



## **Re: Newstart Allowance and related payments**

I am writing to you as Prime Minister to urge your support of the Australian Council of Social Services' (ACOSS) Raise the Rate campaign. Women's Health West endorses ACOSS' campaign, which recommends raising the rate of Newstart and other related payments by at least \$75 a week. We also endorse the recommendation for an independent and expert decision-making panel to determine payment rates and the process for accessing payments.

Women's Health West provides specialist family violence services to women and their children across Melbourne's western metropolitan region. We also undertake advocacy and run programs that promote equity and justice for women and girls. As the largest women's health organisation in Victoria, receiving over 20,000 referrals every year, we see firsthand the consequences of insufficient government payments on the lives of women and children.

Research continually demonstrates that Newstart is inadequate and yet Newstart payments have not been increased in 25 years. The discrepancy between Newstart and minimum wage – a difference of \$462.80 per week – highlights the insufficiency of Newstart and the inability of existing mechanisms to set an appropriate and adequate rate. The current Senate Committee inquiry into Newstart and related payments is an important opportunity to raise income support rates and review the processes that determine rates and access.

While Newstart is inadequate for all recipients, social inequities mean that some recipients are disproportionately affected by its inadequacy, particularly women. It is well-established that there is financial inequity across genders—women being more likely to live in poverty, women over 50 being overrepresented as Newstart recipients, and women over 55 being the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness is the primary concern identified by women accessing Women's Health West's family violence services. Women and children experiencing family violence are often forced to leave their homes to escape violence and have to rely on Newstart and related payments to re-establish their lives. Because Centrelink payments are inadequate to support people into the rental market, women are often forced to choose between homelessness and returning to an abusive partner.

Further, unpaid caring responsibilities disproportionately fall to women; women make up 84 per cent of single parents. With the single parent payment set below the poverty line, it is unsurprising that single parents are three times more likely to live in poverty. When women are forced into poverty by the inadequacy of Newstart and related payments, so are their children. Currently, 17.3 per cent of children in Australia live in poverty, which is more than one in six children.

EMAIL [info@whwest.org.au](mailto:info@whwest.org.au)  
FAX (03) 9689 3861  
WEB [www.whwest.org.au](http://www.whwest.org.au)  
ABN 24 036 234 159

317 - 319 Barkly Street  
Footscray VIC 3011



Along with inadequate payment rates, Centrelink's processes to access and receive payments cause immense stress and can negatively affect recipients' health. Participants in Women's Health West's financial literacy programs report that their payments are incorrectly suspended, with very little or no notice, and many are not receiving the correct payments. Women's Health West recently worked intensively with Karen and Karenni women to increase their understanding of financial systems in Australia. Through this program, participants described their experiences with Centrelink in the following ways:

***"I gave a medical certificate to Centrelink, but the job provider keeps sending me texts to attend the appointment, but I am in hospital."***

***"I go to Centrelink and they tell me to go to JobActive. I go to JobActive and they send me back to Centrelink. They keep sending me to and fro."***

Women's Health West recommends an immediate raise to Newstart and related payments and the appointment of an independent decision-making panel to determine payment rates and the process for accessing payments.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Robyn Gregory  
Chief Executive Officer  
Women's Health West

**PHONE** (03) 9689 9588  
**EMAIL** [info@whwest.org.au](mailto:info@whwest.org.au)  
**FAX** (03) 9689 3861  
**WEB** [www.whwest.org.au](http://www.whwest.org.au)  
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