

Opening Statement

ParentsNext inquiry hearing, 25 June 2021

We all want the opportunity to be able to fulfil our potential, to be able to contribute to the community in ways that are meaningful to ourselves and others. When people experience hardship and disadvantage, our social security system provides a safety net. It is a right based on individual need.

The Parenting Payment supports parents experiencing that hardship and disadvantage to raise their children.

The ParentsNext program, however, undermines that by making parents leave their children to undertake 'activities' which do not guarantee a job. The very process of engaging with this program is highly stressful, requires resources on the part of the parent, and rarely yields positive outcomes. And this is before we even get to the Targeted Compliance Framework and the punitive measures of suspension and cancellation of payments for not meeting the program's requirements. We all have a fundamental right to social security and an adequate standard of living, but the punitive conditionality attached to ParentsNext has caused over 1,000 people to have their payments cancelled entirely. Some people are walking away from the social safety net altogether, because it is too hard – where does that leave those people and their children?

By its focus on what you might call 'betterment' or self-improvement, the ParentsNext program says that parents of a particular background, with particular lived experiences, are 'not good enough' in the eyes of the Government. It is not enough that these parents take care of their children. They must also be improving and readying themselves for the only thing this Government sees as valuable – paid employment.

We know that the overwhelming majority of parental labour is carried, unpaid, by women. The emotional, physical and mental burden that is involved in raising children is performed by women at great cost to themselves, but to great financial advantage of the community and this country.

Evidence shows that the ParentsNext program overwhelmingly targets women, and within that women who are parenting alone, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. This program says to those women, 'you are not enough'. The Instrument that has triggered this inquiry changes the eligibility criteria for the program so that the targeting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is no longer explicit. But those changes will not mean that fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are forced into this program, and it will not make this program less discriminatory – it simply seeks to disguise it.

There is so much about the program that is flawed, which has been presented in previous submissions of many organisations, and before various inquiries. The 'eligibility' criteria; the reporting requirements; the value of the activities people are required to undertake; the punishment for failure to comply. All of this places extreme stress on parents already experiencing disadvantage, and forces them deeper into poverty.

But it is clear this is a program that has been designed not to support parents in raising their children, not to ensure those early childhood milestones are met and supported, but rather to contribute to the stress of already stressed parents, to draw on the resources of people who have no resources to spare, and to force people into choices that they have no power to refuse.

For these reasons, we believe the Parents Next Program should be abolished.