



Committee Secretary

Standing Committee on Community Affairs

Legislation Committee

Department of the Senate

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Dear Sir/Madam

Submission in Response to the

Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017

Introduction

The Chinese Australian Services Society Limited (commonly known as “CASS” in the community) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017.

As a long standing community organisation, CASS has been dedicated to assisting disadvantaged people from local communities and advocating on their behalf. Our submission is a reflection of the views and concerns that we received from our service users and people in our community, as well as observation and conclusions we made while delivering services to our clients, who are significantly affected by Australia’s welfare measures. This submission does not represent in any way the position of CASS as the organisation.



About Our Organisation

CASS was founded in 1981. Its main service objective is to provide a wide range of welfare services to the community, and assist migrants to settle and integrate into the Australian society. The comprehensive range of community services and activities provided by CASS include residential aged care, home ageing services, disability services, vocational training, settlement and health, volunteering, and family and children services. Most of the services we provide cover the whole of Metropolitan Sydney, with some covering areas down to Wollongong. We serve the Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, people from other CALD communities, as well as mainstream Australians. More than 2,400 families access our services and activities weekly.

Our response to the Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017

We support the proposals in streamlining the seven current working age welfare payments into the new Jobseeker Payment.

However, we strongly object to the amendments in Schedule 9 – Changes to activity tests for persons aged 55 to 59. “The amendments will allow relevant recipients to be taken to satisfy the activity test if they are engaged, for at least 30 hours per fortnight, in a combination of approved unpaid voluntary work and suitable paid work, at least 15 hours of which must be in suitable paid work.” We believe the new requirement that ‘at least 15 hours of suitable paid work’ is an unfeasible and unfair requirement for many migrants, especially those from a Non-English speaking background.



Currently, individuals satisfy the activity test if they are engaged in 30 hours per fortnight of approved voluntary work. In our work with migrants between the ages of 55 to 59, the vast majority of them (except those with special family circumstances or disability or ill health) are eager to be engaged in gainful employment. However, the cruel reality is that many could not find jobs due to their age and their limited English. We have come across many clients who were required to attend job interviews every week in order to satisfy the current activity test. While they were eager to do so, the repeated failure in getting a job offer had led them to constant disappointment and lowered their self-esteem. Many migrant job seekers suffer psychological stress, depression and poor mental health as a result. When offered the opportunity to engage in voluntary work, many of them were eager to do so as they felt they could contribute to the community. While gainful employment was still their first option, many had to settle for the second option of voluntary work if their repeated efforts in job interviews had not resulted in getting paid work.

The proposed changes requiring 15 hours of paid work in order to satisfy the activity test will give additional pressure to the group of disadvantaged and vulnerable citizens who are already unemployed, who do not have special skills and those who are disadvantaged by their language limitations. With funding cuts to TAFE, there are further limitations for people of this age group to receive training which will enable them to join the job market.

We understand that the intention of the activity test is to encourage welfare recipients to continue to contribute to the Australian society if their abilities allow. While seeking paid work is a way of contribution to the society through one's active efforts, we also believe welfare recipients should be given alternatives to contribute if repeated efforts to seek paid work is not successful. Being involved in approved volunteer work is one alternative which serves the



purpose. Instead of feeling deflated and stressed by the repeated failures of finding employment which often result in poor mental health and even depression, engaging in volunteer work will help this group of jobseekers to feel worthwhile and find life meaningful. At the same time, they provide a lot of much needed labour force for many not-for-profit community organisations which in turn provide valuable services for the underprivileged in the community.

We strongly oppose to the amendments proposed in Schedule 9 and urge that the current requirement for persons aged 55 to 59 to satisfy the activity test be maintained.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017. In this submission, we have included the feedback that we received from people in our community, including volunteers and staff members. We would appreciate if the Committee takes into account the viewpoints and concerns raised in this submission. We are happy to have a further discussion to elaborate these viewpoints and concerns and we consent to our submission made public.

Tony Pang

Deputy Chair/Secretary

CASS Group