

We hold the hand of the future.

*Let it be free from hardship and full of
possibilities.*

ParentsNext

**The National Council
& of Single Mothers
Their Children Inc.**

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Eliminate and respond to violence, hardship and inequality for single mothers and their children.



The National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc (NCSMC)

An organisation dedicated to single mothers and a platform whereby both the community and the Government can communicate. NCSMC can comment on policy and legislation and ensure that the lived experience is heard. NCSMC provides information, referrals, and assistance to single mothers through our electronic platforms. In the past year we have responded to tens of thousands individual requests whilst our information posts can reach up to 100,000+ per week. One of our greatest strengths is our expertise and commitment in working with and for the advancement of single mother families who are affected by poverty, hardship, and/or domestic violence.

We welcome

The National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc (NCSMC) welcomes the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services undertaking a high-level review of a pre-employment service known as ParentsNext.

ParentsNext commenced as a “young mothers’ program” established to simultaneously support single mothering and future planning. It was available for mothers who had not finished their secondary education and was free from compulsion and penalties. It additionally had skilled evaluation oversight.

NCSMC has had engagement and knowledge of the various incarnations of ParentsNext since its enactment. We have witnessed it move from a program which commenced as a light touch pre-employment service, through to its current manifestation as a quasi-Workforce Australia program subject to the same Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF).

NCSMC has attended all stakeholders’ meetings, all Department led engagement processes and forums, facilitated participants surveys, advocated, and engaged in formal parliamentary inquiries and continues to respond to the constant flow of questions and concerns from ParentsNext participants and is thus, well-placed to make a meaningful contribution.

Our expertise is derived from our own research, collaboration with others and steeped in the rich but often tragic experience of women who have sought our service. It is from this unique but clear vantage point that we present our submission and recommendations

Recommendations

The ParentsNext program is too tarnished to continue. It requires a complete overhaul and a cultural shift:

1. Institute a complete redesign and re-branding with no compulsion required for participation.
2. Develop a *Future Planning* service with financial assistance available. Co-designed with single mother participants and their advocates, with representation to include First Nations advocates, linguistic and culturally diverse voices/advocates, trauma and gendered violence experts.
3. Institute a stakeholder monitoring committee for a minimum of three-years. Legislation must include a sunset clause and procurement arrangements should require independent, high-quality evaluations.

Employment Services are not specialist trauma informed services and even with good intentions additional harm can be done, and indeed has been the outcome:

4. Safety Hub

NCSMC recommends the Government harnesses and builds upon its current expertise and initiates a 'safety hub' or a series of 'safety hubs'. These would be intersectional specialist services that can work with, and across differing Government Agencies. Providing a place of trust and cultural safety for women who need to interact with Government services would, in addition to providing a 'once only' disclosure point, demonstrate government awareness of the issue and build women's sense of trust and safety.

The Safety Hub/s would undertake roles including but not limited to:

- Grant exemptions from Workforce Australia.
- Grant exemptions from ParentsNext (if still in operation).
- Support women who wish to attend services on a voluntary basis even where they may have an exemption and see that Providers are scrupulous in ensuring all reporting burdens and requirements are paused.
- Protect women from the prospect of payment suspension.
- Develop and guide Services Australia to screen for risk indicators where staff undertaking the screening have completed quality trauma safety training.
- Support employment services to exit women if they have been incorrectly referred and/or have experienced family and domestic violence since referral.
- Assist women to access information and/or Family Violence crisis payments.
- Inform women about and assist them to access exemptions from engaging in child support arrangements
- Oversee the trauma awareness training for providers.

5. Family and Domestic Violence exemptions in all pre and current workforce programs to be an automatic 12-month exemption with a transparent and easy pathway for further extension where these are required. Instituting this process supports a long-standing ALP policy recommendation*.

*Participation Review: Taskforce Report. August 2008

The Taskforce recommends that the current 16-week case-by-case exemption for parents experiencing domestic violence be replaced with a new automatic 12-month exemption. Pg 6 of 39. Click [here](#) for the link

Policy Flaws

In conjunction with the Council of Single Mothers (Victoria), NCSMC has developed “information and tips” for participants of ParentsNext since the enactment of Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) became effective July 2018.

The document was time stamped with the contents confirmed as ‘correct’ by the Department to mitigate the misinformation, the confusion, and the discretion of the

Providers. Furthermore, it was a practical outcome to help protect against payment suspension and for participants be informed of their rights.

ParentsNext commenced as a poorly designed and communicated program which led to our attempts to work with the Department to improve processes, research, and outcomes. However, this didn't address the systemic issues and NCSMC has continued to produce “information and tips” for participants to try and mitigate the common occurrence of suspension of payments, incorrect referrals, inability to exit the program, and access to the

Participation Funds. In respect of the Participation Funds, NCSMC learnt at the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights that the fund was underutilised despite most participants living with financial hardship, safety concerns, housing stress and deprivation. NCSMC being regularly informed that single mother participants were refused these funds or did not know of their availability. Incremental changes to ParentsNext have occurred, but they have been hard earned, greeted with resistance, and followed public reports detailing the negative effects of the program. The adjustments, although welcomed, were not systemic and did not address the significant concerns such as the punitive and racist nature of the program. Single mother families have paid the price for the flawed policy.

Public Image of ParentsNext

The public image of ParentsNext is too tarnished to continue and requires a complete overhaul, and huge cultural shift to become the ambitious program desired by NCSMC and required by single mothers. A small sample of media reports provides insights into the increasingly negative public image of ParentsNext and reaffirms our recommendations.

- 🌐 Job agencies running ParentsNext scheme made invalid claims for taxpayer-funded bonuses, audit finds [Link](#)
- 🌐 Single mother says she had to miss paid work to attend ParentsNext appointment. [Link](#)

- 🌐 Parliamentary Committee to hear evidence against discriminatory ParentsNext program [Link](#)
- 🌐 Morrison Government must scrap ParentsNext and stop making women's lives harder [Link](#)
- 🌐 ParentsNext doesn't help parents become more job ready [Link](#)
- 🌐 ParentsNext program leaves single parents wondering about next steps to secure rental properties [Link](#)
- 🌐 ParentsNext program comes under fire from single mothers who say it 'makes life harder' [Link](#)
- 🌐 Department collected 'background' on single mother who complained about ParentsNext [Link](#)
- 🌐 ParentsNext - after COVID-19 [Link](#)
- 🌐 ParentsNext: providers claim extra funds by signing parents up to their own courses [Link](#)
- 🌐 Government commits to minor changes for controversial ParentsNext program [Link](#)
- 🌐 Whistle-blowers say some job service providers are exploiting the ParentsNext welfare scheme [Link](#)
- 🌐 Parents 'humiliated' if kids miss swimming lessons under welfare rules [Link](#)
- 🌐 'Unable to meet basic needs': ParentsNext program suspended a third of parents' payments [Link](#)
- 🌐 The government parenting program turning librarians into snitches [Link](#)
- 🌐 A Close Encounter with Justice for the ParentsNext Program [Link](#)
- 🌐 The bad bits of ParentsNext just came back [Link](#)