

Council of Single Mothers and their Children

The Hon Brendan O'Connor
Employment Services Review
Department of Education, Employment and
Workplace Relations
GPO Box 9879
Loc: 10M62
CANBERRA ACT 2601

12 June 2008

Dear Mr O'Connor

Re: Employment Services Review

Please find attached a submission from the Council of Single Mothers and their Children to the review of the *Future of Employment Services in Australia*. This submission supports the one we contributed to the *Review of Employment Services Providers* in February this year.

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children (Vic) (CSMC) is a community-based organisation that has provided support, information and financial aid to single mothers and their families in Victoria for nearly 40 years. Our telephone information and support service handles an average of 20 calls a day, and we have a membership of approximately 1,800 single mothers and 120 organisations.

CSMC, along with sister organisations in other states and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC), is well recognised as a source of expert advice on issues of relevance to single mothers. Our expertise is grounded in the concerns expressed to us by single mothers calling our telephone contact line, putting us in an ideal position to respond to this review on behalf of these callers. Individuals, academic institutions, community support/welfare organisations, government departments and members of parliament are some of the bodies seeking our expertise.

Single mothers can experience particular challenges when re-entering the labour market, challenges for which the current system is ill equipped to meet. Comprehensively addressing these needs, both in the Employment Service Provider system and the labour market, is essential in order to generate greater employment participation and to improve the circumstances of single mothers in Australia.

The attached submission addresses a number of the discussion questions raised in the discussion paper, the *Future of Employment Services in Australia*. CSMC has particular expertise in relation to the experience of single mothers in the Employment Service system, and it is the discussion points that relate particularly to these experiences that are addressed here.

Support Line (03) 9654 0622
Rural Callers 1800 077 374
csmc@csmc.org.au



Administration (03) 9654 0327
Administration fax (03) 9654 0328
www.csmc.org.au

In addition, CSMC welcomes the establishment a taskforce to “examine whether there are better ways of balancing the role parents play in their families and communities, with the need to increase participation among child-bearing aged women”. We look forward to the opportunity to participate actively in the work of this taskforce.

If you would like further information relating to this submission or the work of CSMC, please contact our Project Worker, Jess Permezel on 03 9654 0327 or projects@csmc.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Jane Stanley
Coordinator

Council of Single Mothers and their Children Submission to Employment Services Review

Discussion point 4:

What should and should not be able to be purchased with the Employment Pathways Fund?

CSMC welcomes the broadening of the activities covered by the Employment Pathways Fund.

Single mother headed families are among the poorest of Australian families. Single mothers report that the costs of compliance with their Participation Agreements can impose an added financial burden. Current cost of living pressures, in particular the rapidly rising cost of petrol, means that for many single mothers the cost of attending appointments with ESP and job interviews can have a significant impact on their ability to meet their household expenditures. This is particularly significant for single mothers living in outer suburban, regional and rural areas.

Single mothers have reported difficulty accessing funds under the current system, preventing them from undertaking training or skills development, or receiving assistance with the costs of seeking work.

Recommendation:

- The EFP should also be able to assist with the costs associated with attending appointments with ESP, and particularly job interviews. These include the costs of transport, appropriate interview and work attire, and child care costs during interview and appointments times.
- Access to the EFP must be more open, with greater transparency for service users. Clear principles regarding the use of the fund (to enable job seekers to maximise their opportunities to secure employment and ensure they are not disadvantaged in doing so) must be developed.

Discussion point 5:

How can the legitimate interests of a job seeker to choose a service provider be balanced with the need to provide certainty for providers?

The inability to change Employment Service Providers (except in extreme circumstances) has been a significant concern for single mothers unhappy with the service provided by their ESP. Some providers have proved to have little understanding of the particular circumstances of single mothers, yet a single mother unhappy with the service provided has been unable to change providers. This operates against a competitive market where services that provide the best service are 'rewarded' with greater custom. In other circumstances single mothers, particularly in rural or regional areas, have been unable to change to a provider in more convenient geographical location.

Under the existing system there has also been a reluctance to provide assistance to job seekers to help them select the most appropriate ESP during their initial interview/s with Centrelink.

CSMC welcomes all opportunities for job seekers to have a greater voice in the process, and to move towards greater user choice.

Recommendation:

- Provide job seekers with information about how to choose an employment service provider at the initial interview with Centrelink (eg: lists of local providers; their areas of specialisation; the sorts of questions to ask a service);
- Allow at least 10 working days for single mothers to nominate their preferred provider to allow them time to investigate options (to recognise their caring responsibilities);
- Allow job seekers to change providers during an initial 'cooling off' period that includes a minimum of two significant contacts with the ESP; (this is preferable to a set time period to ensure that the service user has had meaningful contact with the ESP.)
- CSMC acknowledges the need for business certainty on the part of employment service providers, however we recommend that greater flexibility be developed to also allow single mothers to change provider should their circumstances change, or the provider cease to meet their needs. This should be an administratively straightforward process.
- If a provider has demonstrated that they are the best able to meet the needs of job seekers, these services should be encouraged. A higher business share percentage for these services would be supported.

Discussion point 7:

Should activity test requirements be made more flexible and responsive to job seekers' needs? If so, how?

The Government has already acted to ensure that job seekers participating in approved training are no longer forced to accept work that would interfere with that training. Are there other areas in which a similar approach should be adopted?

Should job seekers with recognised qualifications or skills be permitted to restrict their job search to their chosen field for a period? If so, for how long, and in what circumstances?

Existing activity requirements have a number of limitations, particularly a lack of flexibility to take into account the needs and experiences of single mothers. Discussions with single mothers have demonstrated that too frequently ESP's have little understanding of the particular circumstances of single mothers. These include:

- the constraints imposed by being the sole carer for their children
- the need to be available to care for their children during school holidays, illness, curriculum days etc
- the disruption and upheaval during the post separation period including relocation, changing schools etc
- the ongoing, time consuming and often traumatic experience of dealing with the Family Law system
- where domestic violence has been involved this can continue or even escalate post separation.

Lack of understanding of these issues has led to single mothers feeling unsupported by the system they are expecting to assist them, and in inappropriate job referrals. For ESP's to provide a responsive service to single mothers, it is essential that they have respect for and a thorough understanding of the issues facing single mothers when entering the workforce. The caring responsibilities of single mothers must be part of the calculation of all activity requirements.

At the other end of the spectrum the 'one size fits all model' has meant that skilled, qualified and experienced women have been required to attend seminars and courses designed for those with little or no workplace experience.

The "work first" approach of the existing system has created anomalies which work against the career development and long term financial security of single mother families. Women with well paying jobs, but for less than 15 hours/week have been forced to give these up for lower paid jobs simply because these jobs meet the required number of hours. Similarly, approved training has been limited to 12 month courses. While the extension of this to 2 year courses is admirable, this does not allow a job seeker to undertake a tertiary level course and thereby significantly improve their long term prospects.

Single mothers with skills and qualifications have been perplexed that the system as it currently stands does not support them to make use of these skills to obtain secure, better paid employment. CSMC welcomes the suggestion to allow skilled and qualified job seekers to restrict their job search to their chosen field for a period of time.

Recommendations:

- Extend the post-separation exemption period to accommodate for the needs of a readjusting family.
- Provide all ESP consultants with comprehensive training on working with sensitivity and understanding of the issues facing single mothers when entering with the workforce.
- Provide ESP consultants with comprehensive training on all of the available pathways and resources available to single parents and ensure that single parents are informed of all their options. For some single parents, this may mean offering a tailored approach or making intensive assistance available to those who want it.
- Provide all ESP consultants and Centrelink workers with comprehensive training on the detection and implications of domestic violence and child abuse as well as the exemptions available to single parents for such issues.
- Ensure that single mothers are not required to accept work that will impact on their ability to provide appropriate care for their children. This could include work which is casual or with unpredictable or inappropriate shifts; work which requires excessive travel; work which offers insufficient financial reward; or work which is not within school or available care hours.
- Single mothers with skills and qualifications should be permitted to restrict their job search to their chosen field/s for a negotiated period of not less than 12 (???) months particularly when it is clear that employment in such an area will provide them with appropriate conditions to combine work and parenting.
- Single mothers should be able to accept work that is less than 15 hours per week, if the salary from this position is at least equal to that of a minimum wage position of 15 hours per week.

Discussion point 8:

How can the needs of parents returning to the workforce be balanced with the need for greater employment participation? Should volunteering be incorporated into participation requirements for parents?

Single mothers already have a high level of participation in the community and in the workforce¹. Research has also confirmed what CSMC hears daily from single mothers – that single mothers want to be in paid employment, but that it is their caring responsibilities and the lack of family friendly jobs that creates enormous challenges².

Shortcomings of the existing system were detailed in our submission to the Review of Employment Services in February this year (attached). Along with the particular circumstances of single mothers outline in Discussion Point 7 above, it is the lack of jobs that allow single mothers to both work and to meet their parenting responsibilities that is the most significant barrier to paid employment

Recommendations:

- Provide incentive programs for employers to create secure, family-friendly positions for single parents.
- Suspend job search requirements for all single mothers over the long holiday periods.
- Include degree level studies (and vocationally oriented post degree studies) as acceptable activities.
- As an acknowledgement of the limited numbers of family friendly jobs available (particularly those that recognise the needs for flexibility regarding holidays, children's illness, curriculum days etc) volunteering activities should be considered acceptable participation activities.
- Provision of comprehensive training to all ESP consultants relating to the specific issues facing single mothers, their employment needs and the particular participation requirements imposed on single mothers.

Discussion point 11:

How can the experience of job seekers and employers best be included when assessing the performance of providers?

CSMC welcomes the proposal for a more transparent performance management system that promotes continuous improvement. From the position of job seekers, the current 'star rating' system provides little meaningful feedback on the ability of a particular employment service provider to meet the needs of single mothers. A more useful system would be one that not only includes the speed of placement, but also:

- the sustainability of this employment (long term outcomes);
- service user feedback about the service they receive from the provider (process);
- and
- appropriate referral to other assistance including training and support.

¹ ABS (2007), Australian Social Trends, *One-parent Families*, Catalogue 4102.0

² Cox, E. and Priest, T. (2008) *Welfare to Work: At What Cost Parenting?* University of Technology, Sydney, p12

Such an holistic approach would enable single mothers to make a more informed choice and would encourage greater responsiveness to service user requirements.

Recommendation:

- Incorporate appropriate referral pathways, client satisfaction and long term outcomes into performance assessment.
- Ensure that potential clients can access information on each criterion of performance measurement.