

# Response to the Welfare Reform Review



December  
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because  
**children**  
matter

## 1. Introduction

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is an agency of the Uniting Church in NSW working with disadvantaged children, young people and families. Burnside provides services including out of home care, family counselling, family support, alternative dispute resolution in families, support for young people who are homeless and activities aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect.

Burnside's Mission statement is:

*Burnside stands in the Uniting Church traditional of compassion and concern for justice. Our role is to enhance the life opportunities of disadvantaged children and families.*

As part of our commitment to raising the awareness of governments and policy makers to the needs of disadvantaged children, young people and families, Burnside has a Social Justice and Research Program. This Program aims to "lead Burnside's commitment to a more just, compassionate and inclusive society by influencing social policy and encouraging best practice".

Burnside's policy and advocacy work is based on the practical experience of other Burnside programs and use the research undertaken within the agency to ensure that our policy work is rooted in the experience of people who are so often forced to margins of society because of poverty, disadvantage and lack of opportunity.

In this submission, Burnside has taken this approach to inform how it is that the proposed framework for reform will impact on the lives of children, young people and families.

## **2. The Welfare Reform Review**

### **2.1 The Scope of the Review**

Burnside is concerned that the review has focused so narrowly on only three groups of people who use the social security system. In making any serious review of the system, it would seem that all areas of social security including, youth allowance, family allowance, childcare assistance and the child care tax rebate would be desirable. The focus on the three categories of the system that the government believes are more “dependent” results in a decontextualised view of the system as a whole. It is of concern to us that this may create an unbalanced view of the social security system and represents a level of labelling of people who might fit into particular categories as those who are the “problem”.

A more holistic approach to the system and to the lives of people who use the system would also be beneficial to the review process. In particular, we are concerned that the focus on the importance of “getting a job” and reducing the overall cost of income support in the federal budget are narrow parameters for a review such as this. A review conducted under these circumstances is not conducive to considering the needs of children, young people or families or addressing many of the other issues that impact on poverty and disadvantage.

*Burnside calls on the Reference group to consider the more broad systemic issues impacting on poverty and disadvantage and their relationship to the social security system.*

### **2.2 Principles underlying the Review**

The terms of reference of the Review have clearly stated the principles the government believes should underlie this process and the development of a green paper. Burnside supports the detailed review of these principles by our peak body in the Uniting Church, the Uniting Community Services Association (UCSA).

In addition, we would like to make comment on some aspects of the principles that are particularly relevant to the core business of our agency and to our substantial experience in working with people who access the social security system.

*Principle 3. Creating greater opportunities for people to increase self-reliance and capacity building rather than providing a passive safety net*

Burnside would take issue with the assumption at the core of this principle, which is that the current system is “passive”. We believe that the current system already asks a number of activities and tasks from the people who receive social security payments. This activity should be acknowledged by the review and should be seen as a starting point, rather than starting from a belief that the system is “passive”.

Secondly, we would also argue that the assumption behind the clarifying statement with this principle that “our system should provide people with the information and skills they need to become self-reliant” is an over-simplistic. This is based on the assumption that income generation is the only way that families or individuals can be self-reliant. We would argue that many of the families who use Burnside’s programs have remained enormously, if not fiercely, self-reliant despite needing income support from the government at times of family stress, transition or even in the longer term.

“Passive” is hardly adequate to describe almost any of the people who use our services and we hope that the review would consider the enormous diversity of community involvement, personal history, and work history and family history among those who receive income support. In particular, we would be very disappointed if there was a lack of acknowledgment of women bringing up children on their own in being self-reliant in caring for their families.

In our experience, most of the people whom we work who receive social security want to be financially independent and constantly seek opportunities to increase their skills and employment prospects.

Burnside also believes that all members of the community have a right to access the social security system in times of need. Processes that reduce access to an adequate safety net or that will decrease the ability of individuals and families to provide adequately for themselves and their children should never diminish this right. We believe that some aspects of the government’s concept of mutual obligation will infringe that right, particularly with the use of penalties such as reduction of benefit for non-completion of a mutual obligation activity. The two year waiting period for newly arrived migrants and the truncated access of refugees under the new three year visa are good examples of how such rights are currently being infringed.

*Principle 6. Maintaining the Government’s disciplined approach to fiscal policy*

Sound fiscal policy cannot be separated from sound social policy. The need for a more holistic understanding about the relationship between economic trends and the experience of poverty and disadvantage is a crucial step in understanding how it is that some families become enmeshed in a cycle of disadvantage.

The best example of this is the proven relationship between investment in early intervention services to prevent child abuse and neglect and the substantial reduction in negative social and economic impacts for children and the community over the long term. For example, the Perry Pre-School Project in the United States.

Findings from the project was that the children who had been part of the program of early childhood education and home visits showed at 27 years of age:

- to have significantly higher monthly earnings than the control group,
- significantly higher percentages of home ownership and second car ownership,
- significantly higher levels of completed schooling,
- significantly fewer arrests and
- a lower percentage were receiving social security during the previous 10 year period (Schweinhart et al 1993).

A lack of economic investment in constructive social programs is poor fiscal management. In the Australian context we have seen the decline in the economic prosperity of rural and regional areas because of a lack of investment in constructive industry, social and community services and employment programs. The impact of this is stark: higher unemployment, more social problems and a drain of people, energy and enthusiasm from the bush.

Therefore we believe that it is only possible to have sound fiscal management when it is based on sound social policy that is about constructively supporting people in their times of crisis and need.

### **3. The Impact of the Review on Children and Families**

Burnside's key concerns about the approaches outlined in the discussion paper *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the Twenty-First Century* are related to the impact on the welfare and well-being of children and young people. Any changes to the way that social security payments are made and any costs arising from "mutual obligation" activities will be felt in families and have an impact on children's quality of life.

Our concerns stem from two sources the first is our experience in working with vulnerable children, young people and families the second is research on the impact of poverty.

#### **3.1 Experience in working with vulnerable children, young people and families**

The majority of the people who use our services are from families that rely on the social security system for income support both in times of crisis and transition or over a longer period. We have seen the impact of the struggle of families to maintain secure and adequate housing and provide clothing, food and education for children while parents look for work, attempt to retrain or care for the family as a sole parent.

Inevitably we see the end results of family crises, often brought about by the enduring stress of poverty and disadvantage or the difficulties of parent's earlier lives. The results of these crises include family breakdown, breakdown of relationships between parents and children, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and many other incremental changes to a family's ability to provide for their children.

Our experience in working with single parent families shows that they are a particularly vulnerable group with diverse experiences of work, family life and social security. One reason this vulnerability arises is because of the very small margin for change in families' week to week accounts. For some families, during weeks where an extra expense is incurred, the food budget is the first budget to be cut. These families whose sole income comes from social security basically live in poverty. This poverty is not the result of a plan or usually even a decision that women would choose. However, because of relationship breakdown, domestic violence, unplanned pregnancies or whatever reason, women are often left to bring up their children without the support and assistance of a permanent partner.

Burnside's experience of working with single parents is, of course, that of working with families who are struggling with the tasks of parenting on their own. This may be because of a mother's previous life experiences, such as being abused as a child, becoming the victim of domestic violence or of a lack of family and support to assist in learning and being a parent. Or it may be because of major life crises that have eclipsed the family's ability to function as they would like: for example unemployment, harm to a child, change of location and housing or radical change to available income.

When people who have used our services describe their experience of poverty, they describe how poverty is pervasive throughout their lives. Dianne, a woman who participated in a Burnside program, described the impact of poverty on her family:

*You're always hoping that the fridge doesn't break down or hoping that your washing machine doesn't break down because you have no way of buying another one. And you know, it never happens on pay day, always the day before. You're just hoping everything coasts along.*

*My dream is to have two hundred dollars in the bank or even three hundred to fall back on, which I never have. It would be a little safety net for times like when I've had to take one of the kids to hospital. Sometimes you have to wait all night and you've got nothing to eat and you can't get a drink out of the machine or chips or anything.*

*Mum does help but she is on the pension so she can't help as much as she'd like to. But she helps all the time. We would never starve because Mum is there. If I am broke for groceries, Mum will always lend me the money.*

*The kids can eat a lot of food and sometimes we're short of it. Occasionally we have what we call a 'pretend chicken dinner'. We'll have baked potatoes, cauliflower, carrots and gravy but no chicken. Life like this has its bonuses though. Like if we're really poor the night before pay night and we only have bread or something, the food next day tastes really lovely.*

*We don't go without a lot of things but it can be very tight. I haven't done as good a job at hiding the occasional poverty as my Mum did, no. I do think the children have the impression that they are poor in some ways and I feel dreadful about that. I want them to have everything. I want them to feel secure (Burnside 1998: 66 -67).*

Burnside urges the Reference Committee to be vigilant in protecting children from becoming disadvantaged by social security system that is punitive toward their parents and in doing so, reduces the life chances of a child.

Given our experience in working with families, Burnside has concerns about the appropriateness of aspects of mutual obligation to very vulnerable families.

“Mutual obligation activities” that incur extra costs or push parents to undertake work in areas away from places where they have family and community networks, childcare and education do not add to the overall well being of children. Such “obligations” may harm the wellbeing of individuals within the family and of the overall family network.

If families are forced to relocate to seek or take up job offers, even if those offers are for short term work, in order to continue to receive income support this will have a negative impact on children. This kind of relocation may impact on children’s lives by interrupting schooling or child care arrangements, separating them from family and friendship networks, increasing adjustment difficulties as a result of moving house and a potential for an increase in family stress and conflict.

Where families have been involved with child protection services because of concerns about the welfare and wellbeing of children, parenting, discipline or family relationships, separation from those services who have provided support and assistance could also impact on how families cope. This may put children and young people at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect or of adding unhealthy tension to already difficult situations. Our experience shows that continuity of service is very important in assisting families to make lasting change.

If a family member is expected to take on a mutual obligation activity that included for example, voluntary work in the community, this might push a family who is struggling beyond their ability to cope. The stressors involved in purchasing or borrowing appropriate clothing, purchasing transport, organising child care (either all day or before and after school care) whilst still seeking work or taking primary responsibility for running a household (with no extra finances to facilitate this) our experience tells us that the only way that extra costs would be accommodated is through a reduction of budgets for essential items. We believe that this is unnecessary and unfair. The whole point of a social security system is to protect the most vulnerable at times of crisis or when difficulties continue over the long term. When the system stops constructively supporting those who are most in need it has stopped being a support and begun as a way of punishing people using an economic hierarchy. Tragically, children are always the ones to suffer most under such a hierarchy.

### **3.2 Poverty and its Social Impacts on Children**

Poverty has profound impacts on the life chances of children. The presence of poverty mediates a range of social problems that are both limiting of individuals’ development and costly to the nation.

Poverty is more than just experiencing a lack of income/money. It is a complex phenomenon that includes a lack of choice, impoverishment of social support and a reduced opportunity to make the decisions that affect one's life. However as research and experience suggest, adequate income is a critical factor in poverty. As Parton has stated " Money supports, deepens and enlarges the social systems that relieve individuals from their own personal failings (Parton 1985: p27).

This section will briefly describe the extent of child poverty in Australia, the damaging consequences of poverty and the importance of an adequate social security system in protecting children from poverty and its negative consequences.

### **3.2.1 The extent of poverty**

Estimates of poverty vary according to the way the figure is calculated. What this should not obscure is the fact that there are substantial numbers of Australian children living in poverty and the impact this has on their lives.

In Australia in 1995/96 there were well over 1 million children living in poverty using the Henderson poverty line. Even when the much lower half current average income measure is used, 612 000 dependent children are living in poverty in Australia (Szukalska & Harding 1998). This means hundreds of thousands of children whose life chances are diminished and whose potential to contribute to themselves, their future families and the life of the nation is put at grave risk.

Szukalska and Harding (1998) found that the majority of children in poverty were in one of the following situations:

- The head of the family is unemployed
- The head of the family is a sole parent, or
- One or both parents has employment but is on low wages (working poor).

### **3.2.2 The impact of poverty on children, families and the whole community**

Research has demonstrated poverty's association with a range of social ills. This section will explore four consequences of poverty that highlight the significance of reducing poverty to achieve good social and economic outcomes. It is important to note that these and other consequences of poverty are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

The four consequences are:

- The impact of poverty on parenting
- The link between poverty and educational disadvantage (school failure)
- The consequences of poverty for child and adult health
- The effect of poverty on rates of child abuse and neglect.

***The impact of poverty on parenting.*** Recent Australian research shows that economic and social stress undermines parenting in critical ways (Weatherburn and Lind 1997). It leads to parents being less nurturant and more rejecting of their children. Chronically stressed parents are less likely to give children positive attention. Appropriate supervision of children declines and discipline is more likely to become harsh and erratic. The effect of poverty in reducing parental monitoring and positive supervision of children is especially significant. Both nurturing and appropriate monitoring of children are associated with healthy child development and the growth of competence (Amato, 1987). The disruptive effect of poverty on parental care is stark:

*“... the more efforts mothers saw themselves as having to make to balance family needs and family income, the more distressed and less nurturant they became”* (Weatherburn and Lind 1997).

The effect of poverty in reducing parental monitoring and positive supervision of children is especially significant. Both nurturing and positive interaction with children are associated with healthy child development and the development of a range of competencies (Amato, 1987). More recent research has identified how early parenting practices can permanently affect the development of the child's brain with huge impacts on later learning and behaviour (Perry 19).

***The link between poverty and educational disadvantage:*** There are well established links between poverty and educational disadvantage. We have already seen how poverty disrupts the parenting process. Poorer children are less likely to receive the stimulation that encourages early language development, literacy and numeracy. This is not only because poorer parents may be less likely to have the skills and resources themselves, it is also because they have less access to good quality child care for their children.

The disadvantage continues upon entry to formal schooling. Research by the Brotherhood of St Laurence demonstrate the link between poverty and poor educational outcomes in the first years of school (Taylor and MacDonald, 1998). Poorer families had difficulty paying school costs and their children regularly missed out on school excursions or other activities. Children from low-income families had lower reading scores, were less confident in the classroom and generally did not perform as well as better off children.

The West Australian Child Health Survey has revealed some underlying mechanisms that mediate the impact of parent's economic status on child school outcomes (Zubrick *et al*, 1997). The study found that parental educational level and employment had a marked affect on children's academic performance. Parents with higher education had more complex jobs that provided greater opportunity for self-direction. These job conditions affected the parent's values, their ways of seeing the world and their sense of control (the sense of being able to shape their own lives).

These attributes influence parent's skills and knowledge and help them care better for their children, which in turn leads to improved school outcomes for those children.

Clearly, the impact of poverty on educational disadvantage is established early. Equally clearly, its impact may last a lifetime. Educational success is a predictor of later employment and the type of work that is secured. Those with less education are less likely to be in employment and their work is likely to be less stimulating and rewarding.

***The consequences of poverty for child and adult health:*** The poorer health of those with fewer economic resources is apparent on nearly all standardised health measures. Death rates are highest in the most disadvantaged areas. Poor people are more likely to have serious chronic illnesses than individuals on higher-incomes. Low income groups are more likely to report recent illness and rate their health as poor or fair rather than good or excellent. Many of these outcomes are associated with greater prevalence of risk factors among low income groups. These include smoking, alcohol consumption (for males) and being overweight and inactive (Commonwealth Department of health, Housing and Community Services).

Research also demonstrates a strong relationship between poverty and ill health in children. Children from low-income families are:

- Less likely to be breast fed
- Less likely to receive full immunisation
- More likely to be premature and have low birth weight
- More likely to have developmental delay
- More likely to have developmental delay
- More likely to have a higher injury rate
- More likely to have behaviour disorders (Jolly 1990).

The poor health of children has both short and long term effects with consequences for schooling, employment and future family functioning. There are also massive financial costs of intervention to address these issues and their later effects.

Many of the factors that contribute to ill health are preventable conditions or able to be ameliorated through the social environment. In particular broad infrastructure factors that impact on poverty need to be addressed. Provision of adequate income, housing, nutrition and access to meaningful work are essential to reduce vulnerability to poverty. In addition early intervention programs that address issues of parenting, education, health and child abuse and neglect are required to lessen the negative outcomes associated with poverty.

Extensive research on the impact of poverty on children and families raises serious questions about possible changes to the social security system, particularly those that would affect a families stable income.

### **3.2.5 Poverty and Child Abuse**

The connections between economic stress and child maltreatment are indisputable. However these connections are complex and cannot be reduced to judgemental attitudes towards people who lack financial resources. Welfare practitioners have long been aware that poverty exacerbates stress and disrupts the parenting process. The economic, social and cultural deprivations that can arise from poverty have a range of effects on how families function:

- Poorer parents get less relief from the constancy of parenting.
- They are less able to afford baby-sitting, quality childcare, entertainment, social or sports activities or to go on stress relieving holidays.
- They are more likely to live in substandard and crowded housing where it is difficult to get a break from other family members.
- Parents living in relative poverty are less able to afford parenting books, resources or courses that give practical input on parenting skills and coping with the normal stresses of parenting (Tregeagle 1990).

Burnside would argue that rather than focussing on minimising income support and thereby reducing the life chances of children living in poverty, governments should be investing in children and families with positive social support strategies that have a focus on the long term outcomes of safer, happier and more healthy communities. Research has demonstrated, for example, the impact of constructive social support for low-income at-risk families in the form of pre-school interventions, home visiting for new parents and support in parenting skills (for example Shweinhart *et al* 1993, Olds *et al*). Significantly, successful programs that engage families with appropriate services and in communities are generally voluntary and have the best results because families have a strong sense of ownership of the program.

### **3.3 Locational Disadvantage**

The lack of opportunity for children and young people living in poverty is becoming increasingly manifest in particular locations. The impact of locational disadvantage is a major issue for the children we work with. In NSW poverty and unemployment can almost be predicted by postcode as it becomes increasingly concentrated in particular suburbs. The life chances of children living in these communities are severely eroded as unemployment and poverty destroy social support structures. These communities seldom command positive attention and often receive negative publicity that perpetuates the social disadvantage of the people who live there. The lack of visibility means that political decision makers and

other members of the community are not aware of what life is like for people living in these areas. In particular, the impact for children in terms of lack of access to educational and vocational opportunities, lack of access to leisure facilities and a lack of a positive community with social infrastructure that addresses their needs and concerns means that the children and young people in these areas are seriously disadvantaged.

The impact of locational disadvantage needs to be considered in this Review. The differential access to employment, educational and vocational opportunities for people living in disadvantaged areas should be taken seriously into account in any compassionate, socially responsible approach to social security. A social security system that does not take into account the local and regional differences in employment, education, training, social infrastructure, public transport, housing and community support is one that will further punish those who are already experiencing significant disadvantage.

In conclusion, our practice experience and the research evidence shows that any changes to stable income support and assistance are likely to have a direct and significant effect on children. When policy changes are considered it is crucial to remember that the wellbeing of children is inextricably linked to the economic and social well being of their parents, communities and social networks.

## 4. The Significance of Social Support

### 4.1 Early Intervention Programs

Burnside's practice experience demonstrates how constructive services that support families to make change can remake a family's concept of themselves and deliver enormous benefits to the adults and children in the family and to the community around them.

For example, Burnside's NEWPIN program works with very disadvantaged and vulnerable families (many of whom are single parent families) in Bidwill in Sydney's western suburbs. The women who come to NEWPIN are at risk of abusing their children or may have already been involved with the Department of Community Services because of issues relating to their parenting. The mothers who attend NEWPIN frequently have little sense of self worth, have experienced very troubled childhoods themselves and often are suffering from depression. NEWPIN offers a five day drop in program, a women's therapy group, children's activities and a Family Play Program where mothers can learn to actively play with their children.

Burnside's NEWPIN program has had enormous success in working with families where extremely difficult personal and parenting issues combined with poverty had resulted in families becoming socially isolated, internally tense and more distant from the labour market as a result. In a relatively short period of time, the NEWPIN model has stood beside families, offering constructive and positive support and professional services and seen remarkable and lasting change in the relationships between mothers and their children.

One woman who has used NEWPIN described her experience in this way:

*"I have received lots of support with the children from the play workers and personal support from the staff and other members. I have learned many parenting skills and a different way of communicating with my children. A lot of what I have learned I have been able to use at home and its making a difference with my family. I am actually playing with my children now and enjoying it."* (Lisa, NEWPIN Program)

Many of the families involved in NEWPIN have begun to contribute back to community through activities such as volunteer work at the program, reading at the local school and involvement in local projects. We believe that this comes about because the provision of positive social support encourages people to value themselves and their community more highly. The spontaneous wish to "give back" to the community can only come as the result of positive experiences and a decrease in stressors within families. It is simply not possible to force people to contribute back to the community positively through punitive sanctions and increases in stress on families only makes it harder for families to become involved in their community.

The significance of early intervention programs has been strengthened by recent research projects into brain development. Researchers such as Fraser Mustard (1999) have demonstrated how the first few years of life set basic competencies, coping skills and determine future learning and behaviour. Research has shown that there are critical sensitive periods for particular aspects of brain capacity that control functions such as literacy, language and social skills.

“It is the kind of and quality of the stimulus the brain receives from our sensing systems that determines the connections around the billions of neurones in our brains” (Mustard 1999: p7).

For example, a lack of physical contact due to neglect can lead to diminishing connections among the nerve cells and a smaller cortex, that part of the brain that governs emotional response. Similarly literacy is dependent on language development that is established early. If a child misses out on the “kind of stimulation that lays the basis for language in this critical early period the down stream effects can be serious” (Mustard 1999: p9). Mustard advocates a much greater investment in supportive early childhood programs as a necessary basis for any nations future social competency.

## **4.2 Child Care**

One of the key connections made in the discussion paper is the importance of the availability of affordable, quality and accessible child care, particularly for women who are single parents seeking work, or seeking to retrain to rejoin the workforce. The paper’s discussion about sole parents is that child care is available and accessible enough to allow women to become involved in labour market related activities when their children are at a younger age than they are currently required to under the current system. In our discussion about childcare, we are including programs such as family day care, long day care centres, pre-schools and before- or after- school care.

Burnside would suggest that many of the women with whom we work would be interested in becoming involved in education, training or work when their children are young or in school, however that such a choice needs to be the best one for the children and the family as a whole.

The issues around childcare are so complex. While the discussion paper makes a nodding reference to difficulties in relation to childcare, it hardly takes into account the personal, community and infrastructure issues that impact on decisions surrounding childcare.

Firstly, it is important to note that it seems rather paradoxical that the same government who have made it more attractive for women in two parent families to care for their children full time rather than go into the paid workforce now finds it necessary to attempt to compel some mothers into the paid workforce. The review needs to address and clarify how it is that these two approaches can co-exist.

The use of child care is a major decision for any family, consisting as it does of a choice arrived at after understanding what the family believes is appropriate care for their child, how the cost of the formal childcare fits into the family budget and how to incorporate care into the family lifestyle. For low-income families, as much as other families, there is a need for respect for the choices that an individual family makes in relation to their children. However, it is also important to be aware of the constraints that may act more seriously on families on low incomes than on middle- or high-income families. These constraints relate to key issues in the childcare system: flexibility, access/availability and quality.

Formal childcare arrangements such as child care centres and pre schools are not generally flexible about booking arrangements and opening hours. For example, with the exception of occasional care centres, child care centres and other programs administered by councils, are not able to give children places based on whether or a not a child's parent(s) was working. The impact of this for people who work in a casual position or are on call as temporary workers is that child care is a very expensive option because even when a member of the family is not working or studying, the child care place has to be paid for. Very few (if any) childcare centres are able to offer short term, or month to month childcare places.

In order for sole parents, or any other working parents to take up opportunities for work or training or even to have time to prepare job applications, childcare is a necessity. However, optimum childcare arrangements are not always available and even with the assistance from government programs (interestingly enough not included in the review) are not affordable for families living in or on the edge of poverty.

Access to childcare is related to financial resources and the availability of reasonable childcare located in an area that is convenient for the family. Growing locational disadvantage in those areas with high levels of unemployment has become more marked in the provision of quality childcare. This has been particularly problematic following cuts to government funding to community childcare centres and changes to priority access to childcare.

Quality is a major issue in relation to childcare. Parents are understandable reluctant to use childcare where they are not confident of its quality and benefits for their children.

When families on low incomes are forced to use informal, unsupervised childcare arrangements, these raise concerns about the welfare and wellbeing of children. We believe that any changes to the social security system that would force children or families into making compromises on the quality of care for children because of pressure to participate in training or labour market related activities, would be a retrograde step for children.

In addition, the discussion paper refers to the Jobs Education and Training (JET) program, targeted at single parents seeking to undertake training or job seeking. While Burnside supports the work of the JET Program, it is clear to us that in its current state the JET program cannot provide assistance to the vast majority of women. Currently JET programs are under funded and understaffed and are not able to meet the needs of the already high number of women who require their services. In addressing this issue, the paper suggests that there is a “potentially increased role for programs like JET”. This does not address the question and leaves Burnside concerned about the effects of a lack of thought around these issues in the development of major changes to the social security system.

**Burnside calls on the Reference Group for Welfare reform to consider childcare and its relationship to social security as a priority. The lack of real discussion or understanding about childcare in the discussion paper has raised concerns for Burnside about how the best interests of children will be affected by any changes to the social security system.**

## 5. Conclusion

Burnside believes that a national system of social security should be focused on the values of compassion, respect, integrity, care and equity. We believe that access to a social safety net and constructive social supports are basic rights in our democracy.

A focus on providing constructive opportunities for those receiving social security and income support to participate in labour market related activities is an important aspect for social security. However, we believe that social security needs to be placed in a context of how it is that people live their lives and the global, national and local issues that impact on all of the employment and related issues.

Policy in relation to social security needs to focus on giving people opportunities and ensuring that the most vulnerable are not penalised by the system. Importantly, the impact of the social security system on the most vulnerable, such as children and young people needs to be thoroughly assessed regularly.

The social security system should seek to enable people to gain the skills and experience they require to break free of cycles of disadvantage rather than punish them for experiencing poverty, lack of education or unemployment.

Finally, we believe that the key focus of government should not be in minimising income support to the most basic level, but in creating real jobs and helping people to find them in a positive and supportive way.

It is clear to us that policy making based on the best interests of children and young people would yield a significantly different outcome in terms of how money was spent and where targeted services would focus. Any approach to social security and social support needs to be based on investing in the future of children and young people and acknowledging their right to grow up in safety, security with the opportunity to learn and explore and fulfil their personal potential. This can only be achieved when a true commitment is made to providing consistent income support that is adequate to meet the needs of families as well as constructive and positive social supports.

Therefore we believe that to invest in children and families is the most effective way of moving forward. Minimising income support will only exacerbate the complex and difficult experience of poverty. Placing more stressors on the most vulnerable families in our community will not assist in making lasting change in families, but will entrench difficulties and eventually reduce the life chances of children and young people.

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