



PSA Submission: Child Poverty Reduction Bill

4 April 2018

For further information, please contact:

Sarah Martin
Senior Advisor
New Zealand Public Service Association
PO Box 3817
Wellington 6140

Email: sarah.martin@psa.org.nz

Children, Young Persons and their Families (Oranga Tamariki) Legislation Bill PSA submission to Government Social Services Select Committee

Introduction

Who we are

The New Zealand Public Service Association Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi (the PSA) is the largest trade union in New Zealand with over 62,000 members. We are a democratic organisation representing members in the public service, the wider state sector (the district health boards, crown research institutes and other crown entities), state owned enterprises, local government, tertiary education institutions and non-governmental organisations working in the health, social services and community sectors.

The PSA has been advocating for strong, innovative and effective public and community services since our establishment in 1913. People join the PSA to negotiate their terms of employment collectively, to have a voice within their workplace and to have an independent public voice on the quality of public and community services and how they are delivered.

This submission has been prepared with the PSA's Social Worker Action Network (SWAN). The PSA represents approximately 3500 social worker members who work in the government, health and community sectors. SWAN is a network within the PSA that aims to unify, inspire, inform, and advocate for social workers. SWAN provides a forum for social work members to come together and organise around the issues facing our community, and ensure that the unique needs of social workers are identified and responded to. SWAN seeks to advocate for the social work community and develop a sense of cohesion, unity and strength amongst social workers. The PSA is an affiliate of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions Te Kauae Kaimahi.

Our submission

The Social Work Action Network (SWAN) of the PSA welcomes the attention the Labour-led Government is paying to child poverty; this bill is an important component of that work. We support the objectives of this bill and are hopeful that this it will contribute to a shift in the way that children are viewed and supported in society and in the development of public policy.

Our members are clear however, that the best way to reduce poverty is to change the material conditions of people's lives. This will be achieved by increases to people's wages, including equal pay, decent housing, and improved access to universal health and education services.

Our members are concerned about the potential for this bill to posit child wellbeing as separate from family and whānau wellbeing. As one member noted: "children are poor because they live in poor families". We reject the de-linking of child poverty from community and whānau poverty, and are concerned that this perpetuates the ideology of the "deserving and undeserving poor". Some members are also concerned about the potential for children and families in low income communities to be stigmatised.

Our experience is that social and economic inclusion policies are most effective when developed in close collaboration with people in communities, and hope that the Government will adopt this approach when developing its plans for improving the wellbeing of children and their families.

PSA social worker members have front-line experience of working with children, families, whānau and communities who are living in hardship. While they are supportive of the attention the Government is giving to poverty reduction, they are clear that progress in reducing poverty will not be achieved by targets alone; profound change to the material conditions of many members of our communities is required.

Our members are also wary of a highly targeted approach to poverty reduction which sees many members of our communities and families miss out on essential services because they don't fit narrow need criterion. This includes in the areas of housing support, special education assistance and mental health. We urge the Government to look across its policy reform agenda to identify and address the broad range of determinants of poverty, and deliver universal services where they can.

In designing an accountability framework the Government needs to be careful not to impose metric targets and measures on public service agencies which are unrealistic and which set up agencies, and their employees to fail. Poverty reduction will rely on changes to the socio-economic conditions

of individuals, families and communities; the ability to affect change may be beyond the power of individual institutions and will instead depend on a suite of cross-government measures. Imposing narrow and arbitrary metric measures of performance can detract from agencies' ability to deliver real improvements in service delivery¹.

The PSA supports the submissions of the CTU, the Children's Sector Groups and the Child Poverty Action Group to this bill.

Recommendations

The PSA supports the Child Poverty Reduction Bill with the following recommendations, that:

- the title of the bill be changed to the "Poverty Reduction Bill" and the bill be re-purposed to focus on the measurement and reduction of poverty across all members of our communities;
- the Government recognises that rigid targets do not fully reflect the experiences of poverty and of well-being in communities;
- the Government is explicit in its commitment to reducing poverty, through the introduction of a range of coherent policies which include, but are not limited to: ensuring universal access to high quality health, mental health, education, special education and housing support services;
- the Government is explicit in recognising that low incomes are a critical factor in family poverty, and agree to support wage increases as a priority in reducing poverty. This includes supporting Equal Pay for women workers, and the living wage as a minimum wage for all workers.
- the Government recognises that poverty reduction will not be achieved by measuring the performance of public service agencies, and is thus careful not to impose an accountability framework on agencies that set them, and their employees, up to fail.

¹ Muller (2018), "The Metric God that Failed", *Project Syndicate*, accessed 4 April 2018 from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-metric-god-that-failed-by-jerry-z--muller-2018-03?barrier=accesspaylog>