

# From the Horse's Mouth: a focus on bread-and-butter reforms for jobseeker support recipients without dependants

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## Abstract

Successive governments have made efforts to reduce poverty amongst some specific population groups, such as children, families and the elderly. However, their focus on poverty alleviation has not been evenly applied across the New Zealand population. Certain groups, notably single and partnered adults without dependants, are yet to receive the same level of attention. This article considers poverty amongst 18–64-year-old beneficiaries, including jobseeker support–work ready (JS–WR) and jobseeker support–health condition or disability (JS–HCD) recipients without dependants. Rather than focusing on big ticket reforms commonly put forward, this article highlights some often overlooked aspects contributing to poverty and other unnecessary hardship amongst this group, and seeks to identify some policy improvements that could be made within existing frameworks. These are discussed with examples primarily from my own experience as a JS–HCD recipient, and informed by others on JS who provided first-hand experience.

**Keywords** jobseeker support–work ready, jobseeker support–health condition or disability, poverty, Ministry of Social Development, beneficiaries without dependants, policy options

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Poverty in New Zealand is not a new problem; nor are government efforts to reduce it. While the Old Age Pensions Act 1898 was the first legislation to address welfare needs amongst a specific population group, the Social Security Act in 1938 provided a more secure foundation for New Zealand's welfare state. Wider changes to society and policy frameworks mean the welfare system has had different emphasises and priorities at different times (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018).

While both National and Labour-led governments have established measures to reduce poverty, the focus has been significantly on second-tier initiatives. In particular, these include: the long-running increasing reliance on the accommodation supplement as an add-on to inadequate first-tier benefit rates; and assistance, notably Working for Families and Best Start, that recipients of jobseeker support (JS) without dependants are not entitled to. These policy initiatives have grown quite significantly in their generosity, at least relative to previous arrangements, under the last two Labour governments. The latter reflects the focus on children and families, and a corresponding lack of

focus on single people and those without dependants. An isolated exception (although with a year-long lag) was the 2019 extension of the winter energy payment to main benefit recipients, initially introduced as part of the Families Package in 2018 exclusively to seniors and some families with dependants (Ardern, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Alongside such policies, governments have utilised other levers, such as setting targets, most notably through legislation addressing child poverty (the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 and Children's Amendment Act 2018). Such initiatives, while welcome, have brought little direct benefit to JS recipients without dependants.

The 2017–20 Labour-led government took steps to improve conditions for JS recipients without dependants. Selected aspects of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's recommendations were implemented, including a \$25 increase to first-tier benefits (the second of two modest non-CPI-related increases since the early 1990s) and indexing future main benefit increases to movement in average wages (New Zealand Labour Party, 2020, p.14, 2021, pp.1, 4–5), both of assistance to JS recipients without dependants. During their current, 2020–23 term, Labour increased (from 1 April 2021) the amount main benefit recipients can earn before a steep abatement rate applies, with an increase in the abatement threshold from \$90 to \$160 per week before tax for JS recipients without dependants.

Also, in May 2021 the government announced increases to main benefit rates. These included a \$20 per week increase effective 1 July 2021, and, from 1 April 2022, increases to the net rates of main benefits, amounting to an increase of between \$32.84 and \$36.50 per week for single JS recipients without dependants, and \$82.38 (in total) for couples, compared to 1 July 2021 (Community Law, 2022; Sepuloni and Wood, 2022).

On the face of it, these policy changes appear to be positive for JS recipients; they are also broadly consistent with (in the case of abatement threshold earnings, surpassing) the increases recommended by the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (2019b, p.99). Indeed, while improvements (e.g., annual indexing) to the accommodation

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supplement are yet to materialise, amongst calls for reform by academics and advocates alike is widespread support for adjustments and increases in two particular areas: main benefit rates and the accommodation supplement (e.g., Auckland City Mission, 2020a, 2020b; Barber, 2022, p.7, 2019, p.11; Boston, 2019, pp.173, 180).<sup>2</sup> Such calls reflect how the inadequacy of main benefits and the accommodation supplement has increased reliance on other, third-tier assistance, such as temporary additional support – an outcome which is unfair and inefficient (see below).

Furthermore, these seemingly positive changes can be deceptive. First, main benefit increases may reduce other payments, such as the accommodation supplement and/or

temporary additional support, as can participation in paid work, even under the abatement threshold. Second, coupled JS recipients without dependants can jointly earn up to \$160 per week (thus, they share the same abatement threshold as single recipients), with each person's benefit being reduced by 35% for income they or their partner earn over the \$160 threshold.

This can be compared with the situation for recipients of other main benefits, such as jobseeker support–sole parent, sole parent support and the supported living payment. Jobseeker support–sole parent and sole parent support recipients share the same initial abatement threshold as JS recipients without children; however, their subsequent abatement thresholds and accompanying rates are comparatively generous: 30% for earnings of \$160–\$250, increasing to the JS without dependant's abatement rate of 70% for earnings over \$250. Supported living payment recipients have the same abatement threshold and abatement rates, although these rates only apply to income generated from sources other than paid work, with an abatement threshold of \$180 on personal earnings.

Moreover, the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's recommendations for increases to the main benefit and abatement threshold were put forward as 'immediate steps towards adequacy', developed as a package of changes to increase income support, with the intention that increases would not be offset by reductions in other payments, such as the accommodation supplement and temporary additional support (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019b, p.98). Rashbrooke (2021) reported cases of people being worse off following the 2021 main benefit 'increase'. Likewise, Fletcher (2021) has highlighted the ongoing shortfall in income to meet basic needs despite such increases.

The fact that consecutive governments have failed to provide adequate support to JS recipients without dependants – both independently, and when compared to others receiving state support – is certainly not due to a lack of available evidence, or reputable advice. Calls for adequate and appropriate reform, including from the government's own expert advisory group, have largely been ignored, or implemented in a manner providing negligible benefit.

JS recipients need a greater increase in overall payments, in order both to live and, ultimately, to thrive and participate in society. However, the most useful contribution I can make is drawing attention to some areas that may alleviate poverty and hardship amongst this group within existing frameworks, albeit in seemingly small ways. My approach is thus somewhat different from that of articles normally found in *Policy Quarterly*. First, it is personal, based on my own experience, together with the experiences, and priorities, of many other JS recipients. Second, proposed reforms are modest and, in general, different from those often put forward by other authors on the topic.

In what follows, the article provides a brief outline of the nature of JS recipients. Next, it describes how support for this group is structured, utilising my own payments to illustrate. Following this, five focus areas for reform are presented. These have been selected because they were the most prevalent issues of concern, both from my own experience and that of many JS recipients I have consulted in preparing this article. Each issue is discussed, with suggested reforms for improvement. Arguably, all these reforms are politically palatable and could reasonably receive multi-party support. All are implementable within existing frameworks, independently or together, within a short period. Further, the suggested reforms require relatively minimal (or no) government investment; some may reap savings. Some concern operational policy.

Policy issues relating specifically to other beneficiaries, such as those with children, fall outside the scope of this article. However, while the focus is on JS recipients without dependants, most of the proposed reforms could be applied to other main benefit holders (such as those with children) and, in some cases, low-income earners.

Not all deserving areas are discussed. Emergency housing, sanctions, increased support for prisoners, including surrounding release, and reforming the outdated definition and application of relationship status are amongst other important aspects particularly affecting some JS recipients without dependants that are worthy of dedicated focus.

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#### **The recipients of jobseeker support**

The concern here is with beneficiaries aged 18–64, single and partnered, without dependant children. While this group may have children, they are considered to not have dependants due to ineligibility for government transfers available to those with dependant children. There are various reasons for this: for instance, they are not the primary caregiver; their child is in Oranga Tamariki care; or their child is receiving a benefit, such as the young parent payment. Some JS recipients do have dependants; however, they are not the focus here. Herein, unless otherwise

specified, ‘jobseeker support’ or JS is used to refer to recipients of both jobseeker support–work ready (JS–WR) and jobseeker support–health condition or disability (JS–HCD) without dependants.

JS is a weekly payment to those who: are unemployed and looking for work; are in part-time employment looking for additional work; or have a health condition or disability requiring reduced working hours or temporary cessation of work. Essentially, JS–WR and JS–HCD are, respectively, the pre-2013 unemployment and sickness benefits. All JS recipients must accept offers of suitable employment (unless their work-test requirements are removed or reduced for health or disability reasons), be 18 years old or over, be a New Zealand citizen or permanent resident, and have lived in New Zealand for two years.

#### **The structure of jobseeker support**

The current benefit system, for JS and other state support recipients, comprises three components: a main benefit (or first-tier assistance); supplementary (or second-tier) assistance; and hardship (or third-tier) assistance (Welfare Expert Advisory group, 2019a, pp.5–6). The main benefit is meant to cover basic living costs. The nuclear family is used to categorise recipients’ eligibility for assistance: adults are categorised as a ‘family type’, either ‘single’ or a ‘couple’. ‘Couple’ includes those who are married, in a civil union or in a de-facto relationship (ibid., pp.7–8). JS–HCD recipients require a current medical certificate, normally needing renewal every 13 weeks (ibid., p.10).

Second-tier assistance consists of payments for particular additional and ongoing costs: accommodation (the accommodation supplement or income-related rent subsidy), having a disability (the disability allowance) and heating (the winter energy payment). Payments usually provide a contribution towards the cost, rather than meeting it in full. Assistance is generally income-tested, and, in some cases, cash asset-tested (ibid., p.6). A raft of other second-tier assistance is available to some other state support recipients for which JS recipients are not entitled.

Third-tier assistance is intended to help meet essential urgent or unexpected living costs. Assistance potentially available to JS

**Table 1: Author's benefit payment details (p/wk)**

Jobseeker support	\$315.00
Accommodation supplement	\$70.00
Temporary additional support	\$56.64
Deductions	
Advance repayments	-\$8.00
<b>Total payment</b>	<b>\$433.64</b>

recipients includes temporary additional support, special needs grants and benefit advances. Temporary additional support is a weekly payment to assist with essential living costs that cannot be met by income or other means, rather than for a specific cost).<sup>3</sup> Special needs grants are one-off, non-taxable assistance for urgent costs, which may be recoverable or non-recoverable. JS recipients may access special needs grants for a range of costs.<sup>4</sup> Strict income and asset limits are applied (ibid. p.6), as are criteria for receiving a special needs grant. To receive a food grant, for instance, the recipient must demonstrate having to pay for an alternative essential cost with money they otherwise would have used for food. Main benefit recipients requiring help for an urgent, essential cost may get a benefit advance, which is recoverable: up to six weeks of net benefit entitlement may be advanced, recoverable from future benefit payments (ibid., p.31).

To illustrate, I receive a total of \$433.64 per week, comprising payment components shown in Table 1.<sup>5</sup>

**Issues of concern and potential reform options**

*Incentives to work*

The current government's move to increase the amount JS recipients can earn up to \$160 per week without their benefit being affected had the potential to reduce poverty significantly amongst this group. Such a policy could provide not only greater incentives to participate in employment, but also opportunities to do so in a sustainable way without harsh financial penalties. Moreover, paid employment can provide not just greater adequacy of living standards, but also a sense of purpose, social inclusion and dignity. This makes it all the more important to get such policies right.

Unfortunately, while the policy intention could have made a significant

difference to the lives of all work-ready JS recipients, this is not necessarily the case. Rather than encouraging participation in work, the design of this policy can function to disincentivise employment, by financially penalising recipients through reductions in second- and third-tier payments, even when earnings are under the abatement threshold. As may be evident from my current payments, taking a short-term 'pay cut' in the hope that part-time work eventually leads to full-time employment would not be possible on such a restricted budget. Worse, those receiving additional assistance over and above a main benefit receive it in order to meet essential costs. Eligibility requirements for temporary additional support, for instance, are explicitly based on having insufficient income to cover even the most basic needs that can otherwise not be met. Just as Rashbrooke (2021) found cases of main benefit recipients being worse off after the 2021 increases, I too have spoken with JS recipients who have experienced similar situations due to reductions in assistance from working where their total earnings are under \$160. Clawing back essential support because people are attempting to improve their situation by taking up paid employment (or working longer hours) puts vulnerable people at further risk; it is also contrary to the goal of supporting those on benefits into sustainable work.

As such, JS recipients would more likely be incentivised into work if they had the ability to earn up to \$160 per week in paid employment without it affecting their main benefit or second- or third-tier eligibility. Given the reliance on second- and third-tier payments to meet basic costs such as housing, reductions in such payments may disincentivise engagement in part-time work, especially if work-related costs (e.g., travel expenses) are taken into account. Such a scenario may be even more likely to have a negative impact

on couples, given the way the abatement thresholds are currently designed.

Thus, consideration should be given to aligning the abatement thresholds and rates to enable all JS recipients – regardless of relationship status – to earn the same amount. Alternatively, consideration could be given to aligning the abatement thresholds and rates for JS recipients to those of others on a main benefit, such as jobseeker support–sole parent and sole parent support.

Another possible way to address the issue and encourage workforce participation would be to enable JS recipients to earn up to \$160 per week spread over a longer time period (say, a maximum of 12 months) as average earnings per week. Flexibility in calculating the abatement period would especially incentivise, rather than penalise, those in casualised or seasonal work, whose weekly earnings may vary greatly throughout the year.

There are other approaches to encouraging work. For instance, the leader of the National Party, Christopher Luxon, has prioritised those under 25 years of age receiving JS for three months or longer: this group, he argues, should be strongly encouraged into full-time work. To this end, under a National-led government this group would be provided (whether they request it or not) with a dedicated job coach to get them into employment. Job coaches would be contracted via community providers if the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) 'can't deliver' (Luxon, 2022).

Luxon does not make it clear whether his proposed policy includes JS–HCD recipients, but in his speech (to the National Party annual conference) it appears both JS–WR and JS–HCD recipients are grouped together as 'on the Jobseeker benefit'. He quotes figures suggesting that there has been an increase of 50,000 in JS recipients since National lost office, and these data include JS–HCD recipients. Yet requiring JS–HCD recipients to undertake paid employment, regardless of their health and disability issues, is of very real concern.

Be that as it may, dedicated job coaches or similar have merit. This applies both for those under 25 and for other work-ready

JS recipients. Indeed, the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's report included the following recommendation: 'Provide sufficient numbers of well-trained, well-resourced, regional labour market managers and specialist employment case managers in MSD' (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019b, pp.141, 204). Certainly, in my experience, there appears to be a shortage of resources. As part of my latest JS renewal I expressed interest in working part-time at a local winery. The case manager specialising in the industry was to call me the following week. That was over two months ago, and the person still has not called. Appropriate numbers of sufficiently resourced job coaches, specialist case managers, or other staff who can assist JS recipients prepare for, enter and continue in suitable employment should be considered to help recipients find and retain sustainable work.

#### *Housing*

Shortly into a nationwide Covid-19 lockdown, my flatmate left, and did so without notice or advance payments to compensate for rent and utilities. When I explained the situation to MSD, I was told there was nothing they could do. As I was to learn later, this was not accurate. In this situation (and the following), I was eligible for a recoverable benefit advance of up to six weeks of my normal payment. The MSD staff involved did not tell me this.

Regardless, under the Covid-19 regulations I was legally unable to enter part-time work, or to show potential flatmates the property. This resulted in a shortfall between my weekly payment and rental payments: there was insufficient money for the landlord, and much less for other necessities. I attempted to find a flatmate; however, Zoom virtual tours are not popular. More distressing was the ministry's awareness over a period of months that I lacked sufficient income for rent, let alone to eat. Unfortunately, this was not the only time I would be in such a situation. Nor was it the last time I would receive an unhelpful response from MSD.

A little later I rented a property with someone I thought I knew reasonably well. Shortly afterwards, that person attempted to kill me, inflicting significant injuries. After leaving hospital, I called MSD to

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explain the situation. But even I was gobsmacked by the response. I had been in hospital, then in Women's Refuge. At that point, no one (including the police or courts) knew if, or when, the person might be released on bail. When I informed MSD that my benefit was insufficient to cover even the rent, I was advised to find random people to stay on a night-by-night basis to cover the shortfall and other expenses, until I had a better idea about when the person would be released from custody. Meanwhile, my net benefit was increased by \$10 per week. MSD also suggested taking the person to court upon their release (despite a lifetime protection order) to secure reimbursement for lost rent and utilities.

There are many (often complicated and interrelated) factors to address in such

situations. Concern for how to pay immediate and essential costs of living should not be amongst them. Currently, temporary additional support recipients are paid up to 30% of the net JS rate (or other main benefit) to make up (at least some of) the gap between essential living costs and income (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a, p.30). Any shortfall between costs and income over the 30% will not be met (aside from a one-off benefit advance). This means a JS recipient may receive both the accommodation supplement and temporary additional support in addition to a main benefit, and still have essential costs (e.g., rent) greater than their entire weekly payment. One possible way to address this issue would be for any shortfall in rent and other basic utilities costs to be available as a non-recoverable grant in specified circumstances (e.g., domestic violence, incarceration, hospitalisation, and abandonment concerning a flatmate or partner). The grant could be available for an initial period (e.g., up to three months) and extendable on an as-needed basis.

#### *Jobseeker support–health condition or disability recipients*

Those seeking or receiving JS–HCD face additional hurdles. For instance, after initial acceptance, 13-weekly renewals are required. This is in addition to 12-monthly renewals for JS and six-monthly disability allowance renewals.

These requirements impose significant costs on those administering the welfare system and the healthcare system, not to mention the support recipients themselves. The medical professionals generally certifying JS–HCD and disability allowance applications and renewals (i.e., general practitioners and nurse practitioners) are currently under considerable strain with severe staffing shortages, exacerbated in many cases by the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflecting this situation, I recently faced a wait of almost 12 months before it was possible to register at my local medical practice.

As it stands, the disability allowance application form is six pages long. It requires detailed information and evidence (e.g., concerning pharmaceuticals, treatments and verified evidence of costs).

The form must be completed by the applicant and a medical professional. Additional paperwork may be required; for instance, if the disability requires a counsellor. To compound matters, the processes for applications and renewals of the disability allowance and JS–HCD are poorly integrated.

There is a further problem. The current processes require the (potential) recipient of JS–HCD to discuss their current health condition or disability with MSD staff, notably for a JS application or renewal. This includes progress towards reductions in and/or no longer requiring such state support. In my case, this has meant recounting a hugely traumatic event – an attempt to kill me – along with how I am tracking in terms of the medically diagnosed anxiety, depression and PTSD arising from that experience. For my most recent JS–HCD renewals, I have had to recount this information to a different person each time, none of whom I had met before.

Plainly, such arrangements can be stressful and have a detrimental psychological impact, both on benefit recipients and MSD staff. From the reactions I have experienced, not all MSD staff are well equipped to deal with traumatic events. And they should not be expected to do so without appropriate training and supervision. Other government departments, such as ACC, have long recognised this – for example, through the establishment of a dedicated sensitive claims team. Moreover, it is not clear that all MSD staff have sufficient training or supervision to make judgement calls on JS–HCD.

Well-designed reforms in this area could significantly reduce the administrative burden on MSD and the health system. First, it would make sense to align the medical certification required for JS–HCD with the disability allowance and JS applications and renewals: all three should be on a 12-monthly cycle, as per the current JS renewal process.

Second, the costs associated with applying for, or renewing, JS–HCD and/or the disability allowance add an additional burden on recipients. The cost of medical appointments mandated by government to apply for, or renew, JS–HCD and/or the

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disability allowance should be available as non-recoverable grants.

Third, there is a case for establishing a dedicated team within MSD to focus on JS–HCD recipients, particularly those receiving JS–HCD on mental health grounds. This team should have specialist training and supervision relevant to recipients and their particular experiences. In the interim, a flag system or similar could be established, identifying those applying for or receiving JS–HCD, along with the disability allowance, especially on mental health or other sensitive grounds. Appropriate security measures would be necessary, given the nature of such personal information. It is assumed that something of this nature is already in place, given that medical professionals are required to collect and supply this information to MSD.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Third-tier assistance*

Most payment rates for third-tier assistance have not been adjusted for some time. Non-recoverable food grants, for instance, are set at a maximum of \$200 for single people and \$300 for couples without dependants every six months. While, theoretically, additional grants are possible, the bar is set high (I was not eligible in either of the

situations described above). Current rates for food, as with other grants and benefit advances (e.g., for electricity and gas, water and glasses) are poorly aligned to current prices. Also, much assistance of this nature is (or may be) recoverable, requiring the recipient to pay it back from already lean weekly entitlements.

It is encouraging that the government has started making improvements with respect to third-tier assistance. As part of Budget 2022, it was announced that those on a main benefit or a low income can apply for up to \$1,000 every year for essential dental treatment. Importantly, this is not just an increase of \$700, but is also now a non-recoverable grant.

Reforms in other areas of third-tier assistance should be considered. One of these relates to MSD's whiteware policy. Currently, benefit recipients may purchase via a recoverable advance a new whiteware product (fridge-freezer or washing machine). MSD decides what model and size appliance the recipient may have, based on family size. In my case, for a household of two, the available fridge-freezer is 198 litres. At a push this is adequate for day-to-day living; however, it certainly curtails opportunities to increase food security. The policy is also inconsistent with MSD's own expectations that recipients should take steps – e.g., by stocking up at the local vegetable market – to increase income and/or reduce costs as part of eligibility for JS and temporary additional support renewals. We have put down a vegetable garden to reduce costs and have healthier diets. Were MSD to alter its policy so recipients have the option to purchase whiteware most appropriate to their household's needs, we would be able to store our produce for future use, rather than giving away what we cannot consume upon harvest.

Tight, unrealistic policies around assistance, concerning basic necessities of life, make it even more difficult to survive, much less thrive. Moreover, they hardly fit well with the government's commitment to numerous international agreements: e.g., adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Of specific relevance here are goals 1: no poverty; 2: zero hunger; 3: good health and well-being; 6: clean water and sanitation; and 7: affordable and clean energy (United Nations, 2015).

Consuming a healthy diet, being able to see, and having heating and clean water should not be considered luxuries.

Last summer, when my household's tank ran dry, our only source of water for drinking, cooking, cleaning and bathing was a nearby stream. I did not feel able to borrow money from MSD for water; I am already paying back money for several other necessities (e.g., glasses, fridge-freezer and moving costs). The pay-back rate would be equivalent to a loaf of bread per week, which for me and other JS recipients might be the difference between eating and going without. While the situation was only short-term, insufficient government support concerning situations that third-tier assistance is meant to help prevent – like potential poisoning from contaminated water – seems most unlikely to support work-ready people able to move into employment.

A possible solution to such situations would be making grants for food, electricity, gas, water bills and glasses non-recoverable, and available on an as-needed basis. Recipients would be expected to provide appropriate evidence that these costs are unable to be met within their existing budget. Grants should be adjusted and indexed, to represent the actual costs involved. Food grants, for instance, could be indexed using the annual University of Otago Food Cost Survey's<sup>7</sup> 'basic' food costs calculation as a minimum. Consideration should also be given to grants for basic necessities, such as food, being at the same rate regardless of relationship status (savings that couples may make via bulk purchasing are negligible). Were food grants not to be available on an as-needed basis, another option, requiring no additional investment, would be to extend the current six-monthly entitlement to 12 months, increasing flexibility and providing greater assistance during times when recipients may need it most (e.g., Christmas, or during a reduction in part-time work hours).

#### *Administrative blunders*

Government departments, particularly larger ones like MSD, are responsible for administering significant processes and functions, along with the accompanying paperwork. However, responsibility for

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important administrative duties by no means excuses administrative blunders. In fact, given the large and often vulnerable population that MSD is designed to serve, it makes the responsibility for accuracy even more vital.

To illustrate the problem of administrative mistakes, I received a letter from MSD dated 16 July 2022, saying that my medical certificate for HCD accreditation would expire on 20 August. Accordingly, I needed to renew my certificate or let MSD know I was ready to look for work. In response, I booked an appointment to renew the HCD accreditation for 15 August. However, on 12 August I received another letter from MSD. This said that my payments would be stopped, effective from 21 August. The letter was written in the past tense. It said that my medical certificate had expired on 20 August, and that, because I had neither renewed it nor advised MSD that I was work-ready, my eligibility for JS had been reviewed and it had been decided that I no longer qualified for anything at all.

I was confused and upset. I called MSD's 0800 number for general enquiries for under-65-year-olds twice in an effort to resolve the issue. I was on hold for 90 minutes the first time and almost two hours the second time, both times without actually getting through to anyone. I understand this is an issue common with MSD 0800 numbers.

I kept my 15 August appointment. The nurse practitioner completed the assessment and filed the paperwork the same day. Later that day, I received yet another MSD letter. This one stated that my JS had been reviewed. Based on the medical certificate and other information, it had been decided that I did not need to look for work and my payments would continue.

My experience is not unique. Fortunately, despite significant unnecessary stress, the long-term impact on me has not been severe. But not all JS recipients have had the same outcome. I have spoken to several who have had similar experiences. In some cases it has been the final straw. Domestic violence, self-harm and suicide attempts are amongst the side-effects I am aware of resulting from such MSD blunders.

Clearly, greater care in administration, with properly trained and resourced staff, is necessary. To compare, when I drafted external correspondence at the Ministry of Education, a minimum of two other (senior) staffers proofread each letter. For ministerial correspondence, the sets of eyes at least doubled before it even reached the minister's office. In the case of correspondence to JS recipients, it would be a vast improvement if at least one other person actually read the letters before they were sent.

It would seem appropriate, then, for MSD administrative processes to be reviewed, with checks and balances put in place to ensure that JS recipients receive the correct information and in a timely manner. Also worthy of consideration would be increasing the efficiency of MSD's 0800 service.<sup>8</sup> One possibility would be adding the option of a call-back service on all MSD 0800 numbers, as used by some other government departments. For instance, Inland Revenue's call-back option kicks in when comparatively high caller volumes result in a long wait time (Inland Revenue, 2022). This would reduce both the wait time and associated stress for those attempting to make contact with MSD, at minimal cost to government.

#### **Conclusion**

This article has highlighted some key issues facing jobseeker support recipients without dependants. It has outlined several easy and

relatively cheap improvements that could be made within existing policy frameworks. If implemented, whether individually or collectively, the suggested changes would go some way towards relieving unnecessary poverty and hardship. Indeed, while the associated costs to government would likely be modest, their beneficial impact on the lives of many jobseeker support recipients could be very significant.

1 The winter energy payment is an additional payment to assist with heating costs during winter, paid 1 May–1 October, at \$20.46 per week for single people without dependants; couples and those with dependants receive \$31.82.

- 2 Some have put forward for discussion other possible means to increase income support: e.g., social insurance (Boston, 2019) and a universal basic income (New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, 2022a, 2022b).
- 3 This article categorises temporary additional support as third-tier assistance, as other commentators commonly do (e.g., Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019a, pp.29–30). Note, however, some MSD publications – e.g., their benefit fact sheets – categorise temporary additional support as second-tier assistance; this is long-standing practice.
- 4 These include: food; accommodation (rent, mortgage, board); electricity, gas and water bills or heating; dental treatment; glasses; whiteware (fridge-freezer, washing machine); medical costs; home repairs and maintenance; car repairs; bereavement; and losses from fire or theft. Other costs (e.g., bedding) may be available.
- 5 During winter I receive a winter energy payment. My advance repayments are for third-tier assistance. I owe \$251.60. I am eligible for a disability allowance for counselling; this is on hold until I can find a counsellor. The disability allowance is a maximum of \$70.04 per week.
- 6 For instance, as part of disability allowance applications and renewals, medical professionals are required to identify the nature of the person's disability. 'Psychological or psychiatric

- conditions', for example, include: stress, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other psychological/psychiatric.
- 7 The latest Food Cost Survey (Department of Human Nutrition, 2020, 2021, p.12) puts the relevant weekly food cost at a minimum of \$67.50 (\$73 for an adult male, and \$62 for an adult female). This would require adjustments to current costs. Alternatively, the Consumers Price Index, which includes the monthly Food Price Index, could be utilised (see, e.g., Statistics New Zealand, 2022).
  - 8 MSD has a 'Service Express' 0800 number, but this is limited to checking one's upcoming payments and current debts, so is of little use for many necessary communications.

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