

Media Statement

For Immediate Release

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Welfare Working Group Forum to Debate the Issues

Issues around long-term welfare dependency and obstacles to achieving better life and work outcomes for people on benefits will be the focus of a two-day forum being hosted by the Welfare Working Group on 9 -10 June 2010 at Victoria University in Wellington.

The Welfare Working Group, established by the Government in April, is examining New Zealand's welfare system, with a specific focus on identifying ways to reduce long-term benefit dependency while ensuring timely, effective and appropriate supports for people when they need them. It will report back on its recommendations by the end of the year.

The Working Group includes former Commerce Commission Chair Paula Rebstock, and a mix of expert academics, employers and community leaders.

Ms Rebstock said the June Forum would bring together a diversity of opinions and experience to identify the practical issues around long-term benefit dependency.

“The recession has shown the need for a safety net. But is that safety net working effectively and is it doing enough to help people receiving benefits to lead more fulfilling and independent lives?

“Prior to the current downturn, and despite 10 years of sustained economic growth, almost 10 percent of all 18 – 64 year-olds have been receiving a benefit. Over that period close to one in five children have been living in benefit dependent households. “

Ms Rebstock said those figures had worsened since the downturn: “Such high levels of benefit receipt are not what we should be expecting for New Zealand families or our communities. The Welfare Working Group is looking to make practical recommendations on creating better opportunities for those currently accessing the welfare system, while also making sure New Zealand’s welfare system is effective and sustainable over the coming decades.”

Ms Rebstock said the forum would include participants from New Zealand and overseas, including people with frontline and life experience of the issues.

“In looking at the future of the benefit system it is important to learn from the experiences of other countries. There will be contributions from a diverse range of thought leaders including, Bob Gregory from the Australian National University, John Martin from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and Peter Whiteford from the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre.”

The forum has also been informed by a series of Working Group-hosted meetings around the country over the past two weeks. These have involved representatives from Tangata Whenua, business, unions and the wider community.

“The Welfare Working Group will continue to engage wider New Zealand in a variety of ways over the coming months as we work to assess challenges and opportunities and develop a final report to be presented to the Government in December,” Ms Rebstock said.

The Welfare Working Group will be seeking public comment and submissions on an issues paper and a subsequent options paper before completing its final report. The Working Group is also having regular meetings May to November 2010. Regular updates and Working Group papers will be available online.

Information about the Welfare Working Group and the June Forum, including registration details, can be found at <http://ips.ac.nz/WelfareWorkingGroup/Index.html>. There will be no charge for the conference and it is open for anyone to register, but attendance will be limited to 250 delegates.

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