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31 January 2019

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
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Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members

Senate Inquiry into ParentsNext

Uniting welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry into the ParentsNext program.

We have been a ParentsNext provider since the pilot program started in April 2016 and part of the new nationally expanded program from July 2018. We acknowledge the benefit gained from, and immense need for, services that assist parents to plan and prepare for employment before their children go to school.

We nonetheless believe that the application of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) is having a negative impact on participants and increasing their existing vulnerability. This in turn has a detrimental impact on our team members and our relationships with other service providers.

Consultation with our ParentsNext program staff has revealed significant trends and issues, which are outlined below.

- By creating a punitive shift in the program TCF is devaluing parenting. While the risk of payment suspension has increased attendance at provider appointments, this enforcement does not support positive parenting or encourage positive experiences for children. Furthermore it does not encourage the parent to plan for education, training or employment;
- TCF reporting requirements lack flexibility and put additional pressure on parents already experiencing the stresses of parenthood. We have had instances where parents caring for sick or very young children forgot to report due to pressure or tiredness and as a result had their payments suspended;
- Parents experiencing family violence (which is not always disclosed to the provider) are also put under additional stress through the application of the TCF;
- Payment suspensions create unnecessary hardship for parents who already struggling to budget. We had one parent who couldn't afford to top up her mobile phone. As a result, she could not contact us or report on that day, leading to immediate suspension of her payments;
- The majority of participants do not possess the literacy, computer/IT and financial management skills required for self-reporting. Newly arrived/CALD parents have also demonstrated difficulty understanding and mastering this technology;
- Participants enter the program when their youngest child turns 6 months old, an age when parents are often still struggling with parenthood and are unable to commit to the extra demands of the program.

- The need for flexible employment that works around caring for children means that many participants are forced to accept casual jobs lacking security, adequate pay, or a long-term career pathway. As the majority of participants are women, the program reinforces gender inequities in employment.

Based on the above experiences, we are calling for the following steps to be taken:

1. Improve the flexibility of the TCF so that payment suspension is at the discretion of the provider and benefits can be reinstated upon re-engagement and consideration of individual participants' circumstances;
2. Increase the program entry age to when the youngest child turns 12 months;
3. Establish a consumer reference group to test the usability of the self-reporting system and inform other broader program improvements.

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Australia recognises social security as a human right that must be provided without discrimination. We urge the Committee to implement the above-mentioned recommendations and provide a social security system that supports, rather than penalises, parents striving to overcome disadvantage.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Linossier
Chief Executive Officer