

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY
to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services

Parliament House
Parliament Drive
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: waes.reps@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services

Dear Andrew McIntyre

ANROWS thanks the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services, with specific focus on the role of the ParentsNext program in providing early intervention services to disadvantaged parents as part of the employment services system.

ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's first *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. Our primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and their children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and their children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC).

The information provided below is focused on the Inquiry's interest in ParentsNext's eligibility and compulsory participation requirements; impact on women's economic equality and workforce participation; and efficacy in addressing structural and cultural barriers to accessing family support, education and employment. It draws on evidence from rigorous peer-reviewed research, including relevant ANROWS research. We would be very pleased to assist the Committee further, as required.

Yours sincerely

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Background

After being introduced in 2016 as a trial program in select local government areas, the ParentsNext program was expanded as a national pre-employment program in 2018. The program was designed for people receiving Parenting Payments from Centrelink, and during its introduction, the Australian Government outlined its three aims: reduce welfare reliance and intergenerational welfare dependency, increase female labour force participation, and help close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019).

To receive their Parenting Payments, participants of the program are required to complete and report on activities in a participation plan agreed upon with a ParentsNext provider. Participation in ParentsNext is compulsory for parents who:

- have been receiving the Parenting Payment for six months or more
- have not had any paid employment in the past six months
- have a youngest child aged under six years old
- meet other specific criteria based on their participation stream.

Exemptions for compulsory participation can be granted for specific circumstances, including people experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV), temporary incapacity, pregnancy, or illness, or those who have caring or family responsibilities. If an exemption is granted, participation is voluntary.

The program is governed by the Targeted Compliance Framework (the Framework) which ensures that participants who have not been granted exemptions from compulsory participation must meet their mutual obligation requirements. It is enforced through tiered financial penalties tied to loss or cancellations of payments.

A previous inquiry in 2018 resulted in a report that made two overarching recommendations: that the ParentsNext program should not continue in its current form, and that reshaping occur through a process of co-design with parents and experts to produce “a more supportive preemployment program which meets the needs of parents and acknowledges and addresses the structural barriers to employment which they face” (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019, pp.71-72). ANROWS endorses these recommendations.

Currently, the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services is inquiring into the implementation, performance, and appropriateness of employment services in Australia. As part of this inquiry, the committee is considering the ParentsNext program. The Committee has asked for feedback on:

- policy objectives
- eligibility and compulsory participation requirements
- impacts on women’s economic equality and workforce participation
- efficacy in addressing structural and cultural barriers to accessing family support, education and employment
- funding and service delivery arrangements.

ANROWS’s primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. As such, this

submission focuses on the impact of the ParentsNext program on the economic security of victims and survivors of DFV and its capacity to support women's decisions about their current and future employment, training and education.

Recommendation 1: In line with the recommendations from the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs report, ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout (2019), ANROWS recommends a redesign of the program through a co-design process with parents and experts, and in particular, parents who have experienced DFV and those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

ParentsNext participants are a cohort of people with increased likelihood of experiencing domestic and family violence

According to the report produced by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, official reported numbers for participants experiencing DFV likely vastly underrepresent the actual numbers of participants who are experiencing DFV (2019). In the first six months of the program, only 2 per cent of, or 1805 participants were identified as experiencing DFV. Of these, 621 were granted temporary exemptions (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019). In contrast to these low numbers, the committee heard evidence of estimates of between 48 and 80 per cent of participants being affected by DFV (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019).

Research on the prevalence of DFV, coupled with the demographic make-up of participants, supports the likelihood of the higher estimates provided to the committee. In December 2018, of the 75,259 participants in the ParentsNext program, 95 per cent were women, 68 per cent were single parents and 19 per cent were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (Summers, 2022, p. 92). Noting that individuals can belong to more than one of these groups, evidence tells us that it is reasonable to expect that there is an increased likelihood that participants of the program have experienced or are experiencing DFV.

The participant cohort overwhelmingly comprises women. One in four women have experienced violence by a current or previous intimate partner (including boyfriends, girlfriends and dates), and 1 in 6 women have experienced violence perpetrated by a married or de facto partner that they currently or previously lived with (ABS, 2017).

There are further compounding factors that increase the likelihood that participants in the program have experienced or are experiencing DFV. For example, single mothers with children under the age of 18 are three times more likely to have experienced domestic abuse compared to the general adult woman population in Australia (Summers, 2022). Given that participants are necessarily parents, it is also important to be mindful that nearly half of all women who have experienced violence by a previous partner (48%) experienced this violence during pregnancy (ABS, 2017). Additionally, findings from the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014–15* (ABS, 2019) indicated that 1 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women had experienced an incident of physical family and domestic violence in the past 12 months.

Understanding that there are groups with a higher likelihood of experiencing DFV and that these groups are overrepresented in the participant cohort for this program, ParentsNext should be acutely

aware of its impact and ability to support participants who are also victims and survivors of DFV. Evidence submitted to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, and the resulting report, suggested that there were issues with both the structure and implementation of the program that rather than providing support for victims and survivors of DFV, could cause further harm (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019). Further information and evidence is provided on these below, accompanied by further recommendations.

ParentsNext could improve its support for economic security and workforce participation for participants experiencing domestic and family violence

The structure and obligations for ParentsNext limit its capacity to encourage workforce participation for participants

ParentsNext aims to assist participants in finding long-term economic security through workforce participation (and thereby reduce their dependency on welfare payments). However, only 3 per cent of participants leave the program due to finding stable employment (Summers, 2022, p. 77). This is particularly concerning as stable employment for women who have experienced DFV is critical for their economic security and for their ability to safely exit an abusive relationship (ANROWS, 2022; see also Cortis & Bullen, 2015). In escaping violence, “safety” is broader than the immediate physical safety sought by leaving the relationship. Stable employment not only provides financial security but contributes additional protective factors that support victims and survivors, including supporting their financial independence, enabling their participation in social networks, and increasing their self-esteem (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2016 as cited in ANROWS, 2019a).

The financial penalties imposed by the Targeted Compliance Framework can also undermine the aim of the program to provide financial assistance to primary caregivers who have limited capacity to participate in full-time employment (as opposed to more insecure employment). There is limited acknowledgement from the program that primary caregivers experience time poverty, which may impact their ability to comply with mandatory participation in employment, training and education activities. This is reflected in the fact that a third of participants of ParentsNext have had their payments suspended for an average of five days, and 1,072 people had their payments cancelled altogether due to infractions on their mutual obligation requirements (Summers, 2022). These penalties can exacerbate financial instability. The impact of this financial instability was highlighted in a recent report by Anne Summers, titled *The Choice: Violence or Poverty* (2022): over half of the single mothers in this study who had experienced DFV were reliant on government payments as their primary source of income. The realistic possibility of payment suspension creates economic instability that may place victims and survivors of DFV in dangerous circumstances where they are made to choose between living in poverty or returning to violence for themselves and their children (see Summers, 2022).

Recommendation 2: Review the use of the Targeted Compliance Framework to avoid contributing to economic insecurity for women escaping violence through financial penalties imposed on those who have limited capacity to participate in full-time employment.

A gap between aims and implementation undermines the program’s ability to support employment, training and education activities

The stated aims of ParentsNext vary across government documents. In addition to the aims outlined in the background section above, other stated aims have been to 1) target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency; 2) help parents identify their education- and employment-related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve those goals; and 3) connect parents to local services that can help them address any barriers to employment (Australian Government, 2022). This lack of clarity may be contributing to a gap between the stated aims of the program, its measures of success, and its implementation and delivery.

ParentsNext is not a “welfare-to-work” program. However, many service providers are delivering it as such. Evidence submitted to the Community Affairs References Committee outlines that the pre-employment goals of ParentsNext have been confused and overshadowed by the fact that the program measures success through employment outcomes (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019). This has resulted in an inconsistent delivery of the program by service providers, with many pressuring participants to participate in any form of employment (including insecure and casual work) for the sole purpose of continuing to receive their payment, rather than supporting and strengthening their ability to make decisions about current and future employment, training and education. Additionally, delivering ParentsNext as a welfare-to-work program to a cohort with limited capacity to engage in paid employment makes it more likely that participants will face penalties, further exacerbating their financial insecurity.

Viewing workforce participation as a mutual obligation requirement for the program severely limits participants’ autonomy in making decisions that are best suited to their interests for career development and personal circumstances. Evidence shows that participants in welfare-to-work programs typically experience lower quality of life, lower job satisfaction and reduced autonomy in deciding how to balance parenting and employment (Blaxland, 2009; Cook et al., 2009; Cook & Noblet, 2012 as cited in Cortis & Bullen, 2015). For participants of the ParentsNext program who have also experienced violence, these effects can compound the existing negative impact of violence on victims’ and survivors’ job satisfaction and remuneration, and reduce their employment stability (Crowne et al., 2011 as cited in Cortis & Bullen, 2015).

To support greater workforce participation, the program would benefit from delivering a more person-centred approach that is flexible, relevant and adaptive to the needs of participants. A person-centred delivery of the program would enable ParentsNext to support its participants to make the best decisions for employment, training and education according to their unique circumstances. Research has shown that responding to individual needs and situations, including victims’ and survivors’ needs for safety and stability, is preferable to a blanket approach that assumes employment will always be beneficial (Cox et al., 2008; Grahame & Marston, 2012 as cited in Cortis & Bullen, 2015). This is reflected in ANROWS research which highlights that many of the employment options available to women experiencing DFV are not fit for need and include restrictions that can have adverse effects on their perceived ability to seek safety (Morgan et al., 2022). Further, forced employment requirements mirror coercive and controlling techniques used by perpetrators of DFV and can further strip participants who have experienced this violence of their autonomy to make their own decisions about future employment, training and education. Indeed, evidence submitted to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2019, p. 71) revealed that participants felt the program exerted “a sense

of control” over their lives. By realigning the aims of the program to focus on supporting participants to make the best employment, training and education decisions for their circumstances, ParentsNext can strengthen participants’ autonomy in making these decisions.

Recommendation 3: Address confusion regarding ParentsNext’s status as either a pre-employment or employment program to enable the program to strengthen participants’ autonomy and ability to make employment-related decisions, and avoid participants being pressured to attend unnecessary, parenting-focused activities.

Recommendation 4: Adjust the ParentsNext program to respond to individual needs and situations, including victims’ and survivors’ needs for safety and stability, rather than adopting a blanket approach that assumes that employment will always be beneficial to sole parents.

Experiencing violence impacts participants’ ability for engagement and compliance

There are structural and cultural barriers that impact victims’ and survivors’ ability to access support

ANROWS research has found that women who have experienced DFV are twice as likely to experience difficulty accessing welfare services than women who have not experienced violence (Cortis & Bullen, 2015). As participants of ParentsNext face increased risks of experiencing DFV, it is critical that structural barriers to accessing and participating the program are addressed, as social security provides material means of escape and alleviates poverty for many women ending a violent relationship (Cortis & Bullen, 2016).

First Nations women experience compounded barriers to seeking and accessing government support. As ParentsNext is a service aiming to support parents and young children, it is important to acknowledge the impact of historical and ongoing displacement of First Nations children from their families. First Nations mothers and caregivers are often reluctant to use services due to their fear of child removal and Centrelink’s perceived connection to other services such as child protection (Langton et al., 2020). This prevents First Nations women from disclosing experiences of violence in a safe, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed way. This barrier to disclosure may also prevent First Nations victims and survivors from being granted exemptions to compulsory participation and receiving appropriate additional support from ParentsNext providers.

Women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds face specific and exacerbated barriers to accessing government support. These could include, for example, lack of access to information, economic dependence, lack of familial support or social isolation, limited proficiency in English, immigration regimes that promote dependence, previous adverse experiences, fear of deportation, and concerns about discrimination (see Day et al., 2018; Mitra-Kahn et.al., 2016; Vaughan et al., 2016). ANROWS research outlines several of the common factors that shape the capacity of services to support CALD women who are experiencing DFV, including communication barriers between staff and clients (Vaughan et al., 2020). All of these barriers may impact the ability of a victim and survivor to access and participate in the program.

Attention is also needed to barriers faced by women with disability or who care for children with disability. ANROWS research points to social and physical barriers and accessibility issues that can prevent women with disability from being able to access services (Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016). Additionally, poor recognition of tactics of violence that are specific to women with disability can compound issues with accessing and making use of appropriate supports (Day et al., 2018). Research on the intersections between disability, children and DFV has consistently highlighted barriers to accessing support, including the administrative burden placed on families trying to navigate multiple service systems, and the lack of collaboration across sectors (Robinson et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2022).

Recommendation 5: Address structural and cultural barriers to access and participation in the ParentsNext program, particularly for women experiencing domestic and family violence, First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse participants, and participants with disability.

Recommendation 6: Conduct research directly with victims and survivors to understand their experiences of welfare-to-work programs, focusing on First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, and participants with disability and those caring for children with disability.

Domestic and family violence can act as a barrier to compliance

Victims and survivors experiencing coercive control, economic abuse and systems abuse are particularly at risk of failing to meet their mutual obligation requirements, as these forms of abuse specifically interfere with their participation and performance in education, training and employment. ANROWS research outlines common behaviours that are used to control women, which could in turn impact a participant's ability to meet compliance requirements, including:

- prohibiting women from working or seeking work
- sabotaging transport or childcare
- destroying documents or work
- harassing coworkers (and caseworkers)
- undermining women's capacity to obtain a job or achieve at work
- humiliating women in front of colleagues
- depriving women of sleep
- injuring women so that they are unable to attend work or education (Cortis & Bullen, 2015, p. 6).

These tactics are used by perpetrators to limit financial independence for victims and survivors of DFV. The Targeted Compliance Framework penalises victims and survivors for the actions taken by perpetrators of DFV, which then further exacerbates vulnerability to this violence, as well as financial dependence and insecurity (see Cortis & Bullen, 2015).

Integration with other support services and training on DFV for program staff is fundamental for effective implementation of the program

Single-service systems such as ParentsNext do not adequately respond to and support victims and survivors of DFV, especially those currently experiencing crisis. As a single-service system, the program has limited communication with other relevant services that may support participants who are experiencing DFV. This places the responsibility of seeking support and/or exemptions onto the

participants of the program who are already exhausted by the impacts of DFV, and minimises the role of service providers in supporting participants to succeed in the program by providing coordinated and integrated support with other services (see Morgan et al., 2022).

This issue is documented across other welfare services in Australia, where victims and survivors of DFV experience unhelpful interactions with staff, including being asked to repeat their stories several times and to different people, and receiving little assistance when completing forms for exemptions and supports following disclosure (Cortis & Bullen, 2015). The administrative burden of navigating multiple single-service systems adds additional strain onto participants who are experiencing DFV, and reduces their ability to effectively advocate for additional supports or exemptions. Limited capacity to effectively advocate for themselves may result in participants not applying for exemptions, or the denial of exemptions due to a lack of provided evidence. This means having to continue complying with mutual obligation requirements or face financial penalties, exacerbating vulnerability to DFV and economic insecurity. Ensuring that ParentsNext has greater integration with other services and systems that participants may engage with may reduce the administrative strain of requesting support and exemptions to compulsory participation for participants.

Single-service systems also require participants to consistently retell their experiences of violence and explain their circumstances to different services. This exacerbates the distressing and possibly retraumatising nature of disclosure for victims and survivors (Salter et al., 2020). Testimony given to the Community Affairs References Committee demonstrated that victims and survivors of DFV were repeatedly being asked to prove their circumstances to ParentsNext service providers, sometimes in front of their children (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 2019).

Compulsory DFV training for staff would reduce the risk of retraumatisation and encourage greater sensitivity towards the barriers that participants face in applying for exemptions or being able to safely disclose experiences of DFV. It would also increase the ability of staff to recognise and identify where participants may be experiencing violence, to connect participants to appropriate supports, and to make decisions on exemptions appropriately. This DFV training should include information on coercive control and non-physical forms of violence. ANROWS's 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* indicated that Australians are more likely to recognise obvious physical violence than they are to understand social, emotional and financial forms of abuse and control as forms of violence against women (Webster et al., 2018). Particularly in the context of supporting participants' economic security, it is important that staff are able to recognise coercive controlling tactics, as these may be used by perpetrators to actively interfere with a victim's and survivor's financial independence (Cortis & Bullen, 2015). It is critical that service providers are trained to be able to understand the impact of economic abuse on a participant's potential ability to comply with the requirements of the ParentsNext program and be able to provide appropriate support for their ongoing participation in the program.

Recommendation 7: Ensure greater integration with other services and systems that participants may engage with to reduce the administrative strain of requesting support and exemptions to compulsory participation for participants.

Recommendation 8: Provide comprehensive DFV training for ParentsNext service provider staff to recognise physical and non-physical forms of violence, and support staff to implement this training in practice.

Recommendation 9: Educate staff to understand the impacts of economic abuse on victims' and survivors' ability to comply with the requirements of the ParentsNext program, and support staff to implement this training in practice.

Recommendation 10: Train ParentsNext service provider staff in trauma-informed approaches to responding to disclosures of DFV and to appropriately support victims and survivors in their ongoing participation in the program, and support staff to implement this training in practice.

Summary of recommendations

1. In line with the recommendations from the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs report, *ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout* (2019), ANROWS recommends a redesign of the program through a co-design process with parents and experts, and in particular, parents who have experienced DFV and those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination.
2. Review the use of the Targeted Compliance Framework to avoid contributing to economic insecurity for women escaping violence through financial penalties imposed on those who have limited capacity to participate in full-time employment.
3. Address confusion regarding ParentsNext's status as either a pre-employment or employment program to enable the program to strengthen participants' autonomy and ability to make employment-related decisions, and avoid participants being pressured to attend unnecessary, parenting-focused activities.
4. Adjust the ParentsNext program to respond to individual needs and situations, including victims' and survivors' needs for safety and stability, rather than adopting a blanket approach that assumes that employment will always be beneficial to sole parents.
5. Address structural and cultural barriers to access and participation in the ParentsNext program, particularly for women experiencing domestic and family violence, First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse participants, and participants with disability.
6. Conduct research directly with victims and survivors to understand their experiences of welfare-to-work programs, focusing on First Nations women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, participants with disability and those caring for children with disability.
7. Ensure greater integration with other services and systems that participants may engage with to reduce the administrative strain of requesting support and exemptions to compulsory participation for participants.
8. Provide comprehensive DFV training for ParentsNext service provider staff to recognise physical and non-physical forms of violence, and support staff to implement this training in practice.
9. Educate staff to understand the impacts of economic abuse on victims' and survivors' ability to comply with the requirements of the ParentsNext program, and support staff to implement this training in practice.
10. Train ParentsNext service provider staff in trauma-informed approaches to responding to disclosures of DFV and to appropriately support victims and survivors in their ongoing participation in the program, and support staff to implement this training in practice.

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