Submission to the Senate on the adequacy of the allowance payment system for jobseekers and others, the appropriateness of the allowance payment system as a support into work and the impact of the changing nature of the labour market.

Summary

My submission is focussing on Single Parents and addresses the inadequacy of Parenting Payment, the unrealistic obligations that currently need to be met when a child turns six and the move to change Parenting Payment to Newstart when a child turns eight.

Introduction

Instead of writing a submission to **THE SOCIAL SECURITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (FAIR INCENTIVES TO WORK) BILL 2012**, I wrote letters to Bill Shorten and Jenny Macklin opposing the recent legislative changes made to the single parent pension. I did this because as a single mother, I am time poor and at that time I was caring for my sick child in the day, dealing with the school holidays and working from home at night in a short lived job opportunity. The work required me to meet deadlines and unfortunately due to caring for my child I was unable to keep up with deadlines and I lost my job. Now that I am no longer working I feel that it is justifiable to spend some time writing this submission in an effort to get the powers that be to understand the difficulties facing some of us unfortunate people who must resort to relying on welfare.

Even though I used some personal anecdotes to support my opposition in the letters, it was intended as a general letter and not about my specific situation. The responses I received from both offices suggested that I approach a financial counsellor, the salvos and slide further into debt by way of seeking loans. These responses place the difficulties I am facing squarely on my shoulders as if it were my own personal fault and not the inadequate systems and barriers I face as a single parent.

I did not choose to be a single mother living on welfare, following the breakdown of my marriage my daughter's father has refused to participate both physically and financially to her upbringing.

Barriers to Employment for Single Mothers

Due to inadequate housing that contributes to my daughters constant illnesses, insufficient rent assistance, lack of family support, inadequate and expensive child care, the casual work force, inflexible employment hours, women's unrecognised unpaid work in society, inherent sexism (especially with regard to superannuation), an inadequate and incompetent child support agency and the rising cost of living, I face barriers to employment.

Moving single parents to new start and the obligations imposed on single parents when their child turns six is extremely harsh and does not acknowledge the constraints that some single parents are under.

Single parents are already under enormous pressure and are already very good at time management and multitasking. It appears it's the systems themselves combined with inefficiency, inflexibility and incompetence that is the problem. If the systems were working correctly, all this extra added pressure could be alleviated and I and many other single parents facing the same sort of constraints, could claw our way back to a reasonable standard of living and become productive members of society as well as carers for the next generation.

The picture just keeps getting grimmer and grimmer as I note the confounding NSW State Industrial Relations reforms plan to abolish family leave.

The rising cost of living

Housing

My daughter and I currently share a bedroom in a damp garden flat. She suffers recurring bouts of respiratory infections due to the damp in the house. The rise in rent and the low vacancy rate means that we are stuck living in a toxic environment. To make matters worse our landlords and neighbours are very old and one has been hospitalised recently and it's looking doubtful she will come home. The other landlord is extremely ill and I believe near death, so it's looking very likely that we will be facing homelessness in the not too distant future.

Why hasn't the government taken into consideration the Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot and increased rent assistance to alleviate housing pressure?

Electricity

Parenting payment and Newstart needs to increase to recognise that there has been a 50% rise in the costs of electricity. These rising costs mean that many people are now literally freezing in their own homes or stuck in a never ending effort to pay off electricity bills.

I have always paid my bills on time and have sought extensions only recently with the huge jump in electricity costs, my daughter is well fed and well cared for so I am hoping that this submission and the previous letters does not red flag me for the much maligned and odious Income Management scheme that is being rolled out across Australia.

Obligations and Inefficiency

The day after my daughter turned six, I received what could be described as a dole form telling me I was to report to Centrelink every 12 weeks. Having already been voluntarily signed up to a job network, this came as a shock as I wasn't warned that this would happen, even though I was aware that "obligations" start when a child turns six. What has ensued since then could only be described as a comedy of errors worthy of an episode in Fawlty Towers.

It appears that the Job Network and Centrelink have systemic communication problems and both agencies do not take into account that I am the sole carer of a child.

I have had my Parenting Payments cut off four times in the last six months due to a series of bureaucratic bungles that were no fault of my own. According to the Centrelink system it looks like I have been neglecting my obligations, but in actual fact I have been in constant communication with my Job Network provider.

The obligations now imposed on me appear to be the same as that of a single person on the dole and are simply unachievable all of the time due to my role as a carer and parent. I truly want a job, and desperately want to get out of this poverty cycle, but this ineffectual and overly bureaucratic system and subsequent pressurising of me when I am doing the best I can under duress is unacceptable and frankly inhuman.

Incentives to work need to be just that – supports to enable mothers to re-enter the paid workforce as they are ready and able to do so while respecting their overriding obligations to their children. The "incentives" the Labor Government are offering are nothing more than bullying tactics.

I propose that the Government rethink these changes and take into account our roles as carers, the constraints of affordable and accessible child care and reinstate Parenting Payment until a child is aged 12, when they can legally be left at home alone.

Contributing to stress and impact with domestic violence

Domestic Violence leaves lifelong scars and takes a very long time to heal. I believe the average Joe might think that single mothers sit around watching Oprah all day long. This could not be further from the truth. Raising a child alone is a very busy 24 hour job. The stress of dealing with a domestic violence situation, family court and financial stress is enough to create depression and anxiety even to the most hardy of individuals. This must be taken into account when facilitating someone back into the workforce instead of adding pressure to an already pressurised situation.

An unemployment benefit is an inappropriate stopgap measure for distraught people in crisis. Savings could be made to the public purse if high-earning fathers were made more accountable for the support of primary carers after divorce. I understand there is currently an outstanding child support debt in Australia of approx 1.8 billion dollars mostly owed by men. Why is the Government not targeting earning fathers rather than non-earning/low earning, primary carer mothers?

And further, the recent changes to cut parenting payment when a child turns eight gives no out to women and children who are living with family violence. It encourages women and children to stay trapped in abusive relationships.

The Way Forward

"The way forward is not to abolish the 'grandfathered' *Parenting Payment* but to restore this payment to all sole mothers while supporting them to re-enter the paid workforce, as they are able. Savings can instead be made for government through reforms to the *Family Law Act* making medium to high-earning fathers more accountable for the costs of their families. Especially since the Howard reforms reduced Child Support payments for such males, divorce has been a financial windfall for wealthy men, giving them far, far more disposable income than they had when their marriages were

intact. That disposable income is a resource that Government could mine, rather than achieving its savings out of the pockets of often poor single mothers. “(1)

I am very grateful for the welfare system in Australia and appreciate the governments help and recognise the difficulty in managing the system and how much of an enormous task it is. I never thought in a million years my life would come down to this.

I hope that you will take these points onboard and rethink the Governments approach to this unfair legislation.

(1) *Quoted from Submission 7 ,THE SENATE, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE REGARDING THE SOCIAL SECURITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (FAIR INCENTIVES TO WORK) BILL 2012*