

Sole Parents' Union is a non-profit community advocacy organisation that works on behalf of all sole parents, representing their views and issues to government. We work on behalf of both female and male sole parents, share-care parents, and children.

Welcome to the Sole Parents' Union newsletter. **18 December 2011**

This newsletter is designed to bring you news and events of interest for sole parents. That is people are, who might be, and who have been sole parents.

Whether you are a sole parent yourself, or you work with sole parents, we hope you will find something of interest here.

What we're doing for you



The Sole Parents' Union website has been hacked once again. Maybe I'm just suspicious, but it does raise questions as to who would want to keep doing this.

It's not only annoying being offline and out of communication for that period, but it costs us money we don't really have to fix it.

But the site is now up and running again - and with better security systems.

There's a lot been happening since our last newsletter.

The Family Law Act amendments have gone through (more later in the newsletter), income management has been extended to other areas, and the Child Support Agency has made changes to their payer statements.

And of course, Christmas is around the corner. Operating hours for Centrelink and the Child Support Agency over Christmas appear later in this newsletter. We've also got some tips on getting through the Christmas period. We know how difficult this time of year can be for single parents, as well as for children who often feel torn. On the other hand, some kids really know how to work the "getting lots of presents from both parents" angle!

We'd like to offer our congratulations to all those people promoted in the latest Cabinet reshuffle.

We have requested a meeting with the new Attorney General (Nicola Roxon) to discuss family law and other issues, and try to work on alternatives that really work.

We are also looking to take up the issues with Centrelink that have been raised with us since we first started blogging about this. The new Minister for Human Ser-

vices is Brendan O'Connor, and again we are seeking a meeting with him early in the new year.

We are in the process of writing a new discussion paper for the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on the issues that have been raised with us through the website and as we travel around the country. This will be finalised by the end of the year and lodged with the Department. If you have anything you wish to contribute or any issues you want us to raise let us know either by email admin@soleparentsunion.org.au or through our website www.soleparentsunion.org.au We are also following up with them on some of the issues we raised in our last paper. As soon as we get the go ahead we'll put these on our website for everybody to access.

Knowing what a difficult time of year Christmas is for single parents, and for blended families, we are writing a survey that will be available online from Christmas Eve. We'd like to know how people cope at Christmas, and what tactics they use to make it a real family Christmas for everybody. By looking at what works we're hoping to be able to work on programs that can be rolled out more broadly to help families.

The survey will be leave it open until the end of January.

That's it from us for now. Please enjoy the newsletter and if there's anything you would like to see, let us know. I am hoping to make another trip in January or February. I'd love to come and talk with people about what's happening in their area, and the issues for sole parents. In the meantime - have a merry Christmas and a fabulous 2012.



Your questions answered

Q *I applied for a Change of Assessment for my child support, but the CSA knocked it back. If they looked at all the evidence I gave them they should have given me the change. As it is, the child support assessment is not fair on either me or the kids. What can I do?*

A: If you don't agree with a decision made by the Child Support Agency you can ask that it be reconsidered. There is a specific objections process you should use, and objections can only be made where you think a decision is wrong because the CSA has:

- used incorrect information
- not considered all the relevant facts
- overlooked relevant details (or new information has become available)
- not applied the appropriate law or policy correctly

A formal request for a review should be made in writing, setting out why you think their decision is wrong and including all relevant information such as your case number; the decision that was made; the date of the letter from the CSA telling you of the decision; and any supporting evidence you have.

You can also do this online via the CSA website "Contact", then "Enquire online". The CSA should then contact you by telephone to discuss the objection. They have a set process they go through in reviewing the decision. You can find this out when talking with them, or through their website.

If you are still not happy following this review you can object to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal (SSAT). Contact them on **1800 011 140** or www.ssat.gov.au

If you are still not happy with the SSAT decision you can escalate the matter to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (**1300 366 700** or www.aat.gov.au), and then the Commonwealth Ombudsman (**1300 362 072** or www.ombudsman.gov.au)

For further information on the CSA review process see their website <http://www.csa.gov.au/publications/1313.php>

If you have a question you would like answered please send it to us at admin@soleparentsunion.org.au.

Family Law amendments passed

The Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and other measures) Bill has now been passed by both Houses of Parliament.

Sole Parents' Union is pleased that this has happened, but would like to see more changes made. We feel that the Family Law Act is still too focussed on parents rights rather than children's best interests.

The 'discussion' (and we use that word lightly) around this issue has been hijacked by extremes on both sides. Many of the arguments either for or against these changes have used ridiculous examples to try to prove their point. I have heard one member of parliament say that these changes will prevent parents restricting their children's facebook use, or stop them grounding them for bad behaviour. This is clearly ridiculous.

Many groups which stress their non-gendered approach to these issues are still focussing on either mothers' rights or father's rights. Yet all maintain their only concern is their children. Three independent reports into the 2006 changes to Family Law to promote shared parenting were clear. The changes put women and children at great risk of violence.

To truly put children back at the centre of Family Law we need to remove all references to any particular type of parental arrangement as a preferred model. All families are different, and all should be able to make the arrangements that suit them. And if they can't decide themselves then the Courts need to be free to make a decision based on individual circumstances.

We should also remove any reference to children being made available to parents. A child centred approach would make parents available to children.

Sole Parents' Union represents all those parents - mothers and fathers - whose focus truly is on their children. These parents are telling us they would like more flexibility in the system. The regimented approach of doling out time and passing children between parents is not good for anybody. **We fully support the objective of keeping both parents involved with their children, where appropriate, yet we can't help but feel that children's rights are being trampled on in the ongoing battle between parents.**

Child Support Agency Christmas operating hours:

CSA will be offering a limited phone enquiry service over the holiday period. If you have an urgent child support issue you can contact them on **131 272**.

They will be closed from **23 December** and reopen for business as usual at **8.30am AEST Tuesday 3 January 2012**. Due to public holidays any payments received from **23 December** will be processed from **30 December**.

Fulbright Scholarship for not-for-profit leaders

Below is an extract of a media release from the office of the Minister for Social Inclusion, Tanya Plibersek:

Minister for Social Inclusion Tanya Plibersek today acknowledged the launch a new Fulbright Scholarship for Australian professionals working in the not-for-profit sector – which employs 900,000 people and contributes \$41 billion to the national economy each year.

“This new scholarship recognises the important role the not-for-profit sector plays in promoting a socially inclusive society and developing our economy,” she said.

“The scholarship is the first of its kind in Australia and will strengthen the sector by boosting the skills and capacity of emerging leaders within our hard-working charities and volunteer organisations.”

Under the Fulbright Professional Scholarship in Non-Profit Leadership, one Australian each year will travel to the US for three to four months between 2013 to 2017.

The Origin Foundation has provided the \$40,000 per year over five years in funding for the scholarship, which will be delivered through the Australian Scholarships Foundation.

“The scholarship will allow the successful applicants to undertake a course of research and professional development which would not otherwise be available to them.”

The Australian-American Fulbright Commission is a non-profit organisation in Australia, established in 1949 to further mutual understanding between the US and Australia through education and exchange. The Prime Minister and the US Ambassador serve as Honorary Co-Chairs.

More information about Fulbright scholarships can be found at www.fulbright.com.au

I can't work out how to embed this video in the newsletter, so follow the link to see what happens when children are given presents they don't like. It's very funny.

<http://youtu.be/q4a9CKgLprQ?hd=1>

Australian Law Reform Commission report into Family Violence

On 30 November, the Family Violence and Commonwealth Laws team delivered its Final Report to the Attorney-General. They also produced a short Summary Report that sets out the ALRC's recommendations and approach to reform so as to give quick access to the Report. Once these publications have been tabled, they will be available to purchase from the ALRC's website in hard copy, and will also be free to view or download from the website.

The ALRC will also release a series of short fact sheets, designed to provide practical examples illustrating how the recommendations, if implemented by government, might affect various parts of our community, for example people with disability, Indigenous peoples; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community; and culturally and linguistically diverse groups. These fact sheets will also be available to view or download from the ALRC website. www.alrc.gov.au

Centrelink Christmas operating hours:

All Centrelink offices and call centres will be closed on Monday 26 and Tuesday 27 December, and Monday 2 January.

If you are due to report income, activity test or participation details on Tuesday 20, Wednesday 21 and Wednesday 28 December, Centrelink have extended the online reporting time to 7.30pm local time for all states except WA who must report by 6.00pm.

For reporting arrangements during the holiday period please see the website www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/information/public-holiday-payment-details



Is Christmas a time of celebration for single parent and blended families?

Christmas can be a difficult time for single parent and blended families. Trying to come to an agreement on where children will be and when, let alone where Santa will deliver presents, can cause otherwise amicable arrangements to fall apart.

Divorce lawyers, Centrelink/Child Support Agency, counselling services and helplines all report a flurry of activity at Christmas - most of it distressing for all parties. It's also a time when domestic violence increases along with all other stresses.

There are lots of tips on how to handle things, as well as other people's experiences to draw on, with the most often cited one being to let go of your expectations and start developing new traditions. Have a look at these pages for some tips:

Divorce Support - Tips for Surviving Christmas as a Divorced Parent

Family Lives - Top ten tips for separated parents at Christmas

Dr Ruth - Holiday Tips for Divorced Parents

Most of these tips depend on parents being able to talk with each other, and focus on their children when making arrangements. While of course it's better if you can do that, we all know that sometimes that doesn't happen. If you can't talk with each other, then you might need to be more stringent in your arrangements.

While there are lots of tips for dads on how to cope without your kids at Christmas, either parent can be the one on their own. If you don't have your children with you on Christmas day, things can be particularly upsetting, and making a break with tradition can be even more important in helping you cope.

And if it's that difficult at Christmas when there's only one set of kids and parents to organise, what happens when you become a blended family, with children, step children, step-children's other siblings, and maybe two or more sets of parents (not to mention all those grandparents) what do you do? Given the rate of separation and remarriage, this is becoming increasingly more common. There are some great stories - as well as some heartbreaking ones - on how to cope.

So Merry Christmas and happy holidays to everybody. I hope whatever you are doing brings you and your children great happiness.

Some useful numbers if you you need to talk with someone:

Lifeline: 13 11 44

Kids Helpline : 1800 55 1800

Mensline : 1300 789 978

Domestic violence line : 1800 656 463



Sole Parents' Union works with government to try to improve outcomes for sole parent families.

We recognise that people move in and out of different family types, but that many of the issues of sole parenting, such as child support, family law, and parenting across households, remain even when people repartner.