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**Department of Human
Services**

Submission from

The Department of Human Services

to the

**House of Representatives' Standing Committee
on Family and Human Services**

Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

8 April 2005

**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES'
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES
INQUIRY INTO BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY**

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1. Introduction

The Department of Human Services (DHS) and its service delivery agencies welcome the opportunity provided by the House of Representatives' Standing Committee to comment on challenges faced by parents wanting to return to work.

However, as policy responsibility resides with the Departments of Family & Community Services (FaCS), Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and others, this submission will be confined to the service delivery elements of these policies only. It is the role of the DHS to engage constructively on policy deliberations to provide the service delivery perspective.

With 850 outlets across Australia, Human Services' service delivery agencies are in contact with half a million Australians every day.

- Around one-third of the Australian population are Centrelink customers (approximately 6.5 million people). Centrelink delivers services through 321 Customer Service Centres and 27 Call Centres, and undertakes 12 million electronic customer transactions on an average day.
- Approximately 1.3 million parents and 1.1 million children are clients of the Child Support Agency supported through 37 metropolitan and regional access centres. The CSA undertakes 16 million computer transactions per day.
- The Health Insurance Commission (HIC) provides Medicare services to the Australian people through 235 Medicare offices and over a thousand Easyclaim booths throughout Australia.

From their service delivery experiences, the agencies are in a position to appreciate the needs of the people they assist.

A source of evidence on the issues faced by parents and the impact on the family unit is provided by Centrelink's Social Work Services. Social Workers, and other specialist officers, are available to help customers in Centrelink Customer Service Centres and Call Centres. They provide counselling and support to Centrelink customers experiencing difficulty with personal or family issues, people experiencing or at risk of domestic or family violence, people who have recently separated from a partner and people in financial crisis.

Contacts with Centrelink's Social Workers indicate that choices made in balancing work and family life are not only influenced by support provided through government and work places, but also by the level of wages and salaries personal and cultural beliefs, the perceived impact on family life, stress, and impacts of missed time with children.

Centrelink's Personal Advisers also help customers identify barriers to employment, make referrals to educational institutions, provide advice on Centrelink-related issues and provide ongoing support.

The bulk of the interaction between the service delivery agencies and Australian families is centred around helping parents return to the workforce, and it is in this context, around this particular term of reference, that the following information and suggestions are provided.

2. Making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce

The Government is focussing on initiatives that move Australians towards greater workforce participation while providing support to families to balance work and family responsibilities.

In recognition of the changing needs of the Australian community, the Human Services' agencies offer flexible access to information and services in an increasing range of subjects and services, accessible at times to suit the customer.

Availability of services

The Health Insurance Commission (HIC) provides access to Medicare forms on-line and information on immunisation as well as offering extended opening hours by most Medicare offices to cover Saturday mornings.

The Child Support Agency offers access to forms on-line, offers a range of self-help tools including child support calculator and financial calculator, access to directories, interactive account statements and access to the law and policy around the Child Support Scheme.

As well as information on services and programmes available, Centrelink offers on-line access to personal information for reporting of income, updating estimates, access to payment summaries, and an on-line rate estimator for families to assess the likely impact on family assistance where circumstances change. Extended hours of access to some Call Centre services are also available.

Other Human Services agencies offer similar access to services, for example CRS Australia offers an on-line referral form; Australian Hearing has an on-line hearing check; and Health Services Australia offers on-line access to information about occupational health and safety and return to work assessments.

Introduced on 1 July 2000 over 550 Family Assistance Offices were established across Australia to provide Australian families with a simplified

range of government payments and services and a wider choice of locations, for example all family-related payments can be accessed from one place.

Family Assistance Offices offer extended hours of on-line access, including Saturdays, and access to services such as the Family Assistance estimator, updating income estimates, history of payments and access to personal details.

Recent return to work trial

From the experiences of, and information gathered by, Social Work Services and other specialist Centrelink officers, such as Personal Advisers and Jobs Education Training (JET) Contact Officers, it is clear that many parents want to get back into the workforce.

The recent 'outbound call strategy' indicated an interest by parents in participating in the workforce, or preparing themselves for entering/re-entering the workforce. The strategy, trialled before Christmas 2004, yielded a dramatic increase in referrals of non-activity tested customers to the Job Network (88% increase in the number of Parenting Payment (Partnered) referrals and a 135% increase in the number of Parenting Payment (Single)). Attachment A1 provides more detail.

Building on the success of the trial, the Government has asked Centrelink to make personal contact with Parenting Payment customers with children over 6 years of age to gauge their interest in contacting the Job Network for assistance in finding a job.

Jobs Education Training initiative

The JET programme aims to help people on Parenting Payment to enter or re-enter the workforce by helping them overcome barriers, such as lower levels of educational attainment or long periods outside the paid workforce, and difficulties associated with accessing child care. Emphasis is placed on improving long-term labour market competitiveness and career development through education and training. It is a valuable source of information on the issues affecting parents who want to re-enter the workforce.

The impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life

Centrelink offers assistance to parents, partnered and single, wishing to return to the workforce, including Child Care Benefit, JET and Child Care. Centrelink has specialist officers available to assist customers from Indigenous and diverse cultural backgrounds. Social Workers are also available for more vulnerable customers experiencing complex personal and environmental issues.

However, it is not only vulnerable customers that experience difficulty in balancing work and family responsibilities. The transition of re-entering the workforce can be difficult for any parent.

Some of the circumstances that Social Work Services have encountered that make it difficult for parents to participate in the workforce are:

- Caring responsibilities for a sick or disabled child, partner, or aged parent
- Transport issues
- Family/domestic violence
- Relationship issues/breakdown
- Accommodation issues
- Physical and or mental health issues
- Out of date skills

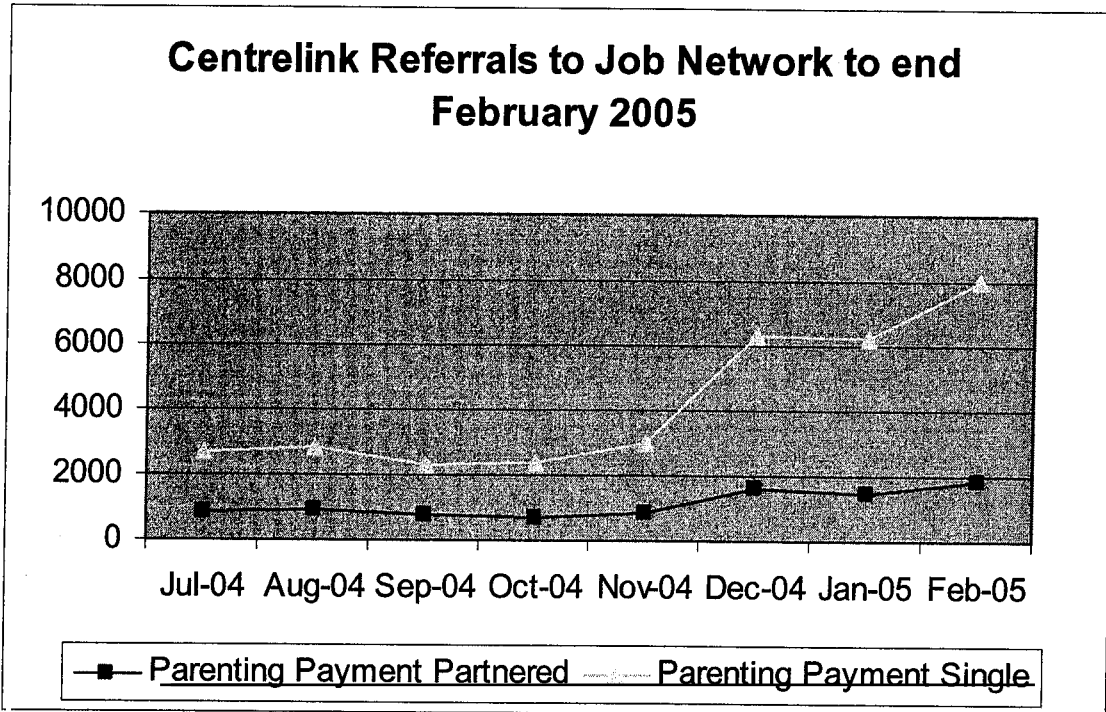
3. Summary

Human Services agencies are endeavouring to make their services available to customers in ways that meet their current needs and keep up with the ever-changing demands of their lives, through traditional counter-based solutions such as extended opening hours, through to innovations such as SMS messaging.

All agencies are listening to customer feedback and continuing to improve accessibility to services. DHS has evidence to show that most parents want to return to the workforce and more than ever we have to provide a range of services at times and in ways that suit our customers' needs.

Attachment A1

Increase in Referrals of Parents to Job Network



Centrelink Referrals to end February 2005

Month	Parenting Payment Partnered	Parenting Payment Single
Jul-04	872	2,658
Aug-04	885	2,879
Sep-04	773	2,337
Oct-04	712	2,405
Nov-04	872	3,023
Dec-04	1,649	6,301
Jan-05	1,441	6,198
Feb-05	1,839	7,990
Total	5,763	19,603