

Submission:

Social Services Legislation Amendment (Consistent Waiting Periods for New Migrants) Bill 2021

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the *Social Services Legislation Amendment (Consistent Waiting Periods for New Migrants) Bill 2021* (*the Bill*) for consideration by the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community, and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

The Centre does not support this Bill. Extending the waiting period for newly arrived residents (NARWP) to receive income support payments while they face all the challenges associated with trying to settle into a new country without a safety net of support for four years, is unconscionable.

It is estimated that in light of this amendment, 45,000 families and 13,200 individuals who will be granted a permanent residency on or after 1 January 2022, would lose access to a wide range of social security payments.¹

Unreasonable expectations

In his second reading speech introducing this proposed amendment, Minister Tudge states:

The newly arrived resident's waiting period is a longstanding feature of our welfare payments system, which is non-contributory and residentary based. It reflects the reasonable expectation that skilled and family migrants who choose to come to or remain in Australia will take steps to provide for their own financial support when they first become permanent residents.²

However, many newly arrived migrants face multiple economic and other barriers on arrival, including language issues, discrimination in employment, inadequate knowledge about the labour market, and unrecognised qualifications. Country of origin can also be a factor in whether a newly arrived migrant can gain employment quickly or at all. In February 2018, 83 per cent of all adult

¹ Economic Justice Australia 2021, Media Release: Budget 2021-22, 12 May 2021; see also Economic Justice Australia 2021, [Briefing: budget 2021 social security measures](#), Economic Justice Australia, Sydney.

² Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 24 June 2021, (Alan Tudge, Minister for Education and Youth), <<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2Feb97f924-9ac6-4ef0-a3d7-0b15830be9b1%2F0043%22>>.

migrants from North-West Europe were employed 5-10 years after arrival, compared with 30 per cent of those migrating from North Africa or the Middle East.³ Having to wait four years to be able to gain income support while experiencing increasingly dire economic circumstances is likely to place extreme pressure on families, including living in poverty.

We also know that many people are granted permanent residency on-shore, after living on long-stay temporary visas for many years. Our members report that many newly arrived migrants on long-stay temporary visas face precarious employment and barriers to accessing housing. These challenges have intensified during the long lock-down experienced in Victoria because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitality and other casualised workforces were hard hit and these are areas that employ many new migrants on temporary visas.

The impact of COVID has been significant on newly arrived migrants. Our members have seen increasing levels of distress and mental health concerns, which is in turn affecting family functioning. There are real concerns, held by professionals with many years' experience in responding to social and economic need, that the extension of waiting times to access the FTB Part A will place greater financial pressure on families who are already facing complex challenges and may result in increasing notifications to state child protection authorities.

Children in families who have obtained residency after a period on long-term temporary visas face delays in being eligible for the FTB Part A, as the waiting period commences from the time residency is granted, not from their date of birth if their family was on a long-term temporary visa. Children in these situations, who are born in Australia, will not be eligible to access FTB Part A until after a four-year waiting period.⁴

Unacceptable ramifications

Imposing additional waiting periods to access social security benefits will push already at-risk families to the brink. Without the critical payments of FTB Part A which is paid per child, and the FTB Part B which is paid to low income families (many of whom are single parents), many children will be forced to live in poverty.⁵ The impact of poverty on young children in already highly vulnerable families has been linked to negative impacts on children's health, social, emotional and cognitive development and educational outcomes.⁶

One ramification of the four-year wait for many benefits is the flow-on impact on children who would now miss out on the Commonwealth childhood vaccination program. Receipt of the FTB Part A payment is conditional on a child being vaccinated and on obtaining a health check before the child's fifth birthday. However, without this requirement, families may not be aware of the importance of

³ Davidson, P., Bradbury, B., and Wong, M. 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 2, Who is affected?* ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 4, Sydney: ACOSS.

⁴ Economic Justice Australia 2021.

⁵ Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) 2021, *Briefing paper: why parliament must oppose the Newly Arrived Resident budget cut*, ACOSS, Sydney.

⁶ See for example, Warren, D 2017, *Low-income and poverty dynamics: implications for child outcomes*, Social Policy Research Paper Number 47, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne; NHS Health Scotland 2018, *Child poverty in Scotland: health impact and health inequalities*, NHS Health Scotland, Edinburgh.

vaccination, or have knowledge about how to access Australia's vaccination program. This could lead to the unintended policy consequence of newly arrived migrant children not being fully vaccinated.⁷

In Australia, many new migrant family members provide high-level care to other family members, including children. Our members tell us that many newly arrived migrants face barriers in accessing supports for their children because of the high cost of obtaining diagnostic assessments, and the high costs and lack of availability of specialist services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy and child counselling. The introduction of a four-year NARWP for Carer Payment and Carer Allowance will make caring for a child with additional needs even more difficult, and place families under greater pressure.

Unacceptable consequences for the community

Our members predict that the extension of NARWP to family and carer payments will result in an additional and increased burden on state health and homelessness services. The Victorian Department of Fairness Families and Housing notes that 'eligibility for most family support services is not determined by visa or residency status' and therefore these services are typically accessible to new migrants.⁸ The Centre's member agencies continue to provide family services, employment and other related programs to newly arrived migrant families and their children to fill the gap left by stringent Commonwealth policies.

Consultations with our members highlights the growing demand for child and family services from refugee and asylum seeker families who are not eligible for Commonwealth support due to the reduction in eligibility for Status Resolution Support Services. Our members expect that this pool of families in need of basic food, health and crisis accommodation assistance will likely expand to include newly arrived migrant families, forced into poverty or low-income situations as a result of the proposed four-year waiting period. Given that current demand is already greater than service capacity, adding newly arrived migrants into the mix will intensify the focus on crisis support, with minimal capacity for our members to provide early help and prevention programs – even though we know from research that supporting families at the earliest opportunity is key to keeping children safe and thriving and keeping the family intact.

It is not acceptable that children in Australia are living below the poverty line. Payments like the FTB Part A provide an additional safety net for families with children and this is even more important for newly arrived residents who are excluded from JobSeeker Payment for a four-year waiting period. Newly arrived migrant families and their children need the security, sense of belonging, and safety which is provided by income support at times of significant need, as well as access to the child focused financial support provided by FTB Part A.

Based on the body of research that makes clear the intersecting links between poverty, lack of social safety nets, precarious work opportunities, stresses on family functioning and poor child development outcomes, the Centre believes the social and economic costs of not providing fair and

⁷ Economic Justice Australia 2021.

⁸ Better Health Channel 2019, Recent arrivals, asylum seekers and family support services, viewed 23 July 2021, <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ServicesAndSupport/recent-arrivals-asylum-seekers-and-family-support>>.

reasonable support to new migrant children and families during the first four years of settlement are likely to be high, not only for those in need but for the social services system as a whole.

Recommendation

That the Committee recommend that the Bill be opposed to protect the rights and wellbeing of children and families who are newly arrived migrants.