

Sisters of Mercy Wiri

13 April 2012

Committee Secretariat
Social Services Committee
NZ House of Representatives
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Submission on the Social Security (Youth Support and Work Focus) Amendment Bill

Sisters of Mercy Wiri carries out the mission of the Catholic Religious Congregation of Women, Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand in Wiri, a small largely state housing area immediately south of the Manukau City Centre. Sisters of Mercy were originally founded in Dublin in 1831 to work with the poor, especially women and children. The Gospels, Catholic social teaching, and the charism of the Sisters of Mercy inform the ministry and practice of the Sisters of Mercy Wiri.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are a community resource and work from a social justice and community development focus, participate in processes that could influence those who exercise power and make decisions affecting the lives of others, raise awareness of current issues, encourage neighbourhood and community participation and support local initiatives. Services currently provided include advocacy, responding to immediate need, supporting family/whanau and children, home visits, prison visitation, information and referral,

Mission Statement

**To work with the poor, especially women and children,
to build positive relationships that strengthen families and communities
and to join with others to bring about a more just and compassionate society.**

Introduction

Sisters of Mercy Wiri is appreciative of the invitation from the Social Services Committee to make a submission on the Social Security (Youth Support and Work Focus) Amendment Bill. Even though the time in which to write a submission is very short and Easter, which is a very significant time for us, falls within that time frame, we have elected, given the importance of what is being proposed, to contribute at such short notice. We note that this Bill signals significant changes to welfare in New Zealand and how it is to be distributed by introducing a stronger work focus to some benefit categories.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri maintain that Government is responsible to each one of its citizens as well as to the country as a whole. From every point of view, we can not afford to leave large numbers of our young people unemployed. This raises the question of the need for meaningful employment for our young people.

From our perspective and experience one of the main difficulties with the focus outlined in the Bill is that the Government is doing little to create meaningful employment, and large numbers of New Zealanders are spending time and effort endeavouring to become employed, and are becoming more and more disenchanted and depressed at their inability to be employed.

Catholic social teaching recognises that distributive justice is an essential part of social justice. While legal justice ensures that everyone is under the same rules, distributive justice recognises that the fruits of our successes, such as wealth, are not ours alone to decide what to do with. It recognises that people have a valid claim to a share of the goods of the earth, which are a result of God's gift to us. ("On a level playing field" Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand Social Justice Series No.16 p.17)

We see a real gap between the concepts of the Social Security (Youth Support and Work Focus) Amendment Bill and the concept of distributive justice. We also see that the concepts in the Bill are incompatible with this as it is with the original concept of welfare in New Zealand, that is to provide a means to enable all New Zealanders to belong to and to participate in society.

The Youth Package

One of the thrusts of this Bill is to establish tougher obligations on young people receiving a Benefit. Sisters of Mercy Wiri applauds the fact that young people will be expected to continue with full time education, training or work based learning in order to receive a benefit. However, we submit that it is disingenuous to encourage young people to improve themselves for work when there are already large numbers of qualified young people who are unemployed. One such person that the workers in this agency are familiar with is a young man, who more than a year after graduating from University is still unsuccessful in finding employment. He is not alone in this. It is part of our mission to convey hope as we work with others to build positive relationships in families and communities.

The State of the Nation report from the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit of the Salvation Army (2012) states clearly stated that it is our young people who have borne the brunt of the global recession. The report points out that while unemployment in New Zealand has stabilised youth employment remains high.

We agree that educational attainment is one of the best pathways to lowering the likelihood of being unemployed, earning a higher income and improving social outcomes, but only if there is meaningful work to do. We see a gap in the Bill between the needs of the community and the responsibilities of the Government to ensure that there is work for our young people, and where in the Bill is it spelled out?

Sisters of Mercy Wiri is also concerned that a young person must earn the right to manage his or her own payment. From our perspective managing one's own affairs is a

right, a right that can perhaps be lost, but not one that must be earned. It is not helpful to treat all our young people who may be the recipients of benefits as if they are at the lowest level. Is there any empirical evidence to suggest that there would be positive outcomes brought about by changes proposed by the Bill? It appears not.

It is our experience here in Wiri that all people, including youth, respond better to encouragement and real support than they do to punishment or having to prove themselves before they are treated as adults. Therefore

Sisters of Mercy Wiri strongly recommends

- **that if our young people are going to spend money and effort being educated and trained then meaningful work must be provided for them**
- **that a young person continues to have the right to manage his or her own money unless he or she shows that he or she is rejecting that right by not meeting his or her obligations and showing himself or herself to be financially incompetent.**

Work availability and work preparation for sole parents, widows, women alone and partners

Catholic social teaching upholds that the family is the primary and essential cell of human society and must, therefore, be accorded every economic, social, cultural and moral consideration.

As already outlined by Sisters of Mercy Wiri in our recent response to the Green Paper on Vulnerable Children, our view is that the Government must show leadership in valuing, first of all, parents, and the immensely important task that they have in bringing children to birth and raising them in loving supportive families. We do not see this Bill promoting the valuing of parents and their role in raising children.

Our experience as Sisters of Mercy Wiri is seeing the effect that the lack of adequate parental supervision and availability has on children. When single parents 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 concept of welfare that is being proposed in this Bill is especially detrimental to the interests of children. When the Welfare State was established in New Zealand, it was to provide people and families with sufficient income to enable them to participate fully in society. This has gradually changed, and now the economic dimension of welfare policy

favoured by the present Government is designed to serve the interests of the labour market ahead of the interests of children and their families. Parents are seen as part of the labour market or potentially part of the labour market, rather than, primarily, as the carers and nurturers of our children.

The fact that meaningful employment enhances the lives and well being of people is indisputable. It can also allow 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 all situations. The ideal that children are cared for and their wellbeing and security are vital to their happiness and development are, in our view, paramount. What is being proposed is detrimental to what was being espoused in the recent Green Paper, that is, that every child is able to 'thrive, belong and achieve'.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri values the unpaid work that women and men do every day in the important work of raising children. The value of such work is undervalued and indeed unrecognised by the proposed legislation.

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. However, 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.

The lack of sufficient adequate and affordable childcare, especially for low income families, is a further issue that influences significantly the ability of low paid, solo parents to be engaged in paid work.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends

- **that the task of raising and forming children be valued as the most important task that society has**
- **that Government pay parents who stay at home to raise their children, rather than pay them to pay private childcare agencies to do the job.**

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sisters of Mercy Wiri acknowledges the merit in expecting young people to continue with full time education, training or work based learning in order to receive a benefit. We suggest that a Government which requires this needs to ensure that there is meaningful work for those young people who are in full time education, training or work based learning.

We further suggest that parents need to be seen primarily as the carers and nurturers of children and not just as economic units serving the interests of the labour market. We want to see the unpaid work that men and women do every day raising children given due respect by Government.

We urge the adoption of our recommendations which are based on lived experience of working with vulnerable families in Wiri for the past 20 years. We believe that young people and their families need long term solutions which give hope for their future.

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We request an opportunity to speak to the committee in person if the committee is meeting in Auckland.