



Linking services, supporting relationships

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Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
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Senate Inquiry into Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act) Bill 2009

Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is a national network of non-profit organisations that support more than 200,000 people every year in over 550 locations. Our member organisations work with parents and grandparents, children and young people, families that live together and those that do not. Families living on low income, single parent families and families receiving income support are over-represented in most programs including those funded by the Australian Government's Family Relationship Services Program¹ and broader Family Support Programs.

FRSA member organisations are focused on the wellbeing and safety of children above all other considerations. These organisations have both moral and legal obligations under child welfare legislation and the Commonwealth Family Law Act. They work with families that are experiencing separation, family violence, mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, homelessness and poverty. They are routinely assessing child safety and wellbeing, parental competency and family support needs. Programs include those with a focus on prevention and early intervention as well as statutory or tertiary services such as the placement of children into out of home care. There is a depth of professional wisdom and experience in this sector that has not been consulted in the development of the proposed income management provisions.

FRSA does not believe that compulsory income management provisions contained in the *Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act Bill 2009* ('the Bill') currently before the Australian Parliament are likely to prove effective or cost efficient mechanisms to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. There is limited and flawed evidence of any such improvements from the income management component of the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention or from other Australian or international examples of similar approaches.

FRSA fully endorses the concerns outlined in detail by ACOSS in their submission to this Inquiry. In summary, we are concerned that compulsory income management:

- fundamentally changes the role of income support and the relationship between recipients of income support and Centrelink;
- is stigmatising and may discourage help seeking by families most likely to benefit from engaging in support services; and
- may have unintended consequences that increase rather than decrease the risk of child abuse and neglect in some families and communities.

While premised on the need to better protect children and young people at risk, the income management policy appears to be at odds with the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and the many submissions received during consultation on that framework. For example,

¹ FRSP National Data Reports 2007-08. 2008-09



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early in the framework document it is stated that “Australia needs to move from seeing ‘protecting children’ merely as a response to abuse and neglect to one of promoting the safety and wellbeing of children. Leading researchers and practitioners – both in Australia and overseas – have suggested that applying a public health model to care and protection will deliver better outcomes for our children and young people and their families ...Under a public health model, priority is placed on having universal supports available for all families (for example, health and education). More intensive (secondary) prevention interventions are provided to those families that need additional assistance with a focus on early intervention. Tertiary child protection services are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families and governments.” (p. 7). The Framework goes on to outline evidence and strategies for working with families to build on their strengths, provide appropriate and timely supports and address the problems most commonly associated with the occurrence of child abuse and neglect which are:

- domestic violence;
- parental alcohol and drug abuse; and
- parental mental health problems (p 21)

FRSA contends that funds allocated to income management under the Bill's provisions (\$352M in the NT alone) could be better spent on improving the lives of children in households with limited income by funding programs that support and empower families to improve their own lives. Service providers and families consistently report that it is very difficult to arrange family support, particularly intensive family support, before parents hit ‘rock bottom’ and children are assessed for placement into out of home care.

Across Australia there are programs that have been developed and evaluated by experts, which are known to deliver outcomes for families and yet struggle to attract sufficient funding to continue. Experienced practitioners know that there are few parents who don't genuinely want the best for their children and will engage in appropriate support programs when they are available. Programs that work are those that engage families in a positive way to build on their strengths and provide effective long-term support to address areas of difficulty such as drug or alcohol misuse, family violence, mental health issues or just the challenges of unstable and unsuitable housing and inadequate levels of income.

Those on the front line of service delivery across the FRSA network and beyond consistently identify the need for increased investment in programs that target the underlying causes of family breakdown and dysfunction. Some examples include:

- Intensive support for families in which children are at risk of cumulative harm has been consistently identified as an area of priority need by inquiries and evaluations into child protection - investment in multi-faceted intensive programs that coordinate supports to parents and children across home, school, community settings and work.
- Enhancing parental competency and confidence through free parenting seminars in community settings, school based education programs, supported playgroups and paint and play programs help to address social isolation and encourage parenting competence.
- Improving financial capacity through matched savings schemes, no interest loans, assistance with student or school expenses and reducing financial vulnerability through financial counselling and advice, credit reform and representation as well as using community service settings to increase financial literacy.
- Improving social inclusion for children and young people through sport and recreational programs, mentoring programs, diversionary programs for young offenders and therapeutic



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programs addressing the emotional needs of children and young people exposed to family violence, parental conflict or impacted by disability, health or mental health issues.

- Drug and alcohol rehabilitation for parents is consistently identified as an area of difficulty for service providers this can include peer mentoring programs and home visiting services delivered by practitioners with expertise in both family support and therapeutic recovery from substance use.
- Mental health services, families on income support cannot afford private counsellors and psychologists, they rely on free community based mental health services which are chronically underfunded nationally.

Underinvestment in services such as those listed above has been consistently identified in program evaluations, reports to government and submissions by community welfare organisations over the past decade. Without improvements in access to appropriate support services, the underlying factors that give rise to child abuse and neglect will not be addressed and it is unlikely that strategies such as income management will achieve any long term improvements or reduction in the number of children needing out of home placement. There is a wealth of evidence to support increased funding for programs that use a strengths-based approach in supporting families to better manage life's challenges such as those mentioned above.

The most recent evidence indicating how families benefit from increased availability of support services is presented in the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Report on the Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms released last week. In its summary report AIFS states, 'From one half to two thirds of parents that participated (in the AIFS research) reported that family violence, safety concerns, poor mental health and/or alcohol and drug misuse were issues effecting their family relationships'. (p. 5) The report's findings highlight that since the significant expansion of early intervention services (EIS) and the establishment of a wider range of post separation services including Family Relationship Centres and Children's Contact Services among others, 'there has been a significant increase in families seeking help'. Indeed, AIFS indicates that 'about two thirds of parents who separated after the 2006 changes had used family relationship services after separating and those parents using these services along with other EIS programs had high levels of satisfaction with the service(s) they attended'. (p. 6)

FRSA member organisations work with limited resources to build the capacity of Australians to better manage their family circumstances and get help and support when necessary. The wide variety of programs offered by community service organisations builds a sense of community connection between people rather than encouraging suspicion and discouraging help seeking. FRSA strongly believes that expenditure on income management is a lost opportunity to direct funding to programs with proven efficacy.

FRSA broadly supports the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda and believes that the original and expanded income management policy is a contradiction to the Government's stated agenda. We strongly advocate for the withdrawal of the comprehensive income management provisions of the Welfare Reform and Reinstatement of Racial Discrimination Act Bill 2009.

Yours sincerely

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