

Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee

**Inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout**

*1 February 2019*

The Western Australian Council of Social Service Inc. (WACOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee on the ParentsNext program.

WACOSS is the peak body of community service organisations and individuals in Western Australia. WACOSS stands for an inclusive, just and equitable society. We advocate for social and economic change to improve the wellbeing of Western Australians and to strengthen the community services sector that supports them. WACOSS is part of a national network consisting of ACOSS and the State and Territory Councils of Social Service, who assist people on low incomes and experiencing disadvantage Australia wide.

WACOSS supports the recommendations made in the submission by the Australian Council of Social Service.

In preparation of this short submission, WACOSS has consulted with its members, including those who are ParentsNext program providers or whose clients are part of the ParentsNext program. WACOSS also convenes and supports the Community Relief and Resilience network that brings together emergency relief and financial counselling services to better understand and respond to those experiencing financial hardship and personal crisis.

The concept of supporting people to be able to overcome barriers to employment, including single mothers, through reskilling and prepare them for employment or to re-enter the workforce is unquestionably positive. WACOSS has serious concerns, however, about the effectiveness of the ParentsNext program to achieve that goal and the assumptions underpinning the program design. Becoming a parent can be a critical life event for many young parents that causes them to re-evaluate and re-focus their life goals on longer-term family-oriented outcomes. A positive strength-based intervention with a focus on participation and career development can play a critical role in helping young parents identify their aspirations and meeting their full potential. At the same time parenting can be very stressful, emotional, exhausting and overwhelming – meaning young parents can be easily overwhelmed and discouraged.

Program providers have expressed concerns to WACOSS relating to the targeted compliance penalties and the compulsory nature of the program for those who have received Parenting Payments for at least six months, has a youngest child aged under 6 years, and has no reported earnings from employment in the previous six months. The punitive nature of the scheme and the

denial of agency for parents is not considered by service providers to result in improved parenting confidence and knowledge.

It has been suggested to WACOSS that, the activity requirements and compliance penalties are in fact having the perverse outcomes of disengaging parents, putting increased pressure on sole parents and could lead to further traumatisation and social isolation.

While some providers may be able to achieve positive outcomes for their clients, these providers are finding they must find ways to work around the program in order to give parents the assistance they actually need.

Food relief agencies have reported to WACOSS that they have had ParentsNext program clients seeking food from their services, due to having had their payments suspended for not meeting ParentsNext activity requirements. These clients are reported to have multiple unmet needs, none of which ParentsNext is orientated to address and may actually be exacerbating. WACOSS has even been informed of instances where parents have stayed with abusive partners due to their fears of the impact of compliance penalties.

Despite the explicit target of this program being parents with young children, it does not appear to recognise in any way the reality of life for single parents or the different circumstance of individual cases. Further, it does not recognise the important value of the unpaid work that mothers undertake, but seemingly treats them as 'intentionally unemployed' despite being full-time caregivers.

Forcing parents into activities to make them 'employment ready' that do not recognise their existing qualifications and skills or the availability of appropriate and meaningful employment serves no positive purpose. In addition, the program makes no allowance for the cost and availability of the childcare that is not only necessary for these parents to undertake the required work activities, but also to be able to re-enter the workforce.

In one story relayed to WACOSS, a single mother of three, including two very young twins, only had access to a donated twin pram that was too wide to fit through doorways. As the sole carer of these children, this clearly posed a barrier for the mother to be able to attend some of her required work activities. It was only through referral to receive counselling that she was able to then postpone the required activities for enough time to be able to organise child care and travel arrangements.

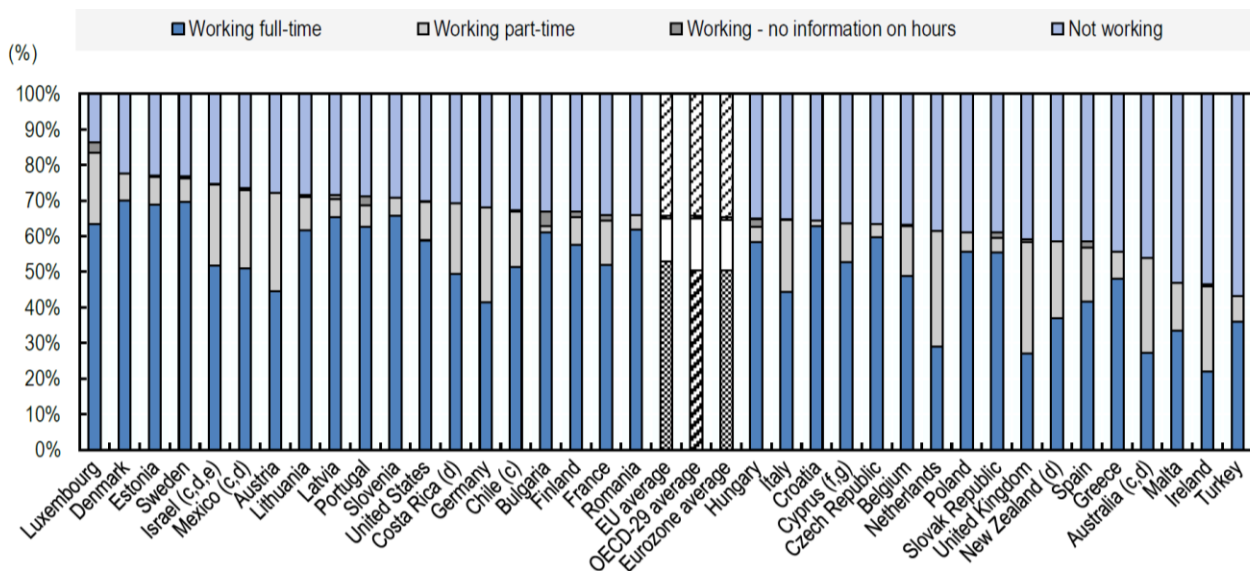
It is well-established that the early years are critical to a child's social and intellectual development. Placing parents into heightened situations of stress such as having to navigate their way through punitive programs, as well as forcing their separation from their children as they undertake their required activities in no way assists in creating the supportive and caring environments that children need to thrive.

A 2017 OECD report into labour market participation in Australia outlines that underrepresented groups in the labour market, including lone parents with young children, can face multiple barriers

to employment.<sup>1</sup> The report found that the employment rate for single mothers in Australia was the third-lowest in the OECD, after Ireland and Turkey, at 50.8 per cent in 2014.

The report found that the most significant barriers to employment for underrepresented groups were stated to be lacking work experience, low education and poor health. Crucially, the report stated that employment intervention alone was not sufficient to enable these groups to re-enter employment, but that integrated support was needed that addressed their health as well as their care responsibilities.

**Chart – Employment status of single parents, 2014**  
Distribution (%) of single parents with at least one child aged 0-14 by employment status



Source: OECD Family Database, [www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm)

Access to free or affordable child care, as well as flexibility in work arrangements can be crucial to enabling parents, when they are ready, to re-enter the workforce. A punitive mandatory program that is structurally unable to take into account the individual needs and circumstances of either the parents or the children is clearly fundamentally flawed.

WACOSS expects to continue to hear and collect more stories from frontline services and those with lived experience of Parent Next through our networks

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact the WACOSS Research and Policy Development Leader Chris Twomey at [chris@wacoss.org.au](mailto:chris@wacoss.org.au) or 9420 7222.

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2017), *Connecting People with Jobs: Key Issues for Raising Labour Market Participation in Australia*, Connecting People with Jobs, OECD Publishing, Paris

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L. Giolitto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "L" and a long, sweeping tail.

Louise Giolitto  
Chief Executive Officer  
WACOSS