

TO: Education and Employment Legislation Committee

DATE: 28 August 2026

Re: *Wage Justice for Early Childhood Education and Care Workers (Special Account) (Extending Support and Strengthening Safety) Bill 2026*

Dear Committee members,

Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (CSMC) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1969 by single mothers to secure a better life for women parenting alone and their children. We achieve change by championing the agency, rights and needs of single mothers and their children and by providing specialist support services to over 3100 women per year. In addition, we have 6500 members and 52,000 website users.

We address only the terms of reference where we have the experience to comment – and CSMC has ample relevant experience. Childcare is a profound consideration for single mothers. As early as 1972, single mothers were acutely frustrated by the expectation that they should be in paid employment (as indeed, many already were) while they could neither access subsidised childcare nor claim childcare expenses as a tax concession. When the Howard government withdrew capital funding and operational subsidies for community-based long daycare centres in 1998, Council of Single Mothers and their Children objected strenuously: ‘(This Government) wants to see a free market approach, where they seem to think that centres should vie for children, like supermarkets vie for customers.’¹ Concerns escalated in 2006 when the Welfare to Work changes came into effect, forcing single mothers into work whether or not suitable and safe childcare and out of school hours care was available.

Our 2023 National Survey of Single Mothers and their Children, the largest of its kind in Australia with 1168 responses, showed 87% of respondents were concerned about their long-term financial wellbeing, across all levels of employment and education, even though 78% were in paid employment – levels of employment similar to all women in Australia. Pivotal to their financial wellbeing is access to affordable and continuing childcare, where retention of staff, reduction of growth in childcare costs, and government support in the form of Child Care Subsidy (CCS) have real and urgent impact. In addition, the imposition of National Quality Standards are critical to the safety, health and wellbeing of children in early education.

We wish the Committee all the best with your deliberations and will be happy to provide more information should it be useful.

Yours sincerely,



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Childcare Access and Affordability

Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) has been supporting single mother families for 57 years. Single mothers make up 13% of Australian families. Nationally, 678,500 families with dependents are headed by a single mother.* These mothers are very diverse – all ages, from all backgrounds, cultures, and education levels, living with various health and wellbeing challenges, with over 60% having experienced family violence. What is true of all single mothers is that they are determined to provide a good life for their kids and a bright future for their children and themselves.

CSMC notes the essential role of childcare in enabling women to work. Single mothers carry a disproportionate care responsibility for their children, with our national survey showing that single mothers have their children on average 12 days per fortnight, regardless of the age of their youngest child. Some mothers choose not to work when they have pre-school aged children, however many are working to support their family to top up the low level of Parenting Payment Single (which remains below the poverty line) or are studying to enable a better future for themselves and their children.

The issue of childcare affordability is raised frequently with our frontline staff, who have over 3000 contacts with single mothers annually. Access to childcare presents a significant barrier for some mothers wishing to engage in employment and study. In some locations, single mothers are confronted with waitlists of up to a year and in some rural and remote locations mothers report no service availability. Delay and lack of suitable and affordable facilities only serves to compound the poverty and isolation of these families. Reducing growth in childcare costs and fees paid by parents through subsidies by government through Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is of critical importance to the families represented by Single Mothers and their Children.

Female-headed households make up Australia's poorest families, with 37% living below the poverty line and many more in financial hardship. Pivotal to their financial wellbeing is access to affordable and continuing childcare. Retention of staff and government support for the reduction of growth in costs to parents is a key factor in the quality of childcare.

A significant factor both in independent evidence and in our second National Survey of Single Mothers is that 67% of single mothers have lived experience of family violence, with this number increasing to 75% where the mother or child has a disability. This in turn means far too many pre-school aged children have both been exposed to violence (past and often continuing), and to the stress involved in the complexities facing their mothers as they seek to rebuild their family's life. The benefits for children in engaging with early childhood education are therefore heightened for families grappling with disadvantages such as poverty, isolation from community or family networks, recovery from family violence and in families in which the mother and/or child lives with a disability as are a significant numbers of single mother families.

Health and Safety of Children in Childcare Services

Our previous recommendation to improve the health and safety of children in childcare services serves to put the wellbeing of children at the heart of all decision-making about this matter. The National Children's Commissioner has been calling for this across the whole of government, and it is vital. We will know we have achieved this when it is no longer possible for a single child to be subject to any form of abuse in childcare in Australia.

Good quality childcare services are in high demand. The Victorian government's advice is that: 'parents and carers are recommended to join their preferred wait lists 12 months or more before the date they hope to start their child with a service'.² This places many single mother families at a disadvantage where they are unlikely to be able to predict their need to utilise childcare services 12 months ahead:

- Some of these women, in leaving abuse have had to relocate to another area or state, immediately losing any place on a waiting list that they might have had.
- Many families plan on the mother staying at home for a few years with a small child but if there is a separation, discovery of a disability or chronic health condition, high quality and safe childcare is often unavailable without an extended wait.

In addition, Council of Single Mothers and their Children highlights:

- Australia's childcare crisis: there are not enough places for children in rural and remote regions with waiting lists in many metropolitan areas.
- Childcare costs are far too high resulting in many parents, particularly single mothers, being unable to work the roles and hours they prefer because childcare is unaffordable. This problem contributes to a 'poverty trap', where single mothers cannot afford to survive on income support alone, and are no better off financially when they return to work and incur additional childcare expenses combined with a loss of social security payments.
- There is not enough in-home and flexible childcare available for single mothers doing shift work, weekend work and other work outside business hours.
- The government's recent change to subsidies were framed to benefit families with two or more children attending childcare at the same time. This does not help the very many single mothers and other parents with only one child at childcare at the one time.

Given the above, CSMC recommends that the Committee supports amendment of Wage Justice for Early Child Wage Justice for Early Childhood Education and Care Workers (Special Account) (Extending Support and Strengthening Safety) Act 2026 to continue funding and extend sunset date 30 June 2028 to 31 December 2029 and impose National Quality Standards conditions on providers to ensure children's health and safety in childcare. Furthermore, it is critical to reduce growth in fees paid by parents through the continued support of the government's Child Care Subsidy (CCS).

*ABS Data on one parent families with dependants shows that the vast majority (83.0%) were single mother families. Of all one parent families with children and dependants, 51.1% had a youngest dependant aged 0 - 9 years.

There were 480,000 one parent families where the parent was employed and had dependants, representing 69.4% of all one parent families with dependants. Of these families:

- 81.2% (390,000) had an employed single mother.
- 18.8% (90,000) had an employed single father.

In one parent families with dependants, 68.0% of single mothers were employed compared with 76.4% of single fathers. Just below three-quarters (74.3%) of families with employed single mothers and dependants had mothers aged between 35 and 54 years.

The proportion of one parent families with dependants where the parent was employed generally increased with the age of the youngest dependant. The proportion with an employed parent was lowest when the youngest dependant was under 5 (53.5%) and the highest when the youngest dependant was between 10 and 14 (75.8%). This pattern was more prominent for single mothers.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release#one-parent-families>