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4 August 2017

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

**Re: Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Welfare Reform) Bill 2017**

AFAO welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

AFAO is the peak national organisation for Australia's community HIV response. We are recognised nationally and globally for the leadership, policy expertise, coordination and support we provide. Through advocacy, policy and health promotion, we champion awareness, understanding and proactivity around HIV prevention, education, support and research. AFAO is particularly concerned to ensure that an evidenced-based approach guides Australia's HIV response and public policy that impacts upon this response. We work closely with our member organisation, the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL), on HIV-related policy issues.

AFAO's submission relates to Schedule 12 of the Bill, the *Establishment of the Drug Test Trial*. The trial includes:

- placing jobseekers who test positive to a drug on income management for 24 months
- no longer allowing jobseekers to be exempt from their mutual obligation or participation requirements if the circumstances affecting their ability to meet their requirements are primarily due to drug or alcohol dependency or misuse
- a possible financial penalty for jobseekers who fail to meet their requirements due to drug or alcohol use more than once.

AFAO fully endorses AIVL's submission. In so doing we highlight the following points made by AIVL in their submission. These include:

- that there is no evidence that punishing people for drug use leads to greater employment, increased income-support compliance or reduced drug-related harms
- that punishing people who use drugs increases the stigma associated with drug use and deters people from accessing services
- that, currently, only 200,000 people receive alcohol and other drug treatment each year, while an additional 200,000-500,000 people seeking treatment are unable to access it
- AIVL's call for the re-allocation of funds reserved for this trial into expanding alcohol and other drug services so people who want support can access the support they need.

This trial is punitive in its effect and undermines an intended goal of the Bill which is to "better encourage and support [individuals] to pursue treatment."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 22 June 2017 (Christian Porter).

Punishing individuals for non-compliance is counter-productive to the goals of improving individual health outcomes, as stated by AIVL in its submission. This undermines government investment in effective and evidence informed harm reduction initiatives, such as needle and syringe programs.

AFAO is concerned that the trial could compromise social security support for people who use alcohol and other drugs. Failure to meet the requirements of the drug test trial could lead to suspension of income support including the Disability Support Pension. This outcome could have a catastrophic effect on an individual's health, and on the public health investment in services that address alcohol and drug use in the community.

A central component of Australia's response to HIV has been the development of peer led programs to raise awareness about HIV prevention, testing and treatment. These programs have been informed and operated by community based organisations and have enabled the development of deep levels of trust between the work of community organisations and the communities they serve. In turn, community led organisations have supported affected communities to engage with key health and social services that support better health outcomes. AIVL and its member organisations are peer-led organisations that provide these supports for people who use alcohol and drugs and are trusted by people who use drugs to provide support services that reduce drug-related harm.

AFAO joins AIVL in recommending that the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs advise the Australian Government against proceeding with the Schedule 12 of Bill and recommends reallocating funds reserved for this trial into expanding alcohol and other drug services. AFAO recommends that this re-allocation include funding for services provided by community-based organisations that support people who use alcohol and other drugs.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D O'Donnell', written in a cursive style.

Darryl O'Donnell  
**Chief Executive Officer**