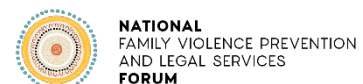


A letter to The Hon Tony Burke, MP

Calling for reform of employment services and an end to payment suspensions



24/04/2024

The Hon Tony Burke, MP
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Parliament House
Canberra. ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

We write to urge you to signal in the 2024 Budget the Government's intention to fundamentally reform the employment services system in the wake of last year's Parliamentary Inquiry into Workforce Australia ('Hill Report'). The present system has failed to reduce prolonged unemployment and is causing serious harm to people through large-scale automated payment suspensions.

There are over 500,000 people on Jobseeker and Youth Allowance payments who have had to rely on income support for more than a year, despite lower unemployment in recent years. This is due in part to counter-productive restrictions on access to alternative payments such as Disability Support Pension, and all too often the poor quality of Workforce Australia services. People are not getting the help they need to extend their skills and connect them to the right employer. The system assumes that people will find employment if only they search harder. As the Hill Report convincingly argues, that approach has failed.

Instead of helping people, the system harms them. Every month, around 80,000 people are threatened with the suspension of their next income support payment – supposedly for missing an appointment with a provider or not applying for enough jobs. Like Robodebt, the system applies these payment suspensions automatically without the involvement of Centrelink. Payments are often suspended before an employment service provider has met with the person affected to assess their circumstances. In most cases, it's later established that they actually met the requirement or had a good reason not to.

There is no justice in this system and the constant risk of loss of their only income is seriously damaging people's mental health and putting them at risk of homelessness. One quarter of those affected are from First Nations communities.

In its response to the Hill Report the Government has the rare opportunity to fix employment services for good.

We understand that reform of such a complex system will take time. Nevertheless, it's vital the Government take the first steps in this Budget so that momentum is not lost. Reform of payment suspensions is urgent.

We therefore ask that the Government announce, in or before the 2024 Budget:

1. Its intention to fundamentally reform the Workforce Australia system along the lines recommended by the Hill Report;
2. Urgent action to remove automation of payment suspensions and reduce their number, and design a fairer system based on human rights and natural justice principles; and
3. An open and transparent consultation process to progress reform, in which people directly affected are properly represented.

We stand ready to work with the Government to achieve these necessary and overdue reforms.

Australian Council of Social Service	Cassandra Goldie
Queensland Council of Social Service	Aimee McVeigh
Western Australia Council of Social Service	Louise Giolitto
Victoria Council of Social Service	Juanita Pope
New South Wales Council of Social Service	Cara Varian
Tasmanian Council of Social Service	Adrienne Picone
Council of Single Mothers and their Children	Jenny Davidson
Mission Australia	Stephen Vines
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre	Jane Favero
Single Mother Families	Terese Edwards
Catholic Social Services Australia	Monique Earsman
Jesuit Social Services	David Murray
Community Mental Health Australia	Bill Gye
Suicide Prevention Australia	Nieves Murray
Full Stop Australia	Karen Bevan
Community and Public Sector Union	Rosemary Ryan
Australian Services Union	Emeline Gaske
Marist180	Peter Monaghan
Arise Foundation	Fariha Chowdhury & Tasnia Alam Hannan
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services	Karly Warner
National Family Violence Prevention Services	Kerry Staines
North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency	Philip Brown
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (QLD) Ltd	Shane Duffy