

Welcome to the Sole Parents' Union newsletter **18 April 2011**

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

From the Chair



I have just returned from another "listening tour". This time we're going to a few places in north-western NSW.

We really enjoy this journey of getting to know some of our community 'partners' and sole parents outside the city.

In our work with the government we think it's very important that we can represent the views and issues of sole parents who don't live in the major cities and towns. And what better way to do that than go out and meet them and hear what they've got to say.

I particularly enjoy travelling as there's no better way to meet new people, and learn new things. And, of course, a great way to combine business and pleasure.

Thanks to those who gave us feedback on our last issue - the first one in the new format. It's great to know what people think, and what you want to hear.

The Sole Parents' Union newsletter is for you - to try to answer your questions, and provide you with updates not only on what we're doing, but on what's happening at government and for sole parents and community organisations in other areas.

So please, if you have anything to contribute, or any questions you want the answer to, or anything you want to share with others, you can contact us via email admin@soleparentsunion.org.au, or through our website www.soleparentsunion.org.au

To keep up with Sole Parents' Union news, follow us on twitter

Enquiries and submissions

The *Family Law Amendment (Family Violence and other measures) Bill 2010* has been referred to committee for enquiry (again).

This is an important Bill to improve safety for women and children in family law, so please, if you can put something down on paper and send it in, do so. It doesn't need to be a "formal" submission.

Submissions close **29 April 2010**. See their website:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_ctte/family_law_familyviolence/index.htm

The Australian Law Reform Commission has released four papers for comment.

These are:

- Family Violence - Employment and Superannuation Law
- Family Violence and Immigration Law
- Family Violence - Child Support and Family Assistance
- Family Violence - Social Security Law

To read more about the papers, or to make a submission see their website. Submissions close at different times in April.

<http://www.alrc.gov.au/news-media/2011/family-violence-commonwealth-laws-e-news-issue-5>

It cost 34.6c for every dollar of child support collected in 2008/09, up from 22.3c the year before. Possibly due to the cost of debt collection.

\$10,000 up for grabs for men's sheds

Last issue we brought you news of Men's Sheds.

Well, now we can tell you that there is a second round of funding for organisations to develop men's sheds programs. Organisations can again apply for up to \$10,000 each through the second round of the Australian Government's Shed Development Program. Community groups can use the funding to purchase work equipment, improve disability access, obtain shed insurance or connect to utilities. The Gillard Government is providing \$750,000 over three years through the Australian Men's Shed Association to provide financial assistance to eligible men's sheds across the country.

Men can be reluctant to seek help even in times of high stress. Either for fear of being seen as weak, or just because they don't know where to go.

Men's Sheds provide places men can go to do "bloke" things like woodwork or some other hands on activity. And of course have a chat while you're there.

You can find a link to Men's Sheds on the Help for Men page of our website.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

A report from the National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council (NADRAC) was released recently and provides advice to Government on improving the integrity of alternative dispute resolutions.

The Attorney General, Mr McClelland commissioned NADRAC to recommend any legislative changes that may be required maintain the integrity of different alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes given the increasing use of ADR in trying to resolve issues outside the court.

The report - *Maintaining and Enhancing the Integrity of ADR Processes: From Principles to Practice Through People* - identifies:

- Issues that affect the integrity of ADR processes, including conduct obligations, rules about confidentiality and inadmissibility, and immunity of ADR practitioners from being sued; and
- Other options to enhance the integrity of ADR, such as developing professional standards, providing education and training for ADR practitioners, participants and the community generally and developing guiding materials to enhance the participants' understanding of ADR processes.

Your questions answered:

Q *Why does my ex get a reduction in child support when he's not paying any of the bills? I can't afford to pay for everything they need already, how am I supposed to keep up?*

A: The review of the Child Support Scheme in 2006 resulted in a number of changes, including:

- A new formula based on the costs of the children and the total income of both parents
- Dividing the child support between both households where both parents see their children
- Different levels of child support for children of different ages.

The second point above, dividing the child support, means that the CSA works out how much each child costs (based on a costs of children research), and then allocates a certain amount of their child for one night per week (14% of the time), then 24% of the child support goes to their household, and 76% to the household in which the child lives.

This amount stays the same up until the parent has 35% care, at which point the child support paid into their household increases in line with the level of care.

The Child Support Agency website says this split "*reflects your expenditure on costs like accommodation, food and entertainment while the children are in your care.*"

Sole Parents' Union was on the reference group advising the Taskforce Reviewing the Child Support Scheme. We objected to this change because:

- Costs of child are based on the cost of children in one household and does not take into consideration the additional cost for two households, so sole parents are missing out already
- Somebody who only sees their child one night per week is unlikely to be paying one quarter of their day-to-day costs, which means that children (or residential parents) are missing out.

We also think that if child support is to be divided between two households, it should be an encouragement for more responsible parenting, rather than seen as a "reward" for seeing your children,, No parent should need to be bribed to see or care for their kids.

We would fully support any moves to encourage responsible parenting rather than a "disney dad" mentality, which is what can happen now. Particularly with the emphasis on th emoney being used for "entertainment" rather than day-to-day living expenses.

But not at the cost of supporting children adequately.

Your questions answered will be a regular feature of our newsletters. If you have a question you would like answered please send it to us at admin@soleparentsunion.org.au.

Centrelink as an agency cops a lot of flak from its customers. It is always in the top 2 (with the Child Support Agency) of government agencies most complained about. Two new blogs on our website provide some idea of why this might be so.

The Ombudsman has also recently released a report *Centrelink: The Right of Review - Having Choices, Making Choices - March 2011* which identified 'systemic weaknesses' in Centrelink's review processes, including lack of transparency and insufficient education about available options to customers, often leading to delays and inaction – and that the complexity of Centrelink's review model contributes to administrative drift and breakdown.

Some Centrelink statistics

- 207,000 application for review were lodged in 2009/10
- Almost half of the review applications resulted in a change of decision
- 33.7 million telephone calls were made to Centrelink in 2008/09

Centrelink have accepted the Ombudsman's recommendations, and asked him to work with them to improve their internal review processes.

We suggest this improvement should include how they communicate with people in the first place.

We look forward to the Ombudsman's follow up report in six months.

<http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/reports>

We need your feedback to be able to make sure that we can give you the information and support that you need, either as a sole parent or as an organisation working with sole parents..

Email us on admin@soleparentsunion.org.au or go to our website to leave your feedback on our newsletter or website, or give us your story.

We treat anything you tell us as strictly confidential and won't use your information to identify you in any way.

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.

One third of children born since 2000 are likely to live in a sole parent family at least temporarily.

Child Protection News

The new NSW Minister for Community Services, Pru Goward, was very quick to affirm her government's commitment to transferring OOHC services to the non-government sector.

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies has welcomed this commitment and met with other community organisations to discuss their plan of action.

In Queensland the Bligh government has moved to strengthen the reporting requirements for child sex offenders.

In the Northern Territory, nominations are open for the inaugural awards recognising foster and kinship carers. The theme for these awards is *Keeping Kids Safe*, and the awards will recognise carers in the Territory who dedicate their life to the safety and wellbeing of Territory children by providing foster and kinship care.

All these are important steps in improving safety and security for children, and we welcome the proposed amendments to the Family Law Act, which are also designed to improve children's safety.

However, there is still a long way to go in getting federal and state agencies to work together on these issues, and to put children's best interests back at the heart of the Family Law Act.

The Gillard government has announced funding of \$490m over 3 years to help support vulnerable children and families.

This is welcome, but Sole Parents' Union supports the Greens call for more support for grandparent carers.

Grandparents often take on care of their grandchildren when the parents cannot care for them for some reason. Yet grandparents do not receive even the same support as foster carers, with many trying to live on a pension themselves.