

MEDIA RELEASE: Coalition Of Organisations Draws Attention To Health Impacts Of Welfare System, Need For Drastic Action

Further Info: Anti-Poverty Network SA spokesperson Pas Forgione on 0411 587 663 or at antipovertynetwork.sa@gmail.com.

On Monday June 5th, an alliance of community and health organisations from across Australia will release an open letter to the federal government, highlighting the health impacts of our impoverishing, punishing welfare system, and the need for significant policy changes.

The letter, a mix of analysis, data, and personal testimony, has been endorsed by 28 state and national organisations, including: Australian Public Health Association, Australian Unemployed Workers' Union, Fair Go For Pensioners, National Council for Single Mothers and their Children, and Uniting Communities. It has also been signed by prominent academics and advocates like Professor Eva Cox, and Dr. John Falzon from St. Vincent de Paul, and numerous welfare recipients personally affected by the issues raised.

The letters draws attention to three urgent health issues requiring substantial responses from the government:

- 1) The grossly inadequate Newstart Allowance, how its low rate is affecting the physical and mental wellbeing of job-seekers.
- 2) Major restrictions imposed on accessing the Disability Support Pension, what this has meant for those with serious, long-term, and chronic health issues.
- 3) Centrelink's unfair, complicated rules around medical certificates and exemptions.

Included are demands for:

- An immediate, \$100 per week increase to Newstart, which has not been raised in real terms for over two decades, and is \$160 per week below the poverty-line.
- An end to moves to tighten eligibility for the Disability Pension, and remove current recipients.
- A Senate inquiry into how Centrelink deals with medical exemptions and certificates.

The letter also voices its opposition to recent budget announcements, particularly the proposal that the Disability Pension not be available to those whose health issues are solely caused by substance abuse.

Anti-Poverty Network SA spokesperson Pas Forgione said, “the central theme of the open letter is that our welfare system, instead of acting as a safety-net, is harming those needing it.”

“These harms are multiple. It is Newstart recipients skipping meals, fresh fruit and vegetables, to make ends meet. Being unable to afford dental care and medication. Being isolated, unable to participate in community life and maintain social networks. The constant financial anxiety that comes from being on an extremely low income. “

“Or it is the quarter of Newstart recipients with a diagnosed disability who cannot qualify for the Disability Pension. Or the over 50,000 Disability Pensioners who have been kicked off the payments over the past few years, most of whom are now stuck on Newstart and unable to cope with their onerous 'Mutual Obligation' requirements. Or Centrelink rejecting medical certificates from those who clearly are not able to work.”

“What we see over and over again is a welfare system that through the poverty and stress it creates, not only damages recipients' health, but in some cases worsens existing health conditions”, Pas Forgione said.