

JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT
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Church Community Service Providers Condemn Welfare Reform Bill

UnitingCare Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia and Anglicare Australia have joined together to condemn the Federal Government's Welfare Reform Bill saying a majority of the measures contained within the Bill will further punish and demonise people who are already on low incomes and need support.

The Bill (Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017) comes before the Senate tomorrow and the leaders of the major church providers group, whose members provide social services to more than 1.5 million Australians each year, wants Senators to recognise their concerns with the Bill.

Anglicare Australia's Executive Director Kasy Chambers called on the Parliament to reject the Government's punitive welfare bill.

"Our Jobs Availability Snapshot shows that people are already competing for jobs that just aren't there. Forcing them into a demerit system won't solve that problem," Ms Chambers said.

"No one can be confident Centrelink could be fair or accurate when doling out demerit points, which can have catastrophic impact people's lives.

"A recent Senate Inquiry found that Centrelink was already struggling to communicate with people, and had a high error rate when recovering debt. Anyone who has had much to do with Centrelink will see the cruel irony in asking it to manage a demerit points system like this."

UnitingCare Australia National Director Claerwen Little said she believed a majority of the measures in the Bill constitute an unacceptable expansion of the hoops that those in need have to jump through in order to access assistance, without delivering the outcomes claimed by Government.

"The cost associated with establishment and implementation of the drug testing trials, for example, would be better allocated towards the expansion of alcohol and other drug services that have been proven to deliver positive outcomes for individuals and improve their life trajectories.

Fr Frank Brennan, CEO of Catholic Social Services, said the mandatory drug testing regimes in the Bill would not help people out of drug addiction.

"The Government has not been able to put forward any evidence that this proposed drug testing regime will change behaviour.

"If the Government was really looking for a way of assisting people to 'get off drugs and back into work', they would start by seeking the advice of the health professionals.

"CSSA believes drug testing all welfare recipients in certain regions will only serve to further marginalise, vilify and drive those battling with addiction further into poverty.

"The Government should support vulnerable people to lead a meaningful life and contribute to society rather than punishing them for having an addiction," he said.

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