



News

Latest news
UK & Ireland news
Reflections
World news
Youth & Young Adults
Arts events, Shows & Exhibitions
Education
Justice, Peace and Environment
Catechists' Page
Films
Books
Obituaries & Tributes
Blogs
Letters
Prayer Requests
Poetry

Saint of the day

Whose feast is it?

Donate to ICN

Help us to bring you news
DONATE TO ICN
...with Paypal It's fast, free & secure
CLICK HERE

Search

Search ICN archives

Member Area

Join ICN and comment
Login

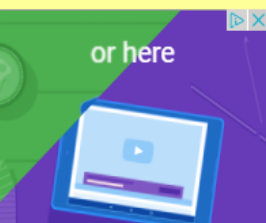
Newsletter Sign-up

Name

Email

Join

Advertisements



Viewpoint: New report identifies welfare system that seeks to punish rather than help

Paul Donovan

Tuesday, July 14, 2015 12:07 pm.

Comment Email Print



Paul Donovan

The government's reforms of the welfare state mark a step back to Victorian times, with a system that was intended to provide a safety net of support being turned into a vicious punitive process that blames the individual for all that befalls them.

A report from Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN), entitled the Impact of Welfare Changes, claims that: "The culture of the existing support system has changed from one based on compassion and support to one focused on efficiency and process."

Research conducted by CSAN has found that individuals and the staff of charities trying to support them have been brought to breaking point by the creation of an inefficient bureaucracy predicated on the need to punish the individual.

Take, the case of Katrin, a mother of three, who has her Jobseekers Allowance stopped because she had not applied for enough jobs. She has though, applied for the jobs but it turns out they had expired or been duplicated on the job centre's own website.

The desire to punish claimants seems confirmed in a process that makes benefits staff less accessible. So in this age of myriad means of communication, phone lines and paper trails are reduced. "The past ten years has seen the removal of phone lines, reduction of face-to-face interaction and minimising of paper trails of evidence. The distribution of knowledge and power is one-way and option for open dialogue is closed," says the report.

Free numbers have been replaced by 0845 numbers making it expensive for claimants. "Call handlers are often inadequately trained and staff in job centres appear ill equipped, with little understanding of how to deal with the complex needs of people's lives," says the report.

This move to a punitive approach is no doubt costing society more in the long run with the damage being done to the physical and mental health of the individuals concerned. "In the 21st century when we should be mindful of people's problems and supporting them emotionally, we are doing the reverse. In the long-run we are as a society paying for it one way or another, by increasing mental health problems. We are going, I would say, in the wrong direction, said Raj, a benefits advisor at the charity Brushstrokes in the West Midlands.

The mental health implications are a particular worry. "The impact of the benefit changes, less employment, less access to housing means people's mental health is just falling apart," said Sian, a key worker at Caritas Anchor House.

The changes are also having an impact on the staff of the charities concerned, forcing them to get involved in various bureaucratic morasses instead of dealing with the specific problems of the people they are trying to help.

"Over the last two years - and especially the last 12 months - there has been change in how we're supporting our tenants. Things are just completely different," said Rachel, a support worker at Nugent Care in Liverpool.

The report sums up what is happening very clearly. "Appealing against incorrectly applied sanctions and medical assessments, as well as navigating the complex and changing rules issued by the DWP means that staff are spending copious hours on paperwork they deem to be ineffectual," says the report. "Time that is essential to deal with underlying issues - addiction, mental health, family breakdown or low skills - is often compromised through dealing with complex welfare system issues."

The CSAN charities have shown great creativity in responding to the different challenges shown by the changes in the system. So at Nugent Care in Liverpool for instance, the cuts in local authority funding has led to a couple of staff picking up donations in the form of white goods. So they go around collecting these items, then testing them before allocating out to those in need. The testing process is another that the charity has had to take on because of the cuts.

The pressures though are causing some of the charities to change their functions to meet the needs. So for example, in the case of Brushstrokes, the organisation has had to widen its remit from simply supporting destitute asylum seekers. "Originally established as a centre for destitute asylum seekers, with no recourse to public funds, over the past 18 months the centre has experienced a 30% increase in people needing food aid - the vast majority of these British citizens from the local area as more and more people fall into the category of 'most vulnerable'," says the report.

The welfare changes are taking place against a mood music, fed by government and amplified in the media of skivers and scroungers. The misrepresentation sees the public increasingly believing these stereotypes, indeed, the report found that these beliefs were even being internalised by their clients.

CSAN recommend a number of changes that will help create "a more person-centred approach that respects human dignity." These include softening the sanctions regime, being less keen to cut people off entirely and ensuring there are proper means of contact and support for the individuals concerned.

The actions being taken in our names are not only morally wrong but in the government's own terms of cutting costs seem unlikely to be meeting the stipulated goals. A whole new expensive level of bureaucracy has been created in the name of punishing the weak and vulnerable. It is not morally right or economically efficient.

This report should cause pause for thought in government and wider society about what is being done to the poorest and most vulnerable in the name of austerity. There is a dehumanisation going on amid a race back to the world of the Victorian workhouse with its ideas of deserving and undeserving poor. It is not the way in which a society should be operating in the 21st century.

See also: [ICN 14 July 2015 - CSAN report: 'Restore dignity to the welfare system'](http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=27926) <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=27926>

Read Paul Donovan's blog here: <http://www.pauffdonovan.blogspot.com>