

# Domestic Violence NSW

## Submission into ParentsNext

Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

30 November 2022

## Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services' Inquiry into Parents Next. Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) has previously participated in the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs (2021) regarding ParentsNext and continue to express our concerns regarding this program, and its impact upon single parents.

DVNSW is the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services in NSW, providing a representative and advocacy function for over 130 specialist domestic and family violence services across NSW, and the thousands of women, children and communities they support. DVNSW also represents the voices of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence who have been forced to participate in ParentsNext at detriment to themselves and their families.

DVNSW endorse in full the submission of the National Council of Single Mothers & their Children.

## Domestic Violence NSW Submission

DVNSW continues to hold concerns regarding the ParentsNext program due to the poor human rights implications for women and their children, many of whom are victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. Whilst single parents certainly require support to establish and maintain financial independence, this should be provided in a compassionate manner rather than a punitive one.

The ParentsNext program started in 2012 as a pre-employment service for young mothers and was then expanded following positive evaluation. The evaluation was conducted prior to the inclusion of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF), which consequently became the most harmful element of the program. The program became mandatory in 2018, with the capacity to suspend or cancel payments. From July 2018 to March 2021 approximately one third, or 159,000 payments, were suspended, and at least 1000 were cancelled all together (Maley, 11 August 2021, [‘Unable to meet basic needs’: ParentsNext program suspended a third of parents’ payments](#)). 85% of participants are single mothers. Further, Aboriginal parents made up about 21 per cent of current ParentsNext participants, despite comprising just 3.3 per cent of the population (Maley, 2021), demonstrating concerning implications for Aboriginal families whose payments are suspended.

A high proportion of single mothers have experienced domestic and/or family violence. Of the estimated 311,000 single mothers living in Australia in 2016, 185,700, or 60 per cent, had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a previous partner (Summers, [Violence or Poverty](#), 2022). Victim survivors often experience financial impacts long after the relationship has ended. Between 80-90% of women who access DFV services in Australia say that they have experienced some level of financial abuse as part of the coercive control in their relationship (Cortis, & Bullen, 2016). Debts are a common factor forcing victim survivors to remain in or return to an abusive relationship.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) estimated that of the women who had experienced domestic violence, 81,700 (30 per cent) had temporarily left the violent partner on at least one occasion but later returned, with 15 per cent of that group of women (12,000) returning to an abusive relationship due to economic reasons (Summers, 2022). Income support and supports to re-enter the workforce for single parents should be trauma informed and based on the understanding that a high proportion of participants have experienced trauma, that there is likely to be ongoing abuse and for the safety concerns for themselves and their children to be central. Being suspended or cut off from a payment can lead to reuniting with an abusive partner, which can have grave consequences for both the primary victim-survivor as well as their children.

DVNSW holds concerns about the punitive nature of ParentsNext, the lack of clear and transparent information, and the negative impacts on family safety where access to income support is removed.

Income support is a human right which enables families in Australia to live more healthy and safe lives. The ParentsNext program should not prevent access to income support for vulnerable families, rather it should offer additional support, which is voluntary in nature, noting the specific vulnerabilities of this cohort. DVNSW has provided two case studies which demonstrate the success and failures of this program as reliant on the skills of the employment services to identify and respond where there is domestic and/or family violence or sexual abuse.

DVNSW recommend that ParentsNext is redesigned and rebranded to offer evidence based, trauma-informed supports for single parents. As an example, DVNSW has had positive experiences with the Financial Independence Hub program which was developed using a co-design process with people with lived expertise from the DVNSW Voices for Change program. Whilst evaluation of the Hub is pending, initial evaluation demonstrates positive outcomes for clients. And most importantly, client safety and trauma-informed principles are inbuilt to the model.

### Recommendations:

DVNSW support the recommendations of the National Council of Single Mothers and their children:

1. **Completely re-design and re-brand ParentsNext, ensuring the program is entirely voluntary.**
2. **Build in future planning, financial literacy and financial support, co-designed with participants and their advocates.**
3. **Introduce an oversight/advisory committee and sunset clauses.**
4. **Ensure ongoing qualitative and quantitative evaluations.**

Additionally, DVNSW recommends:

5. **Increase ParentsNext providers' domestic and family violence literacy through specialist-informed training and education.**

### Case Study 1:

Sarah\* lives in regional NSW and has three children, two with her ex-partner who chose to use domestic violence. The violence was significant and included stalking, sexual assault and physical assault. There were also allegations of sexual abuse towards the two female children in the home. Sarah has a current AVO in place and had reported multiple breaches of the AVO to police.

Sarah already had exemptions for job searches with Centrelink but ParentsNext needed separate evidence and Centrelink did not share the information with the job agency. They requested that she come to the office for a face-to-face conversation, which was located on the same street as her ex-partner's residence. At the appointment, the client officer recognised Sarah. Sarah attempted to explain the reason she hasn't looked at higher education or work was due to the abusive situation. When she disclosed this information, the client officer said that she knew of Sarah's client and 'couldn't imagine him doing that'. This has been a significant issue for Sarah as her ex-partner is well known in the regional town and has made a name for himself as a community leader. Sarah felt disbelieved, uncomfortable and lost confidence in advocating not to be part of ParentsNext.

As part of the ParentsNext program, Sarah was obliged to study, so she studied online as she still was concerned for her safety if she was in town. Sarah also had ongoing therapeutic appointments for herself and her children including sexual assault counselling and trauma counselling. This was in addition to her children's everyday needs such as transport to school, after school events and casual work commitments. Sarah needed to make ongoing police statements for breaches of AVO and attend court. These events caused her further trauma and impacted on her mental health. Her ability to meet assignment deadlines when she was studying was also impacted. Sarah was encouraged to study community services by the client officer. She ended up failing the course because she needed to do work practice and she did not feel she could do work experience in the local area because she had accessed the majority of the services when she was escaping domestic violence and felt uncomfortable. Failing this course has negatively impacted on her mental health further, and not led to further training or employment opportunities.

### Case Study 2:

Eliza lives in an outer metropolitan suburb of Sydney and is studying nursing. Eliza was already studying and accessing ParentsNext when she and her two children became homeless due to the domestic violence.

Eliza was struggling significantly emotionally and financially during the period of homelessness. She and her courses began to suffer as she could not afford the books or fuel to attend. Eliza found accommodation and as the crisis decreased, her housing caseworker discussed the supports that ParentsNext could offer. With advocacy from the housing case worker and from Eliza, she re-

engaged with ParentsNext who were able to provide funding support for fuel and study items that resulted in the client successfully completing her course.