



Caught in a childcare subsidy limbo

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A sole mum who wishes to remain anonymous, shares her story of seeking Work and Income (WINZ) help when her school's after school care centre lost its Ministry of Social Development (MSD) funding during a change of management. The MSD is making critical changes in WINZ offices to ensure that people who rely on benefits and subsidies are treated with fairness and care, but, as "D" notes below, an important precedent is that caseworkers should have the ability to treat each case individually and based on practical need. Improved income supports and subsidy access for low-income working parents is vital.

In 2013 I was full time working single mother of one child. My ex-husband avoided paying child support by being self-employed and basically his child support debt was growing on the paper but I had never received any actual payments from him. Most of my salary went to cover rent, travel expenses, child-care and food. I had to carefully budget if I needed to visit a doctor, or fix my car, or buy new pair of shoes for my daughter, often it meant I had to skip dinner for a week or two.

My daughter attended before/after school care in her school and I was entitled to OSCAR (Out of School Care and Recreation) subsidy payments. At some stage school decided to change their legal arrangement and outsource the management of their before/after school care to another organisation. The place, the time, and the teachers remained as they were, just some formal arrangements changed. But it meant that the new provider had to wait several months before Work and Income could confirm that it was an OSCAR-subsidised organisation.

There was no other possible before/after school care in the area and I couldn't afford to pay full price. I talked to the school and asked for a discount during this difficult transition period, but they refused to help. So I visited Work and Income, which was a terrible experience. The lady I dealt with was rude, and said she couldn't do anything to help. There was no hope of an emergency grant, as I was working. I asked, why couldn't they offer some flexibility to support individual situations? I broke down in tears, explaining that without help to pay for my child's care, I could lose my job - which would cost WINZ so much more. She then called her manager to remove me from the premises.

I managed that time by withdrawing my child from school for two days a week until papers were sorted with the new centre. I was lucky to be able to take her to work with me. I don't need to explain how damaging and hard it was for her, me and even my job suffered in the process.

I believe first of all that managers at WINZ must be trained to be kind, compassionate and caring. Secondly, they must do more than simply tick boxes, a protocol which any computer program could do more efficiently than a human being. They must be able to review each case individually and grant assistance depending on the personal circumstances. And, finally I think raising children should be recognised as a hard and important work. Money which WINZ pay to child-care providers should go directly to the parents with no conditions and parents can decide if they spend this money on the child-care of their choice, whether it is centre-based or for parents to provide care for their own children themselves.

If you or anyone you know needs help with accessing benefit entitlements or subsidies, you can call any of the following organisations for advice and assistance:

Action Against Poverty www.aaap.org.nz

Beneficiary Advisory Service www.bas.org.nz

Beneficiaries Advocacy & Information Service www.bais.org.nz

Citizen's Advice Bureau www.cab.org.nz