

Submission on the Social Assistance (Future Focus) Bill

This submission is made by **Sisters of Mercy Wiri**.

Introduction

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

As an active non-governmental organisation it 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, and first came to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1850.

Overview

From the perspective of the Sisters of Mercy Wiri the most significant aspects of the Bill are those that are related to the introduction of part-time work testing for domestic purposes beneficiaries whose youngest child is aged 6 or over.

Social Education and Parental Supervision of Children

The fact that meaningful employment enhances the lives and well being of people is indisputable. We also acknowledge that 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. The ideal that children are cared for and their wellbeing and security are vital to their happiness and development are, in our view, paramount.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri acknowledges the right of women and men who are single parents to be employed, and the wonderful contribution that many such parents make to society while raising their children. The task of raising children is more important than any other, from every point of view, from that of the children, the parents, the community and the nation.

From the experience of Sisters of Mercy Wiri, the affect that the lack of adequate parental supervision and availability has on children has serious repercussions. When single parents, even though the children are over 6, are compelled or even just encouraged to work the results 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 the establishing of clear routines and boundaries, particularly between the hours of 7.00 am to 9.00 am and 3.30 pm onwards, because they are often tired, or just 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, is also a real issue. It would seem to us that to acknowledge the valuable contribution of parents of well adjusted, well educated, law abiding children by paying them to bring up their children would be more effective than what is proposed.

The lack of training opportunities as well as appropriate part time employment are also potential reasons for the Bill's failure.

The Government's own statement on the Bill admits that there is no research available to quantify the change. There is no evidence to suggest that the Bill will actually achieve its goal of moving more people into work. It appears to be ideologically inspired and is irresponsible in that it has the potential to adversely impact on some of New Zealand's most vulnerable citizens.

Therefore **Sisters of Mercy Wiri opposes the Bill.**

In particular

Sisters of Mercy Wiri opposes Clause 13(2), 13(7), 13(8) and 13(10) of the Bill.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends that

- **Clause 13(5) be amended to extend the income exemption of \$100 before abatement commences to unemployment and sickness benefits.**

Prior to the previous election the National Party pledged that for all benefits income less than \$100 a week was exempt from income testing.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri opposes Clause 14 of the Bill.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri opposes Clause 18 of the Bill.

Clause 18 reflects the "work first" ideology that underpins the Bill. It does not recognise that preparing for employment may not be appropriate for some domestic purposes beneficiaries.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri opposes Clause 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 37

Conclusion

This Bill is all about an ideological focus on work which implies that beneficiaries are shirking and need some pressure to get them to pull their weight. While the Bill states that its purpose is "to create a fairer benefit system with an unrelenting focus on beneficiaries entering or returning to employment" it is anything but fair. In particular it is unfair firstly to the children of the beneficiaries, to the beneficiaries and to society as a

whole. It is punitive in its approach and has no guarantee of achieving any useful outcome. It suggests that the beneficiaries are to blame for their situation not the system or the global economic climate.

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 work that is done in our families towards the wellbeing and development of our children. Resources need to be put into enhancing and affirming the role of parenting in Aotearoa New Zealand and vulnerable families enabled to parent their children appropriately. For this to happen effectively for the benefit of children and the good of society parents require time, availability, adequate income and knowledge.

We strongly recommend that the Government seeks ways to upbuild the fabric of family life in our country.

We wish to appear before the select committee to speak to this submission, in Manukau City preferably.

Sister Anne Hurley
Sisters of Mercy Wiri
P.O.Box 98923
MANUKAU 2241

Phone: 09 263 66464
Email: anne@sistersofmercywiri.org.nz