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27 October 2008

Committee Secretary
Community Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senate Community Affairs Committee,

ALSWA RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS SUBMISSIONS

I would again like to thank you for the opportunity of speaking at the recent Senate Inquiry into the Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008.

As requested I have read the submissions of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. ALSWA submits the following response:

1. ALSWA agrees that poor school attendance is associated with lower academic, outcomes and early school leaving. ALSWA also agrees that irregular school attendance can result in economic disadvantage for life, increased levels of unemployment, increased likelihood of engagement in criminal activity, increased likelihood of substance abuse, poorer physical and mental health in adulthood and increased likelihood of having children who exhibit problem behavior.
2. As acknowledged by the Department, the States and territories already have legislation to enforce school attendance and the ability to prosecute those parents whose children are not regularly attending school. There is no evidence that this additional tool of enforcement is going to be beneficial.
3. The Department's proposal that Centrelink staff will take all necessary steps to encourage parents to enroll their children in school and regularly attend has already been proven unsuccessful in the Halls Creek 'Engaging Families' Trial. In this trial the active assistance of Centrelink staff did not result in higher school attendance.

4. ALSWA believes that Centrelink does not currently have the resources or the training to effectively case manage families whose children are truanting. This issue is exacerbated in regional and remote areas.
5. Decisions as to whether parents are meeting their 'basic parental responsibilities' by encouraging their children to attend school is largely left to the discretion of Centrelink staff. It is ALSWA's experience that staff members who hold such a position of discretion often directly or indirectly discriminate against Aboriginal people, which stems from cultural stereotyping, ethnocentricity, fear and poor communication. This issue is worsened through lack of staff training, high turn over of staff and staff inexperience.
6. It appears that the case examples of linked income support to children's school attendance in the USA and the UK support ALSWA's perspective that making parents feel more comfortable in the school environment and appreciating the importance of education, is essential to improved attendance rates of their children. As concluded by the Department, none of these other programs link a person's income support payment to behaviors. Instead the programs focus on further enhancing the parents educational experience through non-punitive measures.
7. In WA, it is law that juveniles are only imprisoned as a last resort yet 73.5% of the juvenile population currently in detention are Aboriginal. ALSWA is concerned that welfare suspension used as a last resort may result in similar over representation.
8. Support services for domestic violence, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and other similar services are poorly resourced and limited in many parts of Western Australia. It is a nice suggestion that Centrelink social workers will refer customers to such services, however in reality, waiting lists and general lack of services will make this difficult.

I reiterate that ALSWA strongly opposes the Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008. It is simply another layer of bureaucracy for Aboriginal people to understand and cope with. It will not have the intended outcome of reducing the truancy rate of Aboriginal children.

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Yours sincerely



DENNIS EGGINGTON
Chief Executive Officer