



**Submission to the Inquiry into Social Security  
and Other Legislation Amendment  
(Welfare Reform and Reinstatement  
of Racial Discrimination Act) Bills**

February 2010

Carers Australia is the national peak body representing the diversity of Australians who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, mental illness or disorder, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail.

Carers Australia believes all carers, regardless of their cultural and linguistic differences, age, disability, religion, socioeconomic status, gender identification and geographical location should have the same rights, choices and opportunities as other Australians.

They should be able to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing and participate in family, social and community life, employment and education. These rights should be mandated in legislation.

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**CA Submission to the Commonwealth Ombudsman Issues Paper  
“Mistakes and Unintended Consequences— a safety-net approach”**

**Title:**

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## About Carers Australia

Carers Australia is the national peak body representing those Australians who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, mental illness or disorder, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail.

Carers Australia's members are the Carers Associations in each state and territory that deliver specialist information, counselling and other services to carers in the community. Carers Australia is informed about carer issues through its member Carers Associations (the Network of Carers Associations) and its participation in national and international forums.

We believe that all carers are entitled to the same rights, choices and opportunities as other Australians in order to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing and to participate in family, social and community life, employment and education.

## About Australia's Carers

Australia has almost 2.6 million carers, and nearly 500,000 of these are primary carers – the people who provide the most care.<sup>1</sup>

Carers are sometimes referred to as 'family carers' to distinguish their role from other caring roles in our society such as paid care providers, foster carers, parents or guardians.

Many carers are termed 'sandwich carers or the sandwich generation' because they care for more than one person – a frail parent, a partner or a child with a disability or chronic condition. Anyone, anytime can become a family carer and the caring journey can last a lifetime. This can be from the birth of a child through to their own inability to continue to provide care because of age or illness.

Carers are the foundation of our aged and community care systems, and the annual replacement value of the vital care they provide is over \$30.5 billion. In 2005 it is estimated that carers provided 1.2 billion hours of unpaid care and the productivity loss of this care is approximately \$4.9 billion.<sup>2</sup>

## Diversity of carers

Carers are from all walks of Australian society and come into the caring journey at various stages throughout their life. Carers are young, of working age, older, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, they live in rural and remote areas, and may have been born outside Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has identified:

- 350,000 Australians under the age of 25 provide care to a family member who has a disability, or a mental or chronic illness<sup>3</sup>
- 170,000 carers under the age of 18<sup>4</sup>
- 31,600 Indigenous carers over the age of 15<sup>5</sup>
- 620,000 of Australia's carers born outside Australia<sup>6</sup>
- 366,700 of those born in other than main English-speaking countries.<sup>7</sup>

# Young Carers

## A vulnerable and 'at risk' group

Young carers are a group of young Australians under 26 years of age who provide unpaid care in families where someone has an illness, a disability, a mental health issue or who has an alcohol or other drug problem.

They are required to perform the same caring tasks as older carers including providing emotional support and assisting with mobility, the provision of medications, housework and intimate care tasks. The time spent caring can be as much as 30 hours per week – almost equivalent to full time employment. Young carers have to juggle their caring responsibilities and their schooling.

Naturally, young carers see themselves as daughters or sons, brothers or sisters who are part of a family rather than a “young carer”. A general lack of awareness and focus on the needs of young carers, within schools and among other professionals, means their needs can go unnoticed.

We do know that it is very difficult to accurately estimate the numbers of young carers across Australia due to the numbers who are 'hidden' in our community. However, current figures suggest that there are:

- 348,700 under the age of 26, and of these 170,600 are young carers under the age of 18
- 132,000 are primary carers – that is they provide the most care<sup>8</sup>
- approximately 105,500 carers are under the age of 15<sup>9</sup>
- one-third to one-half of young carers live in rural and remote areas of Australia where services that support families are, in general, not adequate.

Supporting young carers is particularly important as young carers are less likely to complete secondary education than their non-carer peers and have an increased likelihood of low socio-economic status over their lifetime.

## **Carers and the Proposed Welfare Reforms**

Carers Australia is concerned that the welfare management measures to address school attendance outlined in the bills may have a negative impact on young carers and their families.

While Carers Australia supports all children and young people in Australia being able to access education, the reality is that many young people with caring responsibilities face significant challenges in balancing these responsibilities with school attendance.

Primarily we are concerned about caring families already facing precarious financial situations who may be trying to make the best of difficult circumstances and who would be further disadvantaged by the suspension of income support payments.

These families may be unable to address poor school attendance due to a lack of support and options. For some caring families the threat of payment withdrawal would simply place them at a significant financial disadvantage that they would be unable to remedy without another form of support.

### **Welfare reform pilots**

Changes involving welfare management included in the bills under inquiry came to the attention of Carers Australia as a result of their ability to impact on carers in families in receipt of income support payments. This was particularly apparent in the introduction of pilot programs in Logan, QLD and surrounding areas involving the suspension of income support payments to encourage school attendance and engagement.

In the design of the policy for these pilots, the negative impacts for those families in with caring responsibilities was either not considered, or not adequately accounted for. Of particular concern for Carers Australia were the potential negative impacts on young carers who often have difficulty balancing care requirements with schooling.

The measures, which may penalise caring families for lack of attendance instead of assisting young people to meet their educational requirements, could easily result in significant negative outcomes for this group.

Further, Carers Queensland staff members working in the area where pilot trials of the changes took place were concerned that Logan has a high proportion of families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. There are young carers in many of these families, as mental illness resulting from torture and trauma is a common experience. CALD families may be especially vulnerable to any negative outcomes of the proposed welfare management measures.

### **Unidentified young carers**

School attendance measures are also particularly concerning for those young people who have not as yet identified as young carers. Identification is a major issue for young carers. If young carers do not identify – or are not identified by others as carers – they and the person for whom they are caring can miss out on the support that may be available. Research shows that caring without support can lead to social isolation and difficulties throughout their education years.

Where schools are aware of the homelife of these young people, they are often able to provide understanding and support, such as flexible arrangements, to ensure that their issues can be addressed. However, many young people simply will not be aware of, identify or disclose their caring situation for a wide variety of reasons including the fear of stigma and/or of telling their stories to relevant government departments.

### **Measures to safeguard caring families**

Carers Australia believes that exemptions from the welfare management measures should apply to family carers. We believe that a measure such as an exemption from the penalties on the basis of caring responsibilities should be introduced.

Without introducing an overarching measure for all caring families it is possible that caring families may fall through the gaps. However, a system that is able to take account of individual cases and provide exemption on the basis of evidence like caring responsibilities may also be enough to protect against negative outcomes for these families.

Carers Australia has long campaigned government and its departments for the inclusion of a 'Carer Impact Statement' in all relevant policies. However, this simple and low-cost initiative to reduce the risk of negative impacts for carers has yet to be given due consideration and could have been responsibly included prior to the introduction of welfare reform measures.

### **Current government response**

In response to our concerns, Carers Australia has been informed by government that concessions or exemptions from the regulations will be made in 'special circumstances' which can encompass caring responsibilities. However, there is still no safeguard in place to protect this group for being negatively affected without good cause, and planning has not been carried out to this effect.

Carers Australia has not been reassured by the government's response outlining that those carers adversely affected in the first instance would eventually have this rectified by government through a process of intervention by social workers and reconsideration of their case at this time.

The more responsible approach would be to protect caring families as a group from adverse effects (which could be significant), rather than including them under catch-all reforms that are designed to encompass all welfare payment recipients and then providing a 'fix' for carers who experience negative outcomes.

In this case we believe adequate consideration has not been given to the seriousness of adverse impacts for caring families, or to the differing nature of demographic groups within the Centrelink client pool; essentially all client groups have instead been 'lumped' together.

Carers Australia believes that government policies often do not devote enough time or resources to the consideration of adverse effects or unintended consequences. A more reasoned approach to the development of policy and legislation that takes into account the needs of carers, such as the use of Carer Impact Statements, could easily avoid much confusion and distress.

## Measures to further support young carers

The current review of non-attendance also presents an opportunity for the government to consider introducing other measures to tackle the poor educational outcomes for young carers, and the barriers and challenges they face to academic achievement and career options.

We believe there must be a greater focus on programs to support young carers in schools, which target young carers as a group at risk of poor school engagement and attendance. Teachers and schools can be equipped to identify and assist these at risk young people and direct them to the help that so many of them need.

There is still much policy and program work needed to address the issue of young carers in the education system. Carers Australia wants to see young carers supported to engage with and succeed in education, not disadvantaged due to lack of school engagement. It is essential that they and their families are not negatively impacted by the proposed trial or future programs stemming from these welfare reform measures.

## Recommendations

- Carers Australia recommends that the impact of policy and legislation on family carers be accounted for through the introduction of a Carer Impact Statement within government legislation and policies related to the welfare reform measures.
- Carers Australia recommends that the government consider further measures at a national level that specifically target young carers and support them to engage with and remain in education.

## Reference

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) 2003 Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings, Australia, Canberra

<sup>2</sup> Access Economics (2005) The Economic Value of Informal Care, prepared for Carers Australia, Canberra

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005a) 2003 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Caring in the Community, Cat No 4430.0.55.003 Canberra

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2008 Cat No 4704.0, Canberra, April 2008

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) Migrants, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia, 2003 Cat No 34150DS004, Canberra November 2007

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004). 2003 Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings, Australia, Canberra

<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998: ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Canberra (unpublished data)