

Community Affairs Legislation Committee

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Dear Chairperson,

Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Drug Testing Trial) Bill 2018

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc (NCSMC) do not consider ourselves experts regarding drugs and alcohol and/ or drug testing. Therefore, we rely upon those that would be considered an “expert” and have the confidence of the Australian community, such as the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS).

The Australian Medical Association has made their position and concerns public regarding the proposal to introduce drug testing for people who are in receipt of welfare. I particularly note the speech made by the President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Gannon, at the [National Press Club](#) on 23 August 2017.

“If you discriminate against [welfare recipients], if you impair their return to full functioning by labelling them as a drug user, then you impair their ability to get their life back on track.” The trial “simply won’t work”.

The Government due to previous attempts to introduce drug testing for welfare recipients has heard from the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), the peak body in the community and welfare sector which includes drug and alcohol services and they [stated](#);

The evidence is clear. The Federal Government drug testing proposal will make things worse for people in the community who may be dealing with a drug addiction. It would also further stigmatise and demean people who are relying on social security and have a right to receive support when they need it

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc is confused as to why the Government is persisting with this legislation after receiving consistent expert advice from both the medical and the community sector that the trial ‘simply won’t work’, and that it will most likely produce harm.

National Council for Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

Eliminate and respond to violence, hardship and inequality for single mothers and their children

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Most recently, The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister outlining our concerns that related to the harsher measures applied to a 'third party', a person that vouches for the relationship status of social security recipients and how they were at odds with the standards applied to Members of Parliament. The process for Members of Parliament appeared to be more consistent with contemporary relationships, it allowed self-determination when questioned and was minus of the fear of losing the only or key source of income. It gained [media](#) attention and the letter stated;

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc are a strong ally for a robust, transparent and targeted welfare system. We do not support or condone any fraudulent activities.

This stance reflects our knowledge of how critical the welfare system is and the value that we place upon it. Every day we see first-hand the positives when the system works as a safety net and the horror when people fall through the growing holes. Low income, sole parent families have borne the brunt of harsh cuts in successive budgets, they are now living with the consequence of not accessing the Parenting Payment Single if the youngest child is eight years or older, including women affected by domestic violence. Despite evidence that child poverty in sole parents has now risen to [40%](#) there is no restorative action and further cuts were on the table in the form of Family Payments and in three separate pieces of legislation. It is with deep gratitude that we thank those who opposed the measures and the harshest elements were not supported. Whilst bringing the 'lived experience' to the table and presenting well-researched submissions the Government's messaging strongly included the need to curb spending. NCSMC would refute the 'evidence' that resulted in harsh outcomes as well as the stated 'savings' as the figures did not include the projected increases required by the emergency and crisis service system, the human cost, and/or the implications to the community as poverty impedes productivity. Notwithstanding our opposing views, the decision to introduce expensive trials appears to be a contradiction. NCSMC understands that in New Zealand, \$1 million was spent on a similar [scheme](#), which detected 22 positive results in a sample of 8,001. This would appear to be an overspend and directing crucial resources away from a safety net that is in desperate need of a targeted increase.

What We Expect

Expert Input The formulation of legislation, at a minimum, should include the knowledge of “experts”. Experts are those who have a position of knowledge which can be gained from a body that is elected and/or supported by those who it seeks to represent, a professional association as well as the ‘lived experience’. It’s incumbent upon Members of Parliament to ensure that legislation has included these ‘experts’ and that their opinions have had a position of influence and this is reflected within the supporting documents and the legislation.

Population Impact This will provide details of who in the community this measure is targeting, the goal and aims of the legislation, the predicted outcomes (intended and unintended), and defined timeframes and evaluation methods.

Accumulative Affect Members of Parliament should be provided with an overview of previous cuts before presiding over further reductions. This is of critical importance especially when making decisions that will impact upon vulnerable citizens such as women and children affected by domestic violence. Measures that may appear relatively minor, such as recent decision to remove the ‘intent to claim’ are harmful and will increase hardship.

Human Rights NCSMC applauds the inclusion of a Human Rights Compatibility Statement. However, until this statement is prepared by an independent body the robustness of this statement remains questionable.

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc is dismayed that these very basic elements are often elusive in the formulation of legislation and the decision to re-introduce drug trials for Australians who are in receipt of income support illustrates this point. NCSMC urges Members of Parliament, who are in a privileged position of power, to enforce standards. It is our view that if such processes were in place some of the harm, which can span decades, would have been avoided.

In closing, we sincerely appreciate the Community Affairs Legislation Committee for undertaking this Inquiry and providing a platform for engagement.

Warm regards,



Terese Edwards

Chief Executive Officer