



New(town) Beginnings #3

Dear Neighbour,

Over 50% of the clients we work with, many with a history brimming with complex trauma and crippling challenges, receive government support to survive. Finding appropriate work can often be insurmountable, especially if you have recently experienced homelessness, addiction or been incarcerated.

While the derogatory term 'dole bludger' seems to have disappeared from our vernacular, the sentiment that accompanies that slur continues to this day. For many people it's difficult to imagine how or why someone would ever need to access Centrelink support payments.

JobSeeker (formerly Newstart) is often the only source of income for those who find themselves unemployed. However the amount fosters destitution, as the minimal payment never quite allows you to thrive or succeed. The alternative – applying for a disability support pension – can be too hard to navigate.

\$282 a week or (\$40 a day) is what our Government thinks is acceptable for a person who is already facing barriers, to survive on. \$282 must cover your rent, bills, internet, phone, food, clothes and transport. Forget any other luxuries or entertainment that make life bearable and keep your mental wellbeing in check.

We know this measly amount was always unacceptable because not long after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Government was forced to increase payments to be on par with an actual liveable wage, supporting all the thousands of 'regular' Australians who had just found themselves unemployed. Suddenly payments increased with the extra \$750 a fortnight supplement.

Although the supplement was not directly intended to support people who had been on Job Keeper prior to the pandemic, the additional financial support has been a lifeline to our clients. Many have been able to buy nutritious food, pay off debts, buy suitable clothes, get haircuts, furnish their room or home, and invest in items such as TVs and fridges, which for many are considered a luxury.

At the Centre we continued to hear from our clients the difference the additional support was having on their lives.

"For the first time in years I've been able to save money and over Christmas I was able to afford to buy my daughter and grandchildren gifts."

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

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“During winter, when the allowance started, I was able to afford to buy myself some much needed warm clothing and shoes. I have also been treating myself to a haircut once a month, where I usually could only afford it twice a year.”

“I was able to afford to spend more on my rent and took the opportunity to move out of a boarding house and secure a studio apartment, where I feel much safer.”

One of our clients tragically lost their son at the end of April 2020. The additional support he received allowed him to pay for a funeral to commemorate his child.

Being unemployed often triggers or exacerbates mental health issues for our clients and can mean enduring a long-term cycle of debt, social isolation and potential homelessness. It’s almost impenetrable to break out of the cycle.

Today, the rate is at \$357 per week, until the end of March when the payment is expected to return to \$282. The Federal Government this week proposed to increase the payment amount by \$50 a week, but the measly \$3.57 extra a day is not enough.

“I’m really worried about returning to the normal JobSeeker rate of \$40 a day. Once I pay my rent and bills, I’ll only be left with \$60 a week to cover all my other basics like food, phone credit and public transport. Living in poverty like that, always worrying about how you’ll pay for basics – it’s bad for your health. It keeps me awake at night with worry.”

It is hard to ignore the correlation between receiving a suitable amount of money and establishing a sustainable future. Without it, you are stuck in limbo.

Permanently raising the amount of support will increase an individual’s capacity to find employment and re-enter the workforce by providing enough money for them to access phone credit to ring employers, utilise transport and have appropriate clothes to wear at interviews. It provides people with a sense of dignity and allows them to feel comfortable to participate in society and their local community.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre strongly supports the Raise the Rate for Good Campaign. Please join us by visiting www.raisetherate.org.au/ and demanding action from our government to support those who need it most.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

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