The lived experience of welfare reform: stories from the field

John Bellamy
Anglicare Diocese of Sydney

Sally Cowling
UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services


1. Introduction

In December 2007, a research partnership between the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales, UnitingCare Burnside, the Anglicare Diocese of Sydney and the Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies was awarded seed funding from the ARACY ARC/NHMRC Research Network to develop a collaborative and cross-disciplinary research agenda to examine the impact of welfare reform and labour market disadvantage on the well-being of families and young people experiencing acute disadvantage. The funding will support a workshop in February 2008 which will bring together leading researchers from universities, the community sector and government agencies to establish, develop and consolidate this agenda.

While senior research staff from both Anglicare and Burnside will participate in the funded workshop, we wanted to ensure that our contributions were informed by an understanding of how the reform process is playing out on the ground and the voices of our service users and field staff. In developing a relevant research agenda we consider it pivotal to raise questions, issues and research ideas that reflect the needs identified by the families and young people who use the programs and support services offered by community sector organisations working with individuals and families who have multiple problems and needs.

As a means to gather grounded information Burnside and Anglicare hosted a staff forum on January 24, 2008. Twenty three individuals participated including 13 senior field staff, members of the research units of both organisations, and our university partners. The field staff work with families and young people who often have complex needs and experience multiple disadvantage, and who interact with a range of government systems including income support, employment services, public housing, child protection and health services. Field staff consulted with their colleagues prior to attending the forum in order to capture a broad range of users' experiences across these systems. Anglicare participants included a senior manager in Child, Youth and Family Services and coordinators of early intervention, youth support and out-of-home care (OOHC) programs. Burnside participants comprised managers and

1 The authors are Senior Research Officer, Policy Unit, Anglicare Diocese of Sydney and Manager, Strategic Projects, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services (which includes UnitingCare Burnside). We wish to acknowledge the seminal contribution of our colleagues whose reflections and experiences of working with people with complex needs informed this paper.
coordinators from a range of family support and family learning centres, the New Parent and Infant Network (NEWPIN), youth services, and programs providing support to young people leaving OOHC or who are at risk of homelessness. Burnside participants were drawn from programs operating in Western Sydney, South West Sydney, the Far West, and Mid North Coast of New South Wales in order to examine differences in the impacts and conduct of policy in metropolitan and regional centres. Staff from Burnside’s family and youth support services on the Central Coast provided input to the forum via email.

To create a record of the forum, the research partners took detailed notes and the case studies reported in this paper have been screened with the relevant participant to check the accuracy of the transcription. In presenting the insights gathered from the forum the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief outline of changes to the welfare system which have had an impact on Anglicare and Burnside service users. Section 3 discusses the ‘lived experience’ of welfare reform and identifies the barriers to participation and conflicts within, and between, service systems as observed and documented by field staff. Section 4 reports the themes which forum participants identified as priorities for a collaborative research agenda directed to better supporting individuals and families with multiple problems and needs. Concluding comments are presented in Section 5.

2. Policy context

In a companion paper, Cortis, Cowling and Meagher (2008) discuss the changing policy environment in which children, young people and families with high and complex needs are situated. In this section we provide a brief overview of recent changes to income support arrangements and regulatory provisions in the labour market, and discuss the intended roll out of income quarantining arrangements applying to Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and Cape York to a broader spectrum of welfare recipients. While the focus of the forum was on people experiencing multiple disadvantage who were required to seek paid employment as a result of legislative change, we also invited discussion of the difficulties confronting individuals who are voluntarily seeking work. In both cases we were interested in defining the economic motivations which have driven policy change and the consistency or inconsistency of this reform agenda with other programs and systems with which disadvantaged families and young people are engaged.

Changes introduced in the Family and Community Services Legislation (Welfare to Work) Bill 2005 meant that from 1 July, 2006 sole parents were no longer eligible for Parenting Payment Single (PPS) once their youngest child turned 8. They were instead transferred to Newstart Allowance (NSA) and required to seek part-time work of at least 15 hours per week to remain eligible for income support. As a result, sole parents who are unable to attain paid employment face a significant drop in benefits as, relative to NSA, PPS has a higher maximum payment rate, a less harsh income test, is indexed more frequently to account for inflation and qualifies recipients for a greater range of concessions and supplementary benefits (Cowling, 2007).

An additional risk to the wellbeing of young people and sole parents making the transition from welfare to low-paid work has emerged with significant changes to the Australian industrial relations environment under the Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2006. Early evidence collected in both quantitative and qualitative studies on the impact of Work Choices in the low-paid, low-skilled sectors of the labour market show an erosion in pay and conditions and find that such work is increasingly precarious in nature and workers are experiencing poorer
work-life balance, health and well-being (see Van Wanrooy et al., 2007; Baird et al., 2007; and Evesson et al., 2007 cited in Cowling, 2007).

On the other hand, sole parents who have been unable to attain paid employment, and who live in circumstances characterised by severe disadvantage, will face additional compliance measures for the receipt of income support from 2008. In circumstances where their child attends school irregularly or where their child is deemed by state authorities to be at risk of abuse or neglect, a portion of their benefit will be quarantined (Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2007). These income management measures were not accompanied by greater investment in support services which address serious problems at their root cause.

Anglicare and Burnside recognise that these policy shifts are potentially problematic for the service users both organisations support. Our service users tend to face multiple social and personal obstacles to participation, including low levels of education, social isolation, domestic violence, substance misuse and learning difficulties, in addition to the economic adversity that welfare-to-work programs seek to redress. Young people leaving care, and parents involved with child protection or early intervention services, are among the most likely to be affected by these changes, because of their high levels of dependency on income support (Cortis, Cowling and Meagher, 2008). A key goal of the forum was to seek advice from field staff on the extent to which reforms have caused deterioration in, or risk exacerbating, the already adverse life circumstances of the children, young people and families with whom we work.

3. The lived experience of welfare reform - barriers to workforce participation

In this section of the paper we report the reflections, concerns and case studies of forum participants which are grounded in their experiences working with families, children and young people with high and complex needs. The fruits of this discussion have been organised thematically.

i. Conflicting systems

A number of families with whom Anglicare and Burnside work have been involved with the child protection system before changes to participation requirements on income support (including Parenting Payment, Disability Support Pension, Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance). Where parents are required by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) to attend parenting courses, counselling, meetings or court-ordered visits in order to mitigate the risk of child abuse or neglect they may have limited capacity to meet activity testing requirements designed to promote the transition from welfare to work. Caseworkers report that parents in this situation can feel that they are forced to choose between being breached (under the welfare to work system) and losing benefits for up to eight weeks or losing access to their children (under the child protection system). In each case the parents stated they would prefer to be breached although loss of income decreases their ability to provide proper care without the assistance of emergency or crisis services. In this instance the demands of the two systems and indeed their goals (economic participation against good parenting) are in conflict and attempts to meet the requirements of both the income support and child protection systems may exacerbate existing family problems. Furthermore people with mental health issues, intellectual disability or poor literacy skills can find it difficult to understand their reciprocal obligations under the welfare-to-work system indicating a need for systemic change at a procedural level.
Forum participants also identified the suspension of students as generating conflicts between systems demanding the labour force participation of parents, and parenting behaviour which attends to the support and supervision needs of children. Schools and pre-schools can elect to suspend children rather than being obliged to address behavioural problems (using specialist support) within the school setting. There were instances cited of school age children attending agency day programs as a result of suspensions, with children in pre-school and early primary settings being subject to repeat suspensions. Participants considered that children with challenging behaviour or special needs who were already linked to interventions or programs under the auspices of DoCS or community sector agencies were more likely to be excluded by their school due to the agency being perceived as a ‘fall back’ support.

The education system’s increasing use of suspensions for children with challenging behaviours assumes the availability of a parent or carer. Providers of education and childcare services assume that a parent or carer is always, and immediately, available while employers assume casual workers have the ability to change shifts and hours of work with minimal notice. These competing assumptions impose additional stress in already stressful family settings as parents struggle to balance conflicting system demands with the desire to provide quality care to their children. For parents raising a child with a disability - or a child exhibiting difficult behaviour - the supports required are limited across the suite of systems with which children and their parents interact.

The forum was told of a case involving a family in regional NSW whose son had been subject to repeated suspensions from his primary school. The most recent suspensions were for extended periods of 11 days and, later, 20 days. The public school did not offer home-based support to the family or make arrangements with either the parents or the Brighter Futures program with which they were engaged about support needs or catching up on school work. While the mother was not subject to activity testing requirements, the need to provide supervision of her older child limited her capacity to participate in parenting programs designed to develop the skills required to support her son and to provide quality care for her younger children. If these circumstances had arisen for a family in receipt of Parenting Payment Partnered who had a youngest child aged 6 years or above, the question emerges as to how the family would avoid being breached for non-compliance with participation requirements while providing support and supervision for their son during school hours for a three-week period? Where a parent has attained paid work (as a legislative requirement) should we assume they have the flexibility to take leave whenever their child is suspended from school?

While it is recognised that schools may not have access to the specialist resources needed to support children with complex and multiple needs, the failure to invest in this resource base creates a dynamic where schools need ‘time out’ from children with challenging behaviour with the significant impact of suspension policies transferred to parents who have made - or who are seeking to make - the transition from welfare to work.
ii. The difficulty of ‘skilling up’

A number of conflicts between the welfare-to-work regime and vocational training systems were identified at the forum. Many of the younger users of agency services are mothers who left school early after becoming pregnant. Few have formal educational qualifications or workplace skills and experience, meaning that settings which facilitate transitions back to education and training are particularly important. For many seeking to undertake TAFE courses, the cost and availability of child care present access barriers to training in addition to the costs associated with vocational courses. On the one hand welfare-to-work policies are designed to move people into the workforce. On the other, insufficient support means that some are excluded from the training required to gain entry level jobs and to build a career path.

Staff noted that many young mothers face the additional difficulty of securing accommodation in a housing system characterised by long waiting lists for public housing and rising private rents. As accommodation costs absorb a greater proportion of welfare benefits and/or wage income they are forced to reduce expenditure on basics including food, utilities and transport. Consequently, plans to participate in education and training programs are disrupted or ruled out on cost grounds.

The forum heard the case of a young sole parent with a two year old child who had decided to commence a TAFE course which begins on February 11. In order to secure a child care placement for her daughter for the three full days of care she will require each week, she has had to pay fees from January 7. Until she commences TAFE and can access child care through the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme - under which she won’t be required to pay a gap fee - she is required to meet the gap fee ($11.33 per day) on the two subsidised days and to pay full fees ($52) on the third, unsubsidised day. The weekly cost of purchasing care which is not required until the TAFE year starts is $74.66. In addition, the mother was required to pay $224 up front in the form of a two week bond payment. Such out-of-pocket expenses represent a significant hurdle for parents with limited capacity to pay and serve to diminish a parent’s motivation and capacity to further her education as a means to improve her own life chances and those of her child.

In smaller regional centres, Burnside staff noted that TAFE courses are often cancelled due to low enrolments. This requires welfare recipients to transfer to courses in which they have little interest in order to fulfil participation requirements.

Young people exiting the out-of-home care (OOHC) system often struggle to make transitions into education, employment and stable accommodation. The ‘Transition to Living’ Allowance provides a one-off payment of $1,000 but this is often absorbed by bond and up-front rental payments to establish housing or by the start up costs for an apprenticeship (for example, the cost of tools). The Allowance is not sufficient to meet both housing and training costs, leaving young people obliged to choose between them. Further, young people leaving OOHC have frequently had quite fragmented experiences within education and are unsure of which direction to take. If they start an apprenticeship and realise the field they have initially chosen is not for them, they are unable to obtain further financial support to try an alternative. Young people who are early school leavers need extra support to finish school qualifications and to develop the skills required to access paid employment.
iii. Access to transport and affordable quality child care

Participants from Burnside’s regional services noted that the combination of poor transport systems and weak local labour markets represented key barriers to workforce participation in regional areas.

Forum participants also noted that many parents were only able to access low paid jobs with non-standard and highly variable working hours. Even if quality child care services were open at the times required, parents couldn’t afford to use them. Cobbling together a “patchwork” of care arrangements is difficult for parents who are socially isolated or who hold early morning or late night jobs (including cleaning, hospitality and call centre work). Non-standard working hours makes it difficult to call on relatives, friends or neighbours to help with care and supervision. In the absence of access to affordable, quality child care older children are providing care and supervision to younger siblings while their parent meets work and work search requirements. It was noted that there are significant service gaps in the supports available for children aged 8 years and above despite the participation requirements which will now apply to a cohort of these parents.

People who had been in receipt of Parenting Payment Single may be able to gain an exemption from accepting paid employment where cost and accessibility issues mean that there is “no appropriate child care or supervision available when the parent would be undertaking the work” or when the journey to work exceeds 60 minutes or travel costs are more than 10 per cent of gross income (Parliament of Australia, 2005). However when these exemptions apply the parent would remain on the lower Newstart Allowance and the welfare reform agenda has not accorded a policy emphasis to investing in the services and infrastructure needed to directly address barriers to work.

With respect to child care, many service users who have had contact with DoCS express deep anxiety about leaving their children in centre-based care due to a profound mistrust of institutions.

Parents using centre-based or family day care for children with behavioural problems or special needs are frequently called on to collect their child when problems arise. This makes it very difficult for parents to meet work, work search, or work preparation requirements. In addition, forum participants noted that child care centres are becoming increasingly adept at ruling out children with challenging behaviour or who are resident in out-of-home care. Where centre staff are aware of an association between the parents and a professional support organisation, such as Anglicare or Burnside, issues that should be attended to in an early childhood education and care environment tend to be referred back to the service provider.

The forum also noted the role that grandparents are playing in raising children, particularly in circumstances where the parent is unable to provide appropriate care due to mental health or drug and alcohol problems. The welfare arrangements which took effect on 1 July 2006 require a person aged between 55 and 65 to look for up to 10 jobs per fortnight in order to receive Newstart Allowance. While grandparents who have taken a role as the ‘principal carer’ of their grandchild or grandchildren are eligible for exemptions from activity testing requirements, agency staff report that they are frequently “hassled” by Centrelink regarding their non-compliance and are not advised of the exemptions available. There is little in the service system to assist grandparents with the parenting task they have taken on or to provide the emotional and financial support required to raise children while grappling with the trauma being experienced by their own son or daughter.
iv. Employment services and the most disadvantaged

A key theme to emerge from the forum was the failure of current support models to be well-integrated and able to address the barriers associated with multi-level disadvantage. These barriers include the lack of a personal support system and social network; limited education; previous contact with DoCS and associated trust issues; and the need to develop emotional and coping skills prior to workforce entry.

Forum participants noted that the welfare reform measures have also affected parents with a partial capacity to work, who would have formerly been eligible for Disability Support Pension but now receive Newstart Allowance with its associated activity testing requirements. One mother with an intellectual disability whose youngest child is 8 has been subject to a lot of internal stress due to the nature of her interfaces with the Job Network. It was argued that Job Network staff do not have the requisite expertise in assessing people's needs especially when these are complex and multi-layered in nature. In the absence of service user advocacy from organisations such as Anglicare and Burnside, Job Network staff have, in the words of one forum participant, “little idea what to do with clients who are a long way from being ready for Job Search Training”. The employment services system focuses, almost exclusively, on outcomes as opposed to meeting broader support needs which increase the likelihood of positive employment outcomes down the track.

These observations are supported by the broader research literature. For example, Cowling (2005) has argued that the failure of the 'Welfare to Work' package to create flexible employment opportunities that are suitable for people with complex needs (including disability and mental illness) exposes these individuals to a range of risks relating to the impacts of inappropriate assessment and referral, reduced disposable income, harsh compliance measures and the lack of specialist skills and training in the generic employment services to which they are now referred. Individuals requiring specialist services in regional and rural areas are particularly vulnerable.

It is important to note that the term ‘disability’ is used in a variety of ways and may refer to someone who has been injured at work as well as to individuals with congenital or acquired disabilities of a long-term nature. Inappropriate assessment can be a source of hardship for people with disability if it is assumed that a disability can be ‘overcome’ in order that a person can participate in paid work. There needs to be a clear understanding of the difference between temporary and permanent disability, and the appropriate supports required by each group if workforce participation is possible or can be enabled.

Forum participants expressed frustration at the delays in service user access to tailored services such as the Personal Support Program (PSP) which provide effective assistance for individuals experiencing non-vocational barriers to work such as mental health issues and/or substance use disorders. Centrelink data for November 2005 showed 11,000 people on the PSP waiting list and identified mental health problems as the most prevalent barrier to work for PSP participants, affecting 45 per cent of the current cohort (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee, 2005 cited in Cowling, 2005: 10). A further 2,000 places were funded in the 2007-08 Federal Budget to be rolled out over four years (Department of Treasury, 2007: 138). Although a welcome addition to the program, the prospect of significant additional demand arising from welfare-to-work requirements, combined with the already lengthy waiting list, means that a much larger increase in the scale of the program is required.
The forum heard of a young woman with a mild intellectual disability had been a long-term volunteer at a Centre managed by one of the forum participants. In this role she provided assistance in the child care service. While she needed a high level of supervision she was valuable in, and fulfilled by, her work. The woman has recently been transferred from the Disability Support Pension to Newstart Allowance and her voluntary work did not meet activity testing requirements. She has been placed in a slightly more demanding role in a preschool. She is not coping and her needs (including her supervision needs) are not being met. The transition has been a negative experience and the understanding and experience of Burnside staff who have supported and worked with the woman was not sought by Centrelink or the Job Network at any stage.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) service users living in areas characterised by relatively high unemployment, high rates of youth unemployment or the absence of formal labour markets the chances of gaining paid employment outside the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) Program are slight. This situation can be compounded by negative or stereotypical media portrayals which deter employers from hiring ATSI staff.

It was noted that the Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES) started by Moree cotton farmer Dick Estens in 1997 has been effective in generating both employment opportunities and positive social impacts in the Far West of NSW. A forum participant observed that the effectiveness of the program, particularly in its initial guise, was partly due to the way in which an understanding of Aboriginal notions of family - and the family and cultural responsibilities which flow from this - was embedded in the framework leading to an emphasis on capacity building, mentoring and family friendly employment. Unintended but vital social consequences included decreases in the incidence of domestic violence and drug and alcohol problems. The AES also addressed transport barriers in regional communities by organising car pools and bikes for employees who would face prohibitive walks to work in the absence of public transport options. The Strategy has been evaluated and there is now an evidence base from which mainstream employment programs working with Aboriginal people and people with complex needs can draw in order to improve program effectiveness.

Assuming advocacy skills in a complaints-based system

A number of forum participants noted the impact on people experiencing disadvantage of a general shift to complaints-based systems. People who lack the protection offered by advocates (within their family or via the support services they access) frequently lack the knowledge, confidence and competence required to negotiate their way through reporting, dispute resolution and appeal processes.

Caseworkers who had been consulted by forum participants were frustrated by their inability to advocate on behalf of young people whose extreme personal circumstances warrant an exemption from the participation requirements attached to Newstart and Youth Allowance. Young people are now required to seek an appointment with a Centrelink Social Worker and waiting periods often lead to an escalation in the troubles confronting them. In circumstances characterised by crisis there is limited ability to engage in work search and the failure to comply with activity testing requirements can result in the imposition of a warning or social security breach. Forum participants reported the difficulties young people experience in appealing Centrelink decisions. Discussions with breach lines at both state and national levels precede any appeal to the Social Security Tribunal. Many
complainants are confused by the technical language used by Centrelink staff and confronted by the need to retell difficult stories to an array of listeners.

Young people participating in the youth services operated by Burnside and Anglicare were experiencing an increasing incidence of workplace exploitation. Many young workers were being ‘required’ to complete unpaid training shifts and to sign Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) which trade off working conditions. This left individuals in a confronting situation where they wanted and needed employment but were being told to ‘take it or leave it’. They were not well-versed in either their rights or how to exercise these, and a number of service users were taking on low-paid jobs which posed significant occupational health and safety risks. Such positions included cleaning jobs which involved the use of chemicals without the provision of protective clothing or training in safe procedures.

These observations are reflected in a body of research which demonstrates that young workers are under-informed about their employment-related rights and responsibilities. McDonald et al. (2007) found that even in circumstances where a young person was aware that their rights were not being met (such as routine requests to work through meal breaks or work unpaid overtime) they were ignorant of, or unable to participate in, the dispute resolution processes available to them. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005) found that children and young people need assistance in negotiating their work arrangements and have recommended that the “NSW Government provide a free information, advisory, education and referral service tailored for children and young people, advising them, their parents and employers on employment, including occupational health and safety matters” (2005: 3).

It is important to note that the lack of protection within complaints-based systems may flow from failings within the system itself as opposed to a general lack of awareness, and capacity to make complaints, among vulnerable people. For example, in 2007 the Commonwealth Ombudsman published a report on the application of penalties in the welfare system following the receipt of 124 complaints about Centrelink’s administration of the activity test requirements following the implementation of Welfare to Work reforms on 1 July 2006. The Ombudsman identified a raft of system failures where decisions and practices routinely implemented by Centrelink staff were inconsistent with social security law or publicly stated policy. These included the practice of withholding payment pending determination of a participation failure decision; the way in which unacceptable delays in reaching these decisions compounded the difficulties faced by individuals subject to a non-payment period; the failure to notify Centrelink customers of an intention to withhold payments which served to deprive individuals of an opportunity to query Centrelink’s actions and to arrange their finances in the expectation of benefit withdrawal; and the practice of waiting for a participation failure decision before assessing customers for financial case management thus undermining the goal of limiting the impact of non-payment periods on vulnerable people and third parties (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2007: 1).

vi. Access to affordable housing

Anglicare and Burnside work with a number of families who are resident in public housing or experiencing housing stress due to rising rents, as well as young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Forum participants reported a strong correlation between people who have been breached by Centrelink and those seeking to access supported accommodation. In addition, young people who are
homeless or in insecure accommodation may be breached when they fail to receive postal notifications due to the absence of a fixed address.

Service users who are resident in public housing and subject to welfare-to-work requirements fear that accessing paid employment will lead to a loss of their accommodation, particularly in an environment in which tenancy policy is fixed-term and tenants deemed to be high risk are receiving shorter tenancies. The Department of Housing are also sanctioning people who are not good neighbours and staff noted that this group of residents tend to be similarly unwanted by employers.

The forum was provided with a case study of the Minto Redevelopment Project which will see the redevelopment of approximately 1,000 properties on the Minto Public Housing Estate in Sydney's South West. The Department of Housing Social Impact Assessment (BBC Consulting Planners, 2005: iii) states that the redevelopment will result in the relocation of up to 2,100 people or 650 households between May 2007 and November 2011. When the redevelopment is completed only 320 dwellings will be provided for public housing and 800 properties will be privately owned. The Department has stated that public housing properties that are demolished and not replaced at Minto will be replaced in other areas of Greater Western Sydney.

UnitingCare Burnside operates a range of services from the Minto Estate as a means of facilitating access for families with few transport options. The services are targeted to the needs of a highly vulnerable population located in an area which has few employment opportunities and a high number of low-income and sole parent families. Many residents are affected by issues such as drug and alcohol, domestic violence, child protection, parenting skills and financial management (BBC Consulting Planners, 2005: 6). Forum participants confirmed that the stress and uncertainty associated with forced relocation is having a profound impact on the well-being of service users and their children. While the Department’s Rehousing Team provides residents with advice on what alternative housing is available, whether families can relocate to areas which meet their needs depends on the supply of affordable rental stock. There is particular anxiety attached to children needing to change schools and the loss of established connections with service providers and staff and community and social networks.

Despite the raft of difficult adjustments which will be demanded of a very disadvantaged group there seems to be minimal connection in support planning between the Department of Housing and Centrelink or any provision to provide for family outreach services. Residents have informed Burnside staff that they have not received advice on how any change in their housing status and place of residence will impact on their level of income support. Nor have they been advised on whether exemptions from activity test requirements can be granted in the period of relocation when parents will be trying to organise placements in new schools, support programs and child care services while dealing with feelings of helplessness, stress and fear of the unknown.

A similar disincentive effect applies to service users who cannot secure public housing and relocate to find accommodation with lower rents. Low cost private rental housing stock tends to be located in relatively weak labour markets. However, Centrelink may impose an exclusion period of up to 26 weeks on recipients of Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance if a person moves to a location which lowers their employment prospects relative to prospects at their previous address. A preclusion period will apply if they move to a small area labour market with an unemployment rate more than 2 per cent higher than the area they have moved from unless they have “sufficient reason” to move. The sufficient reasons listed in the Social Security Act do not relate to access to affordable housing although the Secretary has discretion to waive the exclusion period if they are satisfied that the
person has moved from their former residence due to “extreme circumstances” (Social Security Act, 1991, Section 3.2.1.35).

4. Shaping an agenda - research priorities from the field

To close the forum we asked participants to reflect on the day’s conversations and to identify key themes for collaborative research going forward. While we have grouped the issues into four broad areas, a number of discrete research projects can be identified within each.

i. Identifying systemic failures and the impact of competing policy goals

The implementation of policy in one area can have the effect of undermining policy in another, resulting in unintended and negative impacts on family and individual life. A research agenda should provide detailed case studies of the interfaces and system conflicts between the welfare to work agenda and discrete areas such as (1) housing; (2) education; (3) caring for people with disability; and (4) access to child care, youth services and family supports. Such research would look at the assumptions and competing priorities which drive such collisions and the consequences for individuals and families who interact with a broad array of systems. The research would establish the nature of system failure and suggest ways in which these policy discords can be addressed. Priority areas include:

a. Housing: What are the consequences for individuals and families affected by the redevelopment of large scale public housing estates with respect to their capacity to make transitions from welfare to work? A case study focusing on the redevelopment process and associated impacts (on individuals, families, service providers and the community) could be undertaken of the Minto project prior to the roll out of similar redevelopments planned for other public housing estates in NSW.

b. Education and Training: Do changes to the NSW TAFE Strategy create new barriers to people with complex needs or disability, and others who require flexible pathways in order to undertake vocational education and training and improve their employment prospects?

c. Out-of-Home Care: Is there any relationship between family breakdown, the current increases in the number of children and young people in OOHC and the welfare-to-work agenda? How do child protection interventions relate to welfare profiles and the nature of low paid work? What are the long term implications for children of welfare-to-work policies?

ii. Cost-Benefit analysis of conflicting systems

While policy settings have prioritised economic objectives it is important to determine the costs associated with maintaining the status quo where there is evidence of competing policy objectives or contradictory policy settings:

a. What are the costs associated with system failure within and across levels of government and what forms does cost shifting take? How do these failures impact on disadvantaged children, young people and families?

b. If we invest more resources in tailored supports for people experiencing multiple disadvantage (as opposed to prioritising compliance within the welfare system) what are the likely returns?
c. What savings can be derived if caseworkers are required to spend less time acting as advocates due to a more coherent policy system? What inefficient strategies are caseworkers within non-government organisations being forced to adopt on behalf of service users in the face of insufficient funding of essential government services and a shift to complaints-based systems?

iii. Welfare to Work - framing a new reform agenda

If the aim of the current welfare reform agenda is to get people off long-term income support and into the workforce then what types of packages, approaches, supports and job creation initiatives are needed by the most disadvantaged and how do we create flexible and tailored responses? What universal services would help fulfil the goals of promoting economic participation while promoting family and child well-being? How might we better assist parents to maintain employment while continuing to access the child and family support services they need?

There are several research issues that could be addressed in terms of the role of welfare systems in promoting genuine job readiness:

a. What is meant by job readiness and what assessment processes (and training for assessors) must be available in the welfare system to determine what assistance an individual needs in order to be job ready?

b. What job creation measures are required in areas of relatively high unemployment in order to give the term ‘job readiness’ meaning?

c. What is the role of work, and the meaning of work, in the lives of the most disadvantaged?

d. What can be done to improve pay, conditions and job security in low-paid work to create stable and family-friendly employment opportunities for disadvantaged workers?

e. How can the CDEP program be used to build the capacities of Aboriginal people unable to attain mainstream work and provide important community services? Which CDEP positions should be converted to public service positions at award rates of pay?

f. How can employment options be created for those groups who mainstream employers frequently reject including people with mental health difficulties or episodic illness; people who are homeless or in insecure housing; and people with challenging or erratic behaviours?

g. How do we work with employers to create family friendly work opportunities and environments where the rights of those with limited advocacy skills are protected?

h. How can parenting courses such as Burnside’s innovative NEWPIN model be used to create pathways into vocational training and employment?
iv. Impacts of welfare quarantining

In the absence of a policy shift by the new Federal Government, income quarantining provisions imposed on Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and Cape York will be extended to parents whose children are deemed to be at risk of abuse and neglect, or who have poor school attendance records:

a. What are the likely effects of income quarantining via the imposition of Income Management Regimes (IMRs)? What capacity building initiatives should be operating instead of, or in concert with, IMRs?

b. Do IMRs serve to diminish institutional trust if State Government Departments such as the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Community Services (DoCS) are required to report welfare recipients to Centrelink?

c. How does the quarantining and sanctioning ethos fit with (or contradict) a social inclusion agenda as proposed by the Rudd Government?

5. Conclusion

The forum held on January 24 drew on the experiences of Burnside and Anglicare staff working directly with children, young people and families whose experience of disadvantage is both severe and multi-layered. The forum identified a sweep of system failures and policy contradictions which impose unnecessary harm on those most in need and prevent people from doing the ‘best they can’.

At an advocacy level, the forum stressed the need to advance understanding of the needs of people experiencing multiple problems and who interface with a range of systems. At present, simplistic and rigid policy responses are unable to address complex circumstances and needs. It is important to note that the people for whom services provided by our health, education, training and employment systems are inadequate or ineffectual are the same people who are over-represented in child protection proceedings and a range of welfare and crisis management programs.

While recognising that current systems are performing poorly, it is important that the community sector is hopeful, constructive and positive in our advocacy. The social inclusion agenda of, and establishment of Council of Australian Government (COAG) working groups by, the new Federal Government represent important opportunities to build more responsive service systems within and across the different levels of government. It is worth noting that qualitative research conducted with twenty frontline Centrelink managers (Winkworth, 2006) also pointed to the difficulties of ‘top down’ centralised approaches for people with complex needs and the potential of service delivery models which encourage engagement with state government and community sector service agencies to produce better economic and social outcomes. Such models would facilitate working across program and sector boundaries and help prevent unintended and negative consequences of other interventions.

The forum concluded that moving forward will require a genuine whole-of-government approach rather than the current methodology which treats problems as discrete entities and, intentionally or unintentionally, sets system against system. Most importantly, it is imperative that policy settings and services are characterised by compassion and a humane and responsive approach to supporting those most in need. Participants concurred with the sentiments expressed by UK social policy academic Hartley Dean (2003: 443):
Attending to the welfare of people whose lives and relationships may be difficult or complex requires that we make connections between the security needs of those who can’t (for the present) work, and the life needs of those who (at least potentially) can. A more holistic approach might entail identifying not those ‘at risk’ of long-term dependency, but those ‘in need’ of long term support if indeed they are to be enabled to engage with the labour market.

References


