



# Australian Council of Social Service

16 March 2020

## **URGENT**

The Hon. Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
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Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

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ACOSS National Member Organisations

Dear Prime Minister,

## **COVID19 Planning and Response**

I write regarding the outbreak of COVID19, following our letter of Friday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, last week, to update our recommendations and put forward some key steps that should be taken to support and protect our community during this time, and to urge you to work with ACOSS as the national peak body for the community sector, and advocate on issues affecting people on low incomes and people who may be vulnerable.

## **Second Economic Stimulus Package**

We welcome key elements of the first stimulus package announced last week as well as the health package to respond to the virus. However, this package is not enough. There are major gaps and questions that need to be addressed. Please see our media release here:

[https://www.acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media\\_release=while-low-income-relief-welcome-more-than-just-a-quick-fix-needed](https://www.acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media_release=while-low-income-relief-welcome-more-than-just-a-quick-fix-needed).



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The below outlines some key measures needed to complement measures already announced, to boost the health and community response, as well best support people who are most vulnerable at this time.

1. We recommend that you allow for an additional \$750 payments for families whose primary income is social security. For example, at the moment, a single parent who is on Newstart with two children living well below the poverty line will receive the same amount (\$750) as a holder of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card who can have millions of dollars in superannuation. We need the stimulus to be targeted properly at most need, not only to help people without enough money, but to also achieve effective stimulus. An additional \$750 should be paid for each child through FTB Part A for families who receive a base rate of income support.
2. Increase Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments by at least \$95pw on a permanent basis.
3. Extend all business related stimulus measures **to community sector and not for profit organisations**.  
As with the small business measures, this is urgent and important to prevent lay-offs of staff and to retain vital services at this time. We are receiving reports across the country of community organisations facing urgent financial pressures, including due to donor fatigue, falling away of volunteers, reductions in clients which directly cuts funding for organisations that are funded according to the number of people they assist. Further, many not for profit organisations are funded under the same programs as for-profit providers (such as child care, NDIS and employment services) and the treatment of these two types of organisation should be consistent. As you know, many community services are provided by both for profit and for-profit entities and it would be unfair to deny vital support to NFP organisations which face exactly the same serious financial risks.  
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4. We urge you to implement a **stimulus package targeted at the community sector**. This package would be focussed on ensuring continuity of service delivery (eg supporting backfill for staff affected by COVID19, capacity building, replacing volunteers who are sick, isolating or unable to volunteer due to vulnerabilities with a paid workforce and other measures), and ramping up services to people on low incomes in the context of the projected downturn. This could be separate to or part of the “Assistance for severely affected regions” provided in the stimulus package.

## Whole of Government Planning

The community sector plays a pivotal role delivering human services to people across our society. These services are often delivered in close contact with people, including in childcare, aged care, disability services, homelessness services and a range of other settings.

While we note that there has been engagement with some parts of the sector about the impacts of COVID19 on the delivery of services, including a Roundtable this afternoon with Minister Ruston regarding emergency relief and financial counselling. However, a sector wide engagement is necessary.



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5. We request that the Government **urgently convene a community sector roundtable** in partnership with ACOSS to engage with peaks and large service providers about the impacts of COVID19 on the community, and communication needs, particularly people on low incomes and with vulnerability and service provision.

It will be important to include in this discussion representatives of key population groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disability, people experiencing homelessness, older people and a number of other representatives.

We also set out below a list of recommendations for action by portfolio. This list is not comprehensive and we continue to consult with our members and the community as the health and economic crisis unfolds.

## Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

6. We urge you to urgently respond without delay to the specific asks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations. We are aware that, for example, **NACCHO has been briefing the Federal Government about the acute health and related risks faced by communities, including in regional and remote areas. We urge you to respond immediately.** ACOSS has also identified a range of key issues that, if not addressed, will particularly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In addition to other recommendations contained in this letter, we recommend the following
7. That the Government **remove obligations for all face to face reporting re compliance** with either social security or justice obligations. Internet access will also be a real concern. This includes the suspension of Community Development Program requirements in remote communities, since people clearly face an elevated risk of illness or death if the virus spreads within them. We recommend that **no adverse action be taken against anyone** who does not engage with reporting obligations but instead the relevant authority **give priority to actively connecting with the person concerned to check on their health and wellbeing**, and to ensure a humane and appropriate response, recognising the extraordinary circumstances that mean that face to face and other reporting obligations will be very difficult to meet at this time.
8. That the Government urgently **addresses the concerns about health and other related travel requirements** for people to get to essential services, and that, instead work collaboratively with NACCHO and other community controlled organisations to support access that removes travel wherever possible.
9. It will be important that the Federal Government and relevant Ministers write to and urge companies that provide essential services such as energy, water, finance, rental housing and telecommunications, and those providing finance or rental services to implement three measures as a matter of urgency to provide relief for their customers:
  - **No disconnections.** Companies should continue to offer their services without interruption, including energy, telecommunications, banking and insurance.



- **Pause debt collection and legal/bankruptcy proceedings practices.** People shouldn't be evicted or be hassled by debt collectors during this time. Lenders should consider moratoriums on loan repayments.
- **Waive penalty and late fees, including additional interest charges.** No one should need to pay extra if they're struggling to pay bills on time.

## Department of Health

10. People are concerned about the risk of COVID19 on people in residential aged care and may seek to remove relatives from facilities in order to safeguard their health. Residents have 52 days social leave per annum, but there may be some who have already used their allocation. ACOSS recommends that the Federal Government **cover the subsidy of residential care residents** who spend in excess of 52 days away from the facility.
11. It will be important that all health facilities, particularly **"pop up" facilities, are fully accessible**, so that people with disability and older people can access these services.

## Department of Education, Skills and Employment

12. We call for a **pause to mutual obligation requirements** that place people at risk until the virus is contained, including across jobactive, the Community Development Program, ParentsNext and Disability Employment Services. This applies especially to activities that require people to congregate in large groups, Work for the Dole and training activities, and regular attendance in person at provider meetings.

We consider this pause is essential and urgent, not only to ensure people continue to receive income support whilst self-isolating, but to also prevent people being required to participate in communal activities that risk spreading the virus. This pause would operate in a similar fashion to that implemented during the bushfire crisis. Such a pause would also reduce demand on Centrelink's telephone lines, employment service providers (who may also face imminent shut down) and allowing staff to attend to other calls related to the virus.

13. In similar fashion to the Community and Regional fund, the Department should create a **fund to support the viability of community organisations funded through the Department, including childcare centres and employment service providers** that are forced to close due to COVID19. Insurance will not cover closures due to pandemics, and childcare centres and providers will continue to incur costs during a closure, particularly wage costs. The government should also make clear if all services forced to close because of COVID19 will have access to the Community Child Care Fund Special Circumstances Grants.

## Services Australia/NDIS

14. There must be an immediate **boost to Centrelink staff** to respond to telephone calls to ensure people can access information about their payments during this time. There is currently a median 35-day processing period for Sickness Allowance claims. There must be an increase in Centrelink staff to respond to this crisis effectively and greatly reduce processing times.



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15. We urge Services Australia to adopt a **'non face-to-face' approach with people** accessing income support, and remove requirements for people to provide documents or attend Centrelink appointments in person.
16. We urge government to **suspend unnecessary claim or other requirements** around payments to reduce demand for Centrelink services (for example, third-party verification for single parents).
17. We urge government to communicate all information relevant to people receiving income support in a timely and clear fashion. It is obvious that clear communication is crucial to protect public health, and we urge Services Australia to communicate in languages other than English, and ensure communication is appropriate for culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Our consultation to date confirms that few community organisations, including ACOSS, have been approached to support a **large scale communications strategy**.
18. There must be **continuity of supports for people with disability and people accessing home care packages**. This will include:
  - a. Provisions for replacement of support workers with no financial penalty
  - b. Access to NDIS plan variations if new or additional supports required
  - c. Plans to manage support provision if the person with disability or older person contracts COVID-19
  - d. Plans to manage support provision if support workers contract COVID-19
19. Government must ensure that there is **Personal Protective Equipment** available for support workers who provide support in the home, both NDIS workers and Homecare workers.
20. Government must immediately address the **misinformation being provided via online** Centrelink portals, where people are being told their payments will reduce from 20 March. This is **causing substantial distress** in the community at the worst possible time.

### Department of Social Services

21. **Waiting periods for Newstart and other payments** people will likely need during this crisis, especially those who are ill, **should be removed** (including the Liquid Assets Waiting Period).
22. We urge government to **remove waiting periods for recent migrants** to ensure they can access income support should they be quarantined or lose their paid work in the event of a downturn.
23. We also urge the Government to provide **income support to asylum seekers** who are without paid work and who do not qualify for any assistance. It is not possible to rely on charitable support at this time for people to get food and essential items.
- 24.



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25. The **Sickness Allowance** provisions for casual workers affected by the COVID19 are a major concern. As you know, the Government plan is to abolish Sickness Allowance from 20 March, as it will then be known as the Jobseeker Payment. As is the case now, people will be required to present a medical certificate to have their claim approved.  
Can you confirm that:
- (1) a certificate will not be required, as you can appreciate that obtaining these for self-isolation or quarantining will be a major barrier to obtaining income support, and
  - (2) that people who are ill or quarantined are not required to enrol with employment service providers or undertake employment-related activities?
- We seek your urgent advice about how this will work in practice without inordinate delay and stress.
26. We are also very concerned about the general confusion that will be created by changing the name of this payment, and particularly at this time. We recommend that this **change to payment arrangements** due to take place on 20<sup>th</sup> March at least be postponed, until we are on the other side of this health crisis.
27. In any event, **we support the ACTU call** for Government to guarantee to all paid workers a minimum of two weeks paid leave that may be required to respond to the health crisis, once employers have exhausted existing entitlements.
28. We urge you to ensure **all \$750 payments are not quarantined under the Cashless Debit Card or Income Management** and paid directly into people's regular bank accounts. People need maximum flexibility about how they can purchase essential items at this time.
29. We also urge you to **cancel all Robodebts**. At the moment, all people who have Robodebts are not able to get an advance. With estimates of at least 60% of Robodebts likely to be unlawful, the Government should immediately cancel all Robodebts to ensure that all additional cash payments are received by recipients and not go toward paying unlawful debts. In addition, cancelling Robodebts will ensure people on low incomes have cash available, which in many cases they are entitled to receive back. This would also enable you to redirect Centrelink staff and resources to responding to the urgent needs of incoming applications for income support, and the rising confusion in the community, with large numbers of people not having dealt with Centrelink before.
30. Relax **contract requirements for DSS funded organisations** affected by COVID19, so that if an organisation is required to close due to quarantine or related reasons, or is otherwise affected by the pandemic, they are not penalised for failing to meet their contract obligations.
31. Continuity of service delivery will be pivotal during this period. The government should provide **funding to community sector organisations** on an as needs basis so that they can engage backfill to ensure service continuity during this period.

A more significant challenge exists for people in communal living, or who are experiencing homelessness who are living in shared rooms in rooming houses, in **overcrowded housing**, or who are **sleeping rough**. In these circumstances, people who need to self-isolate will need to be supported into appropriate self-contained accommodation. It will be critical that the





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Federal Government provide cash funding to housing and homelessness services so that they can guarantee access to at least temporary accommodation immediately.

May I again offer ACOSS support for the Federal Government's efforts to respond to this pandemic, including for coordination and communication purposes in response to this unprecedented crisis.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Cassandra Goldie  
CEO, ACOSS