

## Brief Submission to the Productivity Commission Carer Leave Inquiry

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### About Us

The Health Services Union (HSU) is a growing member-based union with over 95,000 members across every state and territory. Our members work in the breadth of the health and social assistance industry, in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. HSU members in aged care work in roles including personal care worker, enrolled nurse, assistant in nursing, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, therapy assistant, recreational and lifestyle officer, food services, laundry attendant, cleaner, and administrative officers. Our aged care members predominantly work in residential facilities but also in home and community services. In addition to those directly employed in the aged care sector, the HSU has members working in health professions that require them to interact on a regular basis with older Australians. This includes paramedics, mental health clinicians, disability support workers, and other allied health professionals.

### Summary

The HSU supports the fulfilment of the Recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (**the Royal Commission**). We recognise that carrying out this study meets Recommendation 43, to '*examine* the potential impact of amending the National Employment Standards... to provide for an additional entitlement to unpaid carer's leave' (emphasis added).

The HSU's primary focus is on the implementation of the Royal Commission Recommendations that are directed at reforming the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Our advocacy, informed by the experiences of our members, is directed at improving wages and conditions, addressing attraction and retention issues particularly in the context of the COVID-19 exacerbated workforce crisis, uplifting skills and training, and ensuring that the predominantly female and low paid workforce is recognised and valued. Providing care, particularly as more older Australians choose to stay at home and policy design supports this, requires an increasingly complex skill set. Qualified, trained, and appropriately remunerated and supported workers are best placed to provide this care. Prioritising reform that ensures these workers are well-paid and trained will reduce the need for informal carers to take time away from employment and allow their time to be spent enjoying and supporting the company of their loved ones.

We acknowledge the significant intersections between formal and informal carers. Namely that they are more likely to be women, have lower rates of labour force participation (e.g. employed in casual or part-time arrangements), earn lower wages, have reduced financial and retirement income security, and have other caregiving responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Given the formal aged care workforce reflects these demographics, legal and policy solutions must be careful not to have the perverse outcome of pushing more unpaid care responsibilities onto women. An extended entitlement may risk entrenching gendered care roles and placing downward pressure on women's participation in secure, well-paid and valued work.

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality Safety, Final Report, March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Carer Leave Issues Paper, pp. 3-7.

While the scope of this inquiry is confined to a consideration of informal care and support for older Australians, we also note that there are broader issues around the intersection between work and all types of caring responsibilities which need to be addressed from a legal and policy perspective. For example, the lack of an enforceable entitlement for workers to access flexible working arrangements which could accommodate caring responsibilities.

### **Additional resources**

The HSU understand that in or around May this year representatives from the Productivity consulted with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) on this study. The HSU is an affiliated member of the ACTU and we support the issues raised by their representative at this meeting. We are aware that in this consultation and following, the ACTU referred this study to additional resources:

- The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association's report 'Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast-food workers', 2021.
- Expert evidence of the ACTU to the Family Friendly Work Arrangements Modern Award review matter (AM2015/2).
- The Work + Family Policy Roundtable.

The HSU recommends the Productivity Commission consider these resources if they have not done so already.

### **Concluding remark**

Providing care has high-skill requirements. We maintain our longstanding position that the Government must comprehensively reform the aged care workforce. Doing so will improve economic and social participation opportunities for women, will have the mutual benefit of easing pressures on informal carers, and in turn will deliver myriad community-wide benefits.<sup>3</sup> The findings of this inquiry, noting the scope is narrow, should be taken by Government in complement to broader-scale reforms addressing the intersections of formal and informal care, including improving wages and conditions for the aged care workforce. Additionally, the Government should progress work on Royal Commission Recommendations 28 and 42 as fulfilment of these will drastically improve the wellbeing of informal carers.<sup>4</sup>

### **Contact**

Louise de Plater  
HSU National  
Industrial Officer

Lauren Palmer  
HSU National  
Research and Policy Officer

### **Authorised by Lloyd Williams, National Secretary**

This submission has been prepared by HSU National but is made on behalf of our branches and members Australia-wide. HSU National is the trading name for the Health Services Union, a trade union registered under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009*. The HSU has registered branches for New South Wales/Queensland/Australian Capital Territory; Victoria (4); Tasmania; South Australia/Northern Territory; and Western Australia.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 1.