

Drug Testing Income Support Recipients

ACOSS Briefing Note

March 2018



The drug testing bill must be opposed.

The government's proposed drug testing policy represents an extraordinary and alarming departure from the key aim of our social security system, which is to provide a safety net for people in need.

The policy, re-introduced by the government on 28 February 2018, was rejected by the Senate in late 2017, following a rigorous Senate inquiry, public forums and numerous submissions by experts including doctors and medical organisations, community groups and advocates, in addition to people on income support. Drug testing further stigmatises people who are unemployed and is an abhorrent breach of privacy of people accessing our social safety net.

The medical experts are united in their opposition to drug testing. They argue that this untested measure detracts from solutions that have been proven to help people with addiction. Why would we divert precious resources to something that will do little to help address addiction?

This bill targets people on unemployment payments who are looking for work.

The bill imposes drug testing for 5,000 people who claim an unemployment payment. They will be tested for selected illicit substances as a condition of receipt of their unemployment payment.

- If a person tests positive once, they will be placed on income management for two years.
- After testing positive, that person would then be tested again 25 working days later. If that person tests positive on the second occasion, they will be forced to undertake treatment or agree to repeated drug tests.
- If a person refuses to take a drug test when they claim a payment, their claim will be denied.

If a person already receiving income support payments refuses a random drug test, they will have their payment cancelled.

There is no evidence that drug testing works.

- ACOSS is unaware of any evidence that shows drug testing of income support recipients is of benefit to the person affected.
- ACOSS is unaware of any evidence that shows that enforced treatment or drug testing of someone found to have used an illicit substance on as few as two occasions is of any benefit to the individual or society.

The bill introduces mandatory income management. There is no evidence the income management reduces serious addiction.

Mandatory drug testing of people who are unemployed has been rejected by the experts.

The Australian Government's own Australian National Council on Drugs looked into the evidence around drug testing and recommended that income support recipients not be drug tested.

The **Australian National Council on Drugs** found:

"There is no evidence that drug testing welfare beneficiaries will have any positive effects for those individuals or for society, and some evidence indicating such a practice could have high social and economic costs. In addition, there would be serious ethical and legal problems in implementing such a program in Australia. Drug testing of welfare beneficiaries ought not be considered." [our italics]



Health and addiction experts overwhelmingly reject the drug testing proposal.

Drug testing income support recipients has been rejected by a broad range of health professionals and addiction specialists who argue that such an approach is ineffective and could threaten the health and wellbeing of people affected.

- The **Australian Medical Association's President Michael Gannon** said: "...this policy is mean, unfair, and totally unnecessary, especially when there are so many positive things the Government could be doing in the health and social policy sectors."
- The **Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA)** stated: "...this proposal does not have an evidence base and is likely to engender greater harm to the community". VAADA also argued that drug testing could compel users to shift to drugs that cannot be detected, which could lead to unknown consequences.
- The **Rural Doctors Association of Australia** stated that "...people who are looking for a job do not generally have any higher incidence of drug use than those in the general population, even if they are receiving government assistance. Those that do have problems will not be helped by measures that feel punitive, such as switching them to a cashless debit card, rather than payments. Tough love is rarely successful in treating substance abuse – particularly when it's from the Government."
- Leading drug policy researcher at UNSW, **Professor Alison Ritter**, estimates drug treatment services are only meeting about 50% of demand, an estimate she describes as conservative.

- **Associate Professor Nadine Ezard**, clinical director of the Alcohol and Drug Service at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, says "...we don't think there is any evidence that mandatory drug testing through the welfare system will actually be effective for employment engagement."
- More than 980 health professionals signed a letter urging parliament to block the drug testing plan. [Their letter says it will push vulnerable people further into the margins.](#)

Even police have disagreed with the drug testing proposal.

- Former federal police commissioner **Mick Palmer** criticised the drug testing plan saying it would harm those who are least able to change their drug consumption.

Drug addiction is a health issue, not a social security issue.

It is grossly unacceptable to force someone who receives an unemployment payment to undergo a drug test. It is an invasion of privacy.

There are a large number of other substantial concerns with the drug testing trial, including the accuracy of drug tests, the legality of drug testing income support recipients, and the risk of people who take medications testing positive.

Introducing drug testing exacerbates an already broken system. The government can do better. Everyone in our economy should be treated fairly – everyone deserves a fair go.

This bill must be opposed.

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