

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. **7 November 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



Hi, and welcome back to the Sole Parents' Newsletter. Sorry for the big gap between updates, but there's been a lot going on here.

First of all I've been away visiting some of our community partners, and learning about the great programs that are happening around the country.

The programs for young single mums in Brisbane are particularly encouraging, with great results in keeping young women attached to the education system. We all know how important a good education is in improving outcomes both for themselves and their children, so this is great to see. It's a shame the government doesn't look at some of these programs before jumping on the "young single mums are bad" bandwagon.

We also talked with and listened to single parents, both mothers and fathers, in northern NSW and Queensland. The issues raised in these groups formed the basis of a Discussion Paper we presented to the Department of Family, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs. As soon as we have permission from them we will make the paper available on our website and send you a link.

Michelle has also been making contact with new groups. This helps us understand how government policy affects people in different places and different circumstances.

We've been trying to broaden the discussion beyond just single parents -v- partnered parents to an understanding that people move between the two groups at various stages in their lives. Most single parents have been partnered parents, and may become partnered again. This brings its own rewards and difficulties but

doesn't change what they experience with trying to get child support or parent across households. In fact it generally increases the difficulties, with children having to divide their time (and sometimes loyalty) between parents, step parents and siblings, half siblings, and sometimes four or more sets of grandparents.

It is these complexities that we want to see acknowledged and addressed in policy and administration.

Sole Parents' Union website

Unfortunately while I was away somebody hacked our website. As is the case with most community organisations, we don't have the resources to have our own web experts so have had to do some begging to get it fixed. This is now all underway and the site is back up and running. A big thanks to the great people at Lumonata for their assistance.

The work on updating the website is still happening. We've already put a lot of new information up there, and moved things around so they should be easier to find.

Hopefull we'll be able to get our forum operating again soon. That's been badly affected by the hacking so we're adding more security to try to prevent any future problems.

If you have any feedback or comments on the site please let us know. If there's anything you want to see, or information you think should go on we'll try to put it in there.



Your questions answered

Q Why doesn't the Child Support Agency take my costs into consideration when assessing child support? My ex gets money deducted from his income that's just for him, but all my money goes on the kids. How can that be fair?

A: Both parents (payer and payee) get a self-support component deducted from their income before child support is assessed. This is the same amount for both parties (\$20,594) and is based on economic modelling that says this is how much you need to support yourself before you start spending money on kids.

You may also be able to have any extra money you earn from a second job quarantined from child support for up to three years. This is in recognition of the additional costs you have in setting up a household after separation. This applies to both payers and payees.

Where you have additional costs for a medical condition you may have, or because you have a legal requirement to support another person you can apply to the Child Support Agency for a change of assessment to recognise this. Again, either parent can apply for a change of assessment on this basis.

Child support is assessed and payable to support your biological or adopted children or those you have a legal obligation to support. In most cases this means that if a parent repartners, their new partner's income is not included in a child support assessment. Some of the circumstances where this may change are if you are both in business together or if one parent appears to have put all their assets and income into their new partners name.

There may also be other circumstances where a partner's income can be considered in a child support assessment. Check with the Child Support Agency if you are unsure whether this might apply to you or to your ex-partner.

You can call the Child Support Agency on 131 272 or check online www.csa.gov.au

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

Australian Charities and Not-for-profits website

On 10 May 2011, a range of measures reforming the NFP sector in Australia were announced by the Federal Government, including the creation of the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC). The ACNC will be an independent regulator and will:

- be advised by an Advisory Board chaired by Robert Fitzgerald AM
- report to Parliament through the Treasurer
- be staffed by around 90 officers, with potential for growth if additional functions are added
- be supported by the ATO in the provision of back-office services

To support the introduction of the ACNC, an implementation taskforce was established from 1 July 2011. The ACNC Taskforce is a nine member taskforce headed by Susan Pascoe AM with members from the Treasury, ATO and PM&C. Additional support is being received for the activities of the taskforce from:

The ACNC Taskforce is required to engage with the Not-for-Profit sector in an open and collaborative manner on key elements of the establishment and operation of the ACNC as the national regulator.

It seems to us that most of the engagement has been with large charities, with smaller community organisations missing out on having a say. As the ACNC will cover all not-for-profits, it's important that smaller agencies get involved, and understand how this will affect the way they operate.

Formal consultations will be taking place in early 2012, with written submissions due by 27 February 2012.

For more information see their website at <http://acnctaskforce.treasury.gov.au/content/content.aspx?doc=home.htm>

You can also get information from their youtube channel <http://www.youtube.com/acnctaskforce>

Single Mothers' Conference, Melbourne

NCSMC and CSMC Vic invites you to the 2011 Conference of the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children – *Diversity, Dignity and Determination*. The Conference is for all single mothers and those who work with and support them. Conference details below. For more information contact Jane Stanley via email coordinator@csmc.org.au or phone (03) 654 0327

Date: Friday 18th November
Time: 9:15am – 4:30pm

Cost: Free for single mothers (childcare available)

Venue: St Michaels on Collins
120 Collins St, Melbourne

Bookings: essential
www.trybooking.com/UVF

Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group (CSNSEG)

Sole Parents' Union is a member of the Child Support National Stakeholders' Engagement Group. Through this we have regular meetings with the Child Support Agency and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to discuss how their policies affect people on the ground and how they can be improved for sole parents.

We attended one of these meetings in Canberra last week, at which the following issues were discussed:

Child support, Family Tax Benefit and the reasonable maintenance action test

In order to qualify for more than the minimum Family Tax Benefit, sole parents must take reasonable steps to seek child support from the other parent. We have always been told that this means first of all getting an assessment from the Child Support Agency, and then taking steps to collect the money from the other parent.

However, we have been advised that this might not be the case. Just obtaining an assessment might be enough to qualify as reasonable maintenance action.

We are seeking written clarification of this advice, and will let you know as soon as this comes through.

Joining of Centrelink and Child Support Agency under the one Department of Human Services

The new Department of Human Services joins the Child Support Agency, Centrelink, Medicare and Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service under one administrative roof.

Part of the reason for doing this is to make it easier for people to deal with these agencies. Instead of going from one to the other and giving them your details all over again, once the amalgamation is fully implemented you will only have to tell one agency something, and the information will be available to all the others.

Despite what you might have heard, this is not working for all information yet. This means you still have to tell each agency individually if you have any change in circumstances.

The only matter so far where information is shared is about a change in care levels. This only needs to be reported once to either Centrelink or the CSA and they will share it with the other agency.

Partial exemption from seeking a Child Support assessment because of domestic violence

Did you know you can get a partial exemption from the requirement to seek child support if you have been a victim of domestic violence? The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children is seeking information on how this actually works for single parents.

Feedback so far has been that not many people are aware of it.

If you have obtained a partial exemption - or wish you knew about it so you could have - get in touch with them.

Via email terese@ncsmc.org.au or call (08) 8223 2330.

Simplifying communications

Sole Parents' Union has been raising the issue of the way the Child Support Agency and Centrelink communicate with their clients. We've had a lot of feedback from people that their letters and forms are too difficult to understand, and they can put people off applying for a Change of Assessment or other things they might be entitled to.

We're pleased to report that the CSA is working on some of their communications. Their new Child Support Statements are being tested and should be out soon. These will make it much easier to understand how much child support is payable, by when.

We are now trying to get a joint CSA/Centrelink communications working group to look at the information that's provided to new clients so that you get only what you need, when you need it.

CSNSEG meets four times a year. During other times we can raise issues directly with the relevant agency. If you have any questions or issues about the Child Support Agency or Centrelink let us know.

Family Law update

The Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and other measures) Bill 2010 is still sitting in limbo, waiting to be passed by the Senate.

This Bill was introduced to the House of Representatives on 24 March 2011, then referred to House Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee on 10 May. Their report was tabled 12 May (very quick report) and the Bill passed the House on 30 May.

The Bill was then introduced into the Senate on 14 June 2010, then Referred to Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee with a report due 23 June. An extension to report was granted until 16 August, then a further extension to report to 18 August. Yet another extension to report was granted until 22 August, with the report finally being tabled on that date.

And that's where it is still at.

Sole Parents' Union is very distressed that anybody would not prioritise children's safety anywhere, let alone somewhere like high conflict family law cases where they are more likely to be at risk.

That children are being put at risk was shown by the three independent reviews released early in 2010.

It's not only Australia where this issue is being addressed. The Family Justice Review Panel in the UK was set up to examine the whole of the family justice system in England and Wales, including disputes over contact with children when parents divorce. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education, and the Welsh Government.

After a great deal of consultation, including accepting submissions and reviewing how the law operates in other countries - including Australia - the Panel has now released their final report .

Chief among their recommendations is that:

"No legislation should be introduced that creates or risks creating the perception that there is a parental right to substantially shared or equal time for both parent."

The report also states:

"The evidence we received showed the acute distress experienced by parents who are unable to see their children after separation. This is an issue we know countries around the world try to tackle, and fail.

"Our conclusion was reached reluctantly but clearly. The law cannot state a presumption of any kind without incurring unacceptable risk of damage to children."

We are calling on all parties to put aside politics and act in the best interests of children.

This legislation must be passed - quickly!

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.