



ParentsNext

Workforce Australia Committee submission

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About UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network and is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

We give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provision.

We are the largest network of social service providers in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people every year across urban, rural, and remote communities.

We focus on articulating and meeting the needs of people at all stages of life and those that are most vulnerable.

UnitingCare Australia Submission

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Workforce Australia Committee Inquiry with a focus on the ParentsNext program.

UnitingCare Australia's Network delivers the ParentsNext program in multiple locations across multiple States. Participants in our ParentsNext delivery network overwhelmingly welcome the support provided through this program and commonly display an altered employment and social trajectory.

We also recognise the often public claims against aspects of the program. We identify the essential transition to building ParentsNext success as moving away from a compliance-driven approach toward a support-driven approach.

ParentsNext is successful where the provider walks alongside the participant to convey the information needed to make informed decisions. More simply, ParentsNext can and should be delivered in a service mindset.

ParentsNext can be, and is often, delivered in a socially positive way considerate of the needs of participants.

The UnitingCare Australia Network of ParentsNext providers take pride in the success of their ParentsNext participants. Jane (*name altered*) is one example of how ParentsNext can be a fantastic success

"In 2020 Jane had been in Australia for two years having fled her home country in fear of her family's safety. As a new migrant she had a limited understanding of the services available to her and little confidence in communicating with government or community service providers.

She was referred to ParentsNext where she was encouraged to build vocational goals. Jane developed an appreciable interest in helping migrants settle into the community. With the support of her ParentsNext adviser she commenced a Community Services course through a local RTO.

Her social connection was enhanced over the next year because she participated in other services and activities run out of the community centre including the Positive Parenting Program, the Advancing Me Program, and a play group. Jane accessed her participant fund to complete driving lessons and received white goods through the community hub.

After completing her qualification, Jane remained hesitant about entering the workforce. Her adviser was able to support Jane in finding volunteering opportunities with a local settlement service where Jane was able to apply what she had learned in her Community Services course and build practical skills.

Jane worked with her ParentsNext adviser to draft a resume and cover letters before preparing together for interviews. Jane's ParentsNext adviser was also able to act as a robust referee for Jane, noting Jane's strong development and skill set.

Jane has remained in ongoing employment since exiting ParentsNext and does not receive income support."

The successes of ParentsNext are dependent on staff capability, local knowledge, organisational settings, and the ability to deliver wrap-around services.

The long-term engagement window and the participation fund strengthen the delivery capacity of ParentsNext. However, the experience of participants in ParentsNext is radically impacted by the quality of the service provided through Centrelink and the contracted service provider. The successful delivery of ParentsNext is driven by robust professional and organisational capability at provider level, including:

- the local knowledge necessary to deliver a service that is responsive to the local labour market,
- the ability to facilitate social connection of parent cohorts including cohorts from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds,
- a staff- and organisation-wide commitment to assist,
- a strong staff capability in identifying and addressing non-skills-based blockers to employment like family and domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse,
- a robust wrap-around service capability to engage relevant supports where non-skills-based blockers are identified, and
- a considerate approach to the experiences and challenges facing each participant.

Some drivers strongly recommend that the appropriateness of for-profit delivery of ParentsNext should be reconsidered. Particularly given the proximity to broader community service support programs. The opportunity for parents to choose their provider should be promoted.

The successes of ParentsNext are not dependent on an excessive compliance framework.

Evidence against the compliance framework led the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights to recommend four structural changes in the circumstance that the program remained compulsory. These recommendations suggested:

- assessing parents on entry to the program for program suitability,
- only suspending payments after the provider has successfully contacted the parent,
- not reducing payments until an assessment has been undertaken showing the reduction would not endanger the basic needs of parent or child, and
- adding consultation with First Nations communities.

Providers within the UnitingCare Network would welcome the opportunity to formally trial all and any of these recommendations. UnitingCare Australia would also recommend creating a lighter-monitoring phase for those who have regularly met their obligations under the compliance framework. If ParentsNext were to remain a compulsory program, an additional period of participation should be optionally available for parents of children up to 8 years of age.

ParentsNext does not place sufficient value on caring work.

The structure of ParentsNext undermines the value of care work in our community by working from the presumption that these kinds of contribution are not work. This advances and entrenches the gendered division of labour in Australia to the detriment of women.

UnitingCare Australia strongly supports any program that enables economic empowerment of women while strongly holding that to work toward gender equality Australia must reckon with the fact that care is neither cheap nor free.

The program should be redesigned to reflect the value of care labour more accurately. This could be done by relaxing the employment outcomes and prioritising securing the wellbeing of the parent in advance of placing employment expectations.

Funding can be better targeted.

Bonus payments for the parents should be considered to incentivise progressing toward employment. The participation fund focusses too narrowly on direct support for the parent and, in doing so, fails to appreciate the powerful impediment arising from unmet costs for their children. Participant funding should be more accessible in the case of child need.