParentsNext caseworker was willing to support her intention to return to study and the formal workforce, such support needs to be tailored and sincere. Svetlana characterised her caseworker as "overworked, jaded and cynical". She had "bunches of files" and "look like she was over it". It is little wonder that Svetlana seems to have been enrolled in an inappropriate activity.

In sum, I recommend ParentsNext be discontinued in its current form. This program might usefully be redesigned as a **voluntary program**, provided **real financial support** was available to participants when it served to help them **realise their own life goals**.

I thank you for the opportunity to share some of my research findings with the committee.

Dr Eve Vincent  
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