



Sisters of Mercy Wiri

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Submission on the Social Security Amendment Bill

This submission is made by **Sisters of Mercy Wiri** to the **Social Services Select Committee**.

Introduction

Sisters of Mercy Wiri is a not for profit community based provider of social services with a social justice and community development focus, based in Wiri, a suburb close to the Manukau City Centre.

As an active non-governmental organisation it delivers a range of services and programmes. The agency also contributes to a number of regional forums that focus on improving social outcomes, health and well being in the region. Through its ministry the agency embodies the mission of the Catholic Religious Congregation of women, Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand. The Sisters of Mercy were originally founded by Catherine McAuley in Dublin in 1831 to work with the poor, especially women and children.

Purpose and Principles

Sisters of Mercy Wiri acknowledges this initiative by the Government to provide financial support for those with temporary or long term barriers to work, as well as to increase opportunities for people to participate in the labour market. The fact that meaningful employment enhances the lives and well being of people is indisputable. Further, it allows people to feel included in society and to feel as if they are making a contribution to society and the national good.

However, from the perspective of Sisters of Mercy Wiri, there are some serious implications when these concepts are applied too rigorously and in every situation. We do not wish to see again the poverty and exclusion that we witnessed in the early nineties, as a result of policies that were introduced without adequate consultation, and in response to ideological impulses. The ideology that Sisters of Mercy Wiri encourages the Government to espouse is that that is reflected in the original 1938 Act. This is to provide an income which allows beneficiaries to have a standard of living that allows them to be part of the community.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends that

- **Clause 23 of the Bill is revised to state that “all New Zealanders have a standard of living that enables them to participate in and feel part of their local community.”**
- **The definition of “income” be clearly defined in the legislation**

Change in Emphasis

The first consideration is that there appears to be a change in the philosophy of providing income support to those who need it. There is a change in emphasis away from the

entitlement to income support, to that of availability for paid work. As already stated, paid employment can lift individuals and communities to a different place of well being, but this is not always the case. Our concern is primarily for the good of families and the children within those families, particularly those on low incomes.

The general flavour of the Social Securities Bill seems to be punitive, and has the overall thrust of inflexibility, insufficiency and coercion. It is particularly through the introduction of Clause 23 that the framework for a regulated, mean spirited social security system is introduced. This system is not designed to help eliminate poverty. The majority of our clientele are doing what they can to support themselves and their families. It is recognised that the time of stand down has been reduced in the Bill, but any sanctions affect the most vulnerable members of our society first, that is, our children. Sisters of Mercy Wiri have worked with many families who are under resourced. The effect on the children, and indeed the whole family, their long term health and well being, can not be understated. Social exclusion is just one of these.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends that

- **the stand down period is abolished altogether**
- **the Ministry should not be permitted to require a beneficiary to undertake any particular activity through the Personal Development and Employment Plans process, but rather engage in genuine negotiation with each beneficiary**

Paid Employment

Clause 16 states that “work in paid employment offers the best opportunity for people to achieve social and economic wellbeing” and that “the priority for people of working age should be to find and retain work”. These statements pay no account of the nature of the paid work, or of the distances that may need to be travelled to get to that work. The “work first” Principles will be a further encouragement to zealous case managers to force beneficiaries into totally inappropriate activities. Neither do these principles show any appreciation for the contribution that is made to our society by those who do voluntary work in their communities.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends that

- **the legislation recognise the value of unpaid and voluntary work in our communities**

At the present time Aotearoa New Zealand is blessed with economic stability, and unemployment is therefore lower than it has been for some time. But, without doubt, the time will come when there is an economic downturn and jobs are harder to find. What will happen then? Will income support be available to those who need it, or will people who cannot find employment be excluded from society?

Social Education and Parental Supervision of Children

In the view of Sisters of Mercy Wiri paid employment does not necessarily provide the best opportunity for people to achieve social wellbeing, nor should it be a priority for people above the wellbeing of their families and children.

From our experience, the effect that the lack of adequate parental supervision has on children is a major concern in our society. This lack of supervision is not due entirely to working parents, but both parents working and solo parents being compelled or even simply encouraged to work can be very detrimental to family wellbeing and the social education of

the children. The workers from this agency often visit the homes of unsupervised and, in some instances, out of control children and youth to find that parents are working, or are sleeping because they work at odd times, or are doing a course to become work ready. They are unable to provide their children with what is needed, such as their time and availability, as well as clear routines and boundaries, particularly between the hours of 7.00 am to 9.00 am and 3.30 pm onwards, because they are tired, or simply not there. Some employees also have to travel long distances to get to their places of employment, which adds to their unavailability to their families. The lack of sufficient adequate and affordable childcare, especially for low income families, can also be a real issue.

Recognition of the Value of Raising Children

Sisters of Mercy Wiri asks why the whole system needs to be changed in order to get people into meaningful employment. Certainly, those who are able to work must be encouraged to work as long as the children and other family responsibilities are not being neglected. While we affirm the right of women to be engaged in paid employment, from our perspective, the work of women (and some men) in the house is, for the most part, undervalued and goes unrecognized here in Aotearoa New Zealand. What would the benefit to our society be if the Government paid the same subsidies to stay at home mothers (or fathers) instead of childcare for families?

Sisters of Mercy Wiri strongly recommends that

- **the unpaid work that is done in the home, most of which relates to the care, development and training of children is acknowledged in real terms through legislation.**
- **the part time work test for beneficiaries' partners who have childcare responsibilities be abolished**

Conclusion

In summary, and in view of our mission to work with the poor, especially woman and children, we strongly advocate for the recognition of the importance of the work that is done in our families towards the wellbeing and development of our children. This is the primary task of any family, and must be recognised as such. We challenge this Government to stand up for the fundamental principles of justice, dignity, and equity in its administration of the country's social security system.

We request the opportunity to be heard by the Social Services Select Committee.

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