

McAuley Community Services for Women (McAuley) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the McClure Reform process.

McAuley provides much needed services for women and their children who are escaping family violence, and for women who are homeless.

Each year we help around 600 women and children to rebuild their lives, supporting them on their journey towards independence and safer futures.

McAuley is a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy. McAuley runs three vital services that focus on **prevention** and **direct service response with inbuilt early intervention and prevention strategies**. We are holistic in approach, providing a joined-up service for women leaving family violence through to providing them with help to secure employment.

McAuley's work includes developing strategies that address the root causes of violence against women, outlining clear objectives, defining what prevention strategies are seeking to change and how; and putting in place a process of monitoring and evaluation.

Our **service response programs** are:

- **McAuley Care:** Victoria's only round-the clock, 365 days of the year crisis accommodation and support for women and their children escaping family violence, as well as five refuges.
 - **McAuley Care Children** – have a program dedicated to their needs which also focusses on strengthening the mother/child bond
- **McAuley House** that provides accommodation and support for women who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, many with a poor physical and mental health.
- **McAuley Works** is an intensive employment program that assists women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, primarily as a result of family violence and mental health issues, to secure meaningful employment and increases their ability to support themselves financially.

We also run **Engage to Change**, a **primary prevention** program aimed at educating employers and workforces about what family violence is, how to recognise it, help women who are experiencing family violence and refer them to further help.

In general, McAuley notes that:

Australia's growing income inequality has a gendered aspect, particularly related to family violence. Where a woman does work, there is the potential for financial control by the man, known as economic abuse. This can mean a woman has no control of her bank account, finances, savings – in short, anything to do with money.

Aiming to lower benefits, by making employment an attractive option, will only penalise women further and may make no or little difference to women who are experiencing financial control. In some instances, men also forbid their partners to work which, in turn, means that the woman relies totally on the man for money for shopping, clothes and other.

In addition, women who are experiencing family violence are generally the sole caregiver for any children involved. Many women who leave the perpetrator and family home become homeless due to lack of finances, limited public housing or safe, affordable housing. Where they are able to become employed, they often take up part-time work or poor quality jobs in order to be able to have the time to look after their children, these factors, coupled with women earning less compared with men and retiring with less, result in women being more likely than men to live in poverty.

The McClure Reform does not appear to recognise these factors.

For these reasons, McAuley believes that these potential reforms are placed in a context that ensure:

- An equitable distribution of wealth
- Support for an economy which is enhanced by strong, social support systems.
- No disadvantaged group – and especially women who are experiencing or who have experienced family violence (emotional, financial and physical) is worse off.

The aim of any reform is to reduce poverty and improve the well-being of people.

In particular, McAuley notes that employment and training programs (often run by community groups) that recognise the person first and acknowledge their circumstances, barriers and challenges they face, have a higher chance of succeeding than government-run programs.

Specifically about the Review and Budget:

Process

Female consumers should be involved in the next stage of the process. No women's groups or carers groups were included in the initial review stage.

Budget

The Budget deficit, real or otherwise, should not be used as a way to hurt already vulnerable people including women who are homeless as a consequence of family violence or mental health problems.

The Budget failed on both fairness and equity tests and the measures proposed in the McClure Reform will affect women disproportionately.

PILLAR ONE: A SIMPLER AND SUSTAINABLE INCOME SUPPORT SYSTEM

Family payment

Changes to family payments will certainly make life for women who are experiencing family violence more precarious.

Newstart

The Newstart Allowance is too low and causes poverty.

We are particularly concerned about mooted changes to Newstart: it already does not allow people to live at an acceptable standard. We believe the base rate should be increased. Neither do we agree with the proposed changes to eligibility eg: six months of on non-payments. This will push people further into poverty, debt and homelessness. Work for the dole is a failed policy in regard to getting people into paid employment.

We support Anglicare Australia's comment "We are concerned with the plan to shift more people of Disability Pension onto Newstart or something similar. Firstly there are not the jobs available for people with a disability to fill. Secondly the Disability Pension already goes to people who really are extensively incapacitated...The talk about giving people more incentive to work can end up as code for undermining their security, and allow others to blame them for their circumstances."

Disability Support Pension

The rate of women on DSP with mental illness is growing fast.

Mooted changes to the Disability Support Pension are also of grave concern: 88% of women who were supported by McAuley in our homeless program last year were on Newstart or Disability Support Pension. These women are unlikely to get jobs simply because of their type of mental and physical health conditions. Our experience shows that women in these circumstances want to work within their capability but cannot find the right jobs, particularly within the time frames set by the national jobs services, eg: one woman has just been offered one day per week paid employment after five years of searching. She is ecstatic.

Further, the introduction of the NDIS following national trials will have a huge impact on people with disabilities. We believe it is premature to change income support parameters before establishing the findings of the trials.

Housing

As the McClure report notes, family circumstances and the cost of housing are the main reason people don't move for work opportunities. What the report fails to point out is that the cost of housing is a main reason why women who are experiencing family violence do not leave their home: they simply cannot afford to.

Safe, affordable housing for women and their children escaping family violence is critical. Changes to the NPAH, the abolition of the NRAS and other housing schemes is of great concern. The increasing reliance on the private rental market with subsidised market rents is not sustainable for women who are already facing poverty. **The broader issue of housing should be examined in the next stage of the process.**

A good starting point would be to implement the recommendations such as those outlined in 'Getting to Yes – overcoming barriers to affordable family friendly housing in central Melbourne the implementation'. See: www.abp.unimelb.edu.au/research/getting-to-yes

PILLAR TWO: STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CAPACITY

McAuley points out that any reform to the system must allow sustained support that recognises the reality of women's lives. A sole parent entering paid work needs to be able to access a range of assistance including after school care, care for sick children and so on.

Furthermore, unemployment and participation rates for people with a mental illness have remained unchanged over the last decade at around 20% and 28% respectively and are the worst of any disability group. Current employment services achieve poor results for this group.

The Victorian Peak Body, Vicserv have estimated that 8,000 people currently being supported through community mental health services will no longer be eligible through NDIS - this will directly affect the women that McAuley supports. As well, many women suffer from multiple conditions are unable to ascertain their eligibility.

The women we support are assisted by a case manager – both inside McAuley House and in the community. They are often not candidates for employment, even on a part-time basis. Our experience shows that, given the right conditions, women want to work, for example: 22% of participants in McAuley's employment program are either voluntary or non-eligible participants of job services. Many others are actively discouraged from seeking support until their 'problems' are sorted out.

PILLAR THREE: ENGAGING WITH EMPLOYERS

People out of work for a long term need individual skills and capability development to help them find and sustain a job rather than simply being matched to job vacancies. Real jobs and skills development do make a difference.

For women who have or are experiencing family violence, keeping a job is an additional stress.

We recommend the McClure Review team to look further at what the community sector is already doing in terms of engaging with employers.

McAuley, for instance, runs two programs that are inexpensive (we receive no government funding) and yet are highly effective.

Our social enterprise **Engage To Change** educates employers and their staff about family violence, what it is, how to assist staff and how to refer on. The estimated cost of family violence to Australian businesses each year is around \$13.6 billion. This loss is generated through lost productivity, increased use of sick leave, poor performance, absenteeism and recruitment costs. By 2021 this is expected to rise to \$20 billion.

In Australia it is estimated that family violence affects 1 in 3 women; two thirds of women experiencing family violence are in the workforce and many women lose their jobs as a direct result of family violence.

Funds raised through Engage to Change are reinvested into our Job Ready program to support women who have experienced family violence and who are or have been homeless get employment or access training.

We invite members of the McClure Review team to learn more about our Engage to Change program and how it can be rolled out across Australia to assist retaining women in the workforce more effectively and economically.

Our second program that engages with employers is **McAuley Works**. The program supports women to become work-ready and assists them to find work or to access training.

The approach that McAuley has found the most effective is that of recognising the person first and acknowledging their circumstances, barriers and challenges they face. As Anglicare Australia puts it “It’s what we call a life first than work first approach.”

The program uses a case management model, provides post-employment support, has low caseloads and provides tailoring of services according to need. It places people in good jobs with good employment conditions.

The program works with women who otherwise would have been viewed as ‘too difficult’ for the Government Job Services to find jobs. For example, 61% of the women who seek employment through our services are homeless, or at risk of homelessness; 50% are experiencing family violence and are at risk of homelessness and 27% are dealing with mental illness; family violence and risk of homelessness.

Since 2010, McAuley Works has assisted over 210 women, 134 employment places have been found by women on the open market, 45 women are no longer on CentreLink payments which has resulted in a saving to taxpayers of \$1million a year. In short, community programs are working but need to be supported with government funding.

Again we invite members of the McClure Review team to learn more about the McAuley Works program and how it can be rolled out across Australia to assist returning women to the workforce more effectively and economically.

PILLAR FOUR: BUILDING STRONG COMMUNITIES

The most effective way to build strong communities is by reducing inequity. Inequality is being exacerbated by the ‘austerity story’ ie:

- ‘We have a high level of debt and debt is bad’
- ‘Welfare is a drug and recipients feel like they are entitled to benefits but really they are weak, lazy, reckless and undeserving’
- ‘Government is too big and is inefficient and controlling of peoples lives’
- ‘Big is better because it has an economy of scale and can do more for less’
- ‘We’re in a mess (previous government) and this is the only way to fix it’

Building stronger communities requires investment into things such as:

- Public infrastructure and spaces (currently led by multinationals with investment capital)
- Addressing family violence as a national priority
- Ensuring wage equity
- Fair and transparent tax system