

RAISING THE RATE FOR GOOD

Before COVID-19, people on income support were living well below the poverty line, unable to cover basic living costs. With the additional Coronavirus Supplement, people were suddenly able to pay their rent and bills, buy fresh fruit and vegetables, and regularly eat three meals a day. Our network of services heard from many families and individuals who were able to buy new clothes and shoes, visit the dentist and take care of medical needs, some for the first time in years.

Recent cuts to the Coronavirus Supplement, however, threaten to undo the gains that have been made. In March, the Coronavirus Supplement is due to end.

Without a permanent and adequate increase to Jobseeker and related payments, hundreds of thousands of people across Australia will be pushed into poverty.

The following case studies illustrate the profound impact the increase in JobSeeker has had, lifting people out of poverty and providing a crucial lifeline. The stories of Camille, Dylan and Mary also demonstrate the need for a permanent, adequate increase to JobSeeker and related payments.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit our shores last year, the Federal Government did the right thing by introducing the Coronavirus Supplement and increasing payments for people on JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and related income support payments.

CAMILLE

'Camille' moved from Regional Victoria escaping family violence at the start of last year. As a stay-at-home spouse, Camille had not engaged in paid employment for over 25 years. She became actively engaged with our job agency and then COVID-19 happened.

With her limited work experience, Camille is finding it extremely difficult to secure a job. After relocating to Melbourne, she was placed in temporary transitional housing, first at a woman's refuge and later in hotel accommodation. As her temporary accommodation comes to an end, Camille has only been able to secure a rooming house, which will cost her almost 30% of her income.

Not only is the rooming house expensive, but she lives in constant fear for her safety, with many of the residents coping with mental health or drug-related issues. The only income Camille has received since arriving to Melbourne is the JobSeeker payment. She mentioned that during lockdown, and with the Coronavirus Supplement, she was able to buy those items she had to leave behind. She was beginning to feel some sense of stability with new clothing, a phone and a balanced diet. However, as the Coronavirus Supplement is cut, Camille is conscious that she will struggle to meet these additional costs, causing her further anxiety.

When visiting emergency relief, Camille mentioned that because the payments have been reduced by almost half - and with the high expenses of renting mounting - her income for food and other basic living expenses is incredibly limited. She is now relying on emergency relief services all around Melbourne to secure food, toiletries, clothing and medicine.

#RAISETHERATE OF JOBSEEKER FOR GOOD

— DYLAN

'Dylan' initially presented to emergency relief seeking food security and assistance with housing and phone credit. He confided that he had been couch surfing and was without stable housing as a result of a break-up in his relationship.

The relationship breakdown was a direct result of the extended COVID-19 lockdown. With increased social isolation, patience and compassion within the relationship began to decrease just as tension, alcohol and drug-use increased. Consequently, when Dylan left what had become an abusive relationship, he found himself without a home, stability or support.

Initially because of the Coronavirus Supplement, he was able to survive. With the cuts to the Supplement, however, Dylan is now in a state of crisis. He has been referred to social housing, however the waiting list is very long due to the recent escalation in demand. Homeless for the first time, Dylan is unsure how to navigate the services he requires. Now in extreme poverty and facing further cuts to JobSeeker, Dylan is experiencing chronic anxiety and depression as he looks to an uncertain future.

— MARY

'Mary' is in her forties, single and with no dependents. She is from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, with no other family in Australia to provide her with support.

Mary was referred to a financial counsellor as she is experiencing considerable financial hardship. She lost her job at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, and has found it difficult to secure further employment since she works in retail; an industry which was devastated by the economic crisis of 2020. She is now completely reliant on the JobSeeker Payment.

Mary's income does not meet basic living expenses, including accommodation, food, her monthly phone bill and utilities. Her position will worsen in March if the JobSeeker Payment is further cut to just \$40 a day. Mary has fallen into significant debt after taking out multiple payday loans to manage her rental payments, even though her rent was reduced during the pandemic to help her to maintain her current accommodation, which she had moved into after fleeing family violence. Mary's loan repayments are unsustainable given her current income.

Unless there is a permanent increase to the JobSeeker Payment, Mary will be forced to leave her rental accommodation as the old rate of JobSeeker will not cover her fortnightly rent, let alone food and other essential items. Despite Mary being linked to housing support services, she is about to become homeless. She now awaits a tribunal hearing to determine what her arrears repayment obligation will be after she is evicted next month.