

**13 September 2021**



**Opening Statement from UnitingCare Australia National Director Ms Claerwen Little at the Community Affairs Legislation Committee Social Services Legislation Amendment (Consistent Waiting Periods for New Migrants) Bill 2021 Public Hearing**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. I'd like to acknowledge the sovereign First Peoples of the lands on which we are variously meeting from – and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services across Australia. Our mandate is to advocate for policies and practices which enhance the dignity of all people, especially those who are most vulnerable.

We work toward a community in which every person can meet their full potential. In this context, we are particularly concerned about the impact of this Bill and urge the committee to reject it in its entirety.

Our concerns with the Bill are informed by the experiences of our vast network of services across Australia, which include emergency relief, financial counselling, housing support, domestic and family violence services, disability services, child care, legal assistance, disability services, aged care, and services providing support to asylum seekers and new migrants.

To support our contribution to today's hearings, I would like to acknowledge the participation of our colleague, Anna Matina, who is the Group Manager of Community Development for Uniting Vic.Tas. Anna has expertise in leading and developing financial and community wellbeing programs including Financial Counselling, Emergency Relief, Asylum Seeker and Settlement Support, Energy Support, Microfinance, Employment Services and Tenancy Assistance and Advocacy Programs.

Feedback from our services suggests that expanding and increasing the Newly Arrived Residents Waiting Period will increase housing insecurity and homelessness. It will further entrench poverty and hardship for low-income migrant families. And it will increase the pressure on frontline services – services that are already struggling to keep up with demand.

Of particular concern are the likely impacts on the most marginalised migrant cohorts, including women experiencing domestic violence, precarious workers vulnerable to exploitation, pregnant women in insecure work, and children living in low-income families. Without access to a safety net, such groups risk being trapped in a cycle of poverty, precarity and vulnerability.

This Bill will disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to rely on carers payment and allowance, family tax benefit, and paid parental leave.

Australia's National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children identifies migrant women as a priority group in responding to domestic and family violence. The additional barriers and issues many migrant women face in leaving violent relationships and gaining economic independence was highlighted at the recent Women's Safety Summit.

This Bill, however, will further deepen the economic insecurity experienced by some migrant women. It will increase their dependency on partners and family, leaving them more vulnerable to controlling and violent relationships.

As some of our financial counsellors have noted, without any income, women will have few options to leave an abusive relationship. If they leave, they and their children will face the prospect of homelessness. For many of these women, navigating a complex and unfamiliar system to access exemptions to waiting periods will simply not be an option at a time of crisis.

Like many in Australia, we recognise the story of immigration to Australia is a post-war success story. Migrants have contributed to the economic productivity of the nation, but, equally importantly, they've contributed to the social fabric of the nation, and we feel that this bill has the potential to undermine their capacity to do both these things.

We believe access to social security should be determined on the basis of need. This Bill risks creating a two-tier society where some members of our community are denied the basic social support and safety net that will allow them to get back on their feet and become active participants in our communities and the economy.

Finally, we urge the Committee to give consideration to the implications of this Bill for children.

Children will be at greater risk of poverty as a result of the changes, as family tax benefit is a critical payment for low-income families, including families in low-paid work. This has potential long-term implications for children's development, health and social and economic outcomes in later life.

As I said, migrants and their children are a key part of the success story of Australia's social and economic fabric and, if we deny them basic payments

when they fall into hardship, we risk denying them the opportunity to fully share in the fabric of the community.

Thank you.

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