

Letter from welfare advice worker on introduction of Universal Credit benefits

UK claimants deeply anxious, even suicidal, due to welfare sanctions

Our correspondent
21 November 2017

The World Socialist Web Site received this submission on the introduction of Universal Credit in the UK from a welfare advice worker. It was written in response to a November 4 article, “Escalation of Universal Credit roll-out in UK threatens millions more with poverty.”

Universal Credit is a benefit payment system for working-age people that merges all entitlements into one payment. It has been estimated that it will cost 2 million in-work families £1,600 a year and more than 1 million out-of-work families £2,300 a year.

I am employed as an advice worker, working in an inner-city area, providing people who suffer with mental health problems advice and assistance to access benefits.

I have worked in this field, with people with mental health problems, for over twenty years. In my time I have seen changes to welfare benefits, housing, with more and more people struggling to make ends meet, and who live from day to day.

The question of the impact of Universal Credit is discussed in the article in some detail, and the author correctly states that this benefit will hit the most vulnerable people particularly hard.

I think it is important that we start by saying that a life on benefits has never been a holiday. With the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill in 2008, under the then Labour Government, and the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) with its Work Capability Assessments (WCA)—medicals brought in to supposedly measure a person’s fitness to work—there was a seismic shift

implemented in how benefit claimants are treated.

The WCA has caused misery for millions. In my everyday work I meet claimants who are living in fear of letters arriving from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and having to attend their meetings. I often hear people say they are anxious, becoming increasingly stressed out as the day approaches, unable to sleep, or think about anything else.

Earlier this year, research conducted by academics at Edinburgh’s Heriot-Watt and Napier Universities found that the WCA experience for many caused a deterioration in their mental health, which individuals did not recover from.

The study carried out in-depth interviews and found that for some people the experience of attending these interviews led to thoughts of suicide. Many of the interviewees with mental health problems felt that those carrying out the assessments lacked expertise.

Professor Abigail Marks, lead author of the study, told the *Independent* that people who worked closely with such cases reported that deterioration in mental health conditions was an “almost universal” response to the tests.

Recently, an open letter posted on Facebook by the mother of Elaine Morrall, 38, reported the tragic news about the death of her daughter, who had been found at her home in Runcorn, Cheshire, alone, just wearing a coat and scarf.

Elaine had not put the heating on as she was waiting for her children to come home from school. Her mother asks, “Why? Because she couldn’t afford to do so.”

Elaine had had her Employment and Support

Allowance benefit stopped because she had been too ill to attend a meeting. She missed the appointment because she had been in hospital, on an intensive care unit. She had a history of suffering from an eating disorder, was severely depressed, and had many other problems.

Her mother outlined some of the details of this tragic case. Reading this, as someone who works in this field, I can truly sympathise with what she has said and agree that this kind of thing does happen.

Her mother had even gone to the Job Centre to explain that her daughter could not attend the appointment. Yet her benefits were still stopped and she was told that being in intensive care was not sufficient reason for failing to attend a universal credit interview. Her mother then asks, “How many people have got to die before this government realises they are killing vulnerable people?”

Elaine’s mother is only one of many people who must be asking themselves the same question about a benefits system that is punitive and draconian.

And now people must face the onslaught of Universal Credit, despite the fact that it is already failing people across the UK as it is being rolled out.

I would like to draw your readers’ attention to a particular issue regarding Universal Credit that will result in up to half a million claimants with disabilities losing a significant amount of money each week, according to charities.

Claimants who were in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP), a disability benefit paid to those with either physical, or mental health problems, may also have been entitled to two additional benefits, depending on their circumstances: Severe Disability Premium, paid at £62.45 a week for a single person and £124.90 for a couple, and Enhanced Disability Premium, paid at £15.90 a week and £22.85 respectively.

Universal Credit does not include either of these additional premiums, and many will be financially worse off.

On top of this disabled claimants will face a mandatory “health and work conversation” (HWC), whereby they will have to provide information to a work coach about what jobs they can undertake, or face the possibility of being sanctioned. This will mean those too ill to even get out of bed having to try and get

down to a local Job Centre.

Over years of working in this field, with cutbacks and attacks on benefit claimants, it is becoming increasingly difficult to acquire benefits for people. The question has to be asked, what can advice workers actually achieve in their day to day work with some of the most vulnerable we meet in our work?

I speak to people who say, “Why don’t you go to your local MP, see if he or she can do something?” But why would you advise anyone to go to a local MP? Many Labour MPs supported welfare reform and it was the Labour Party who introduced the Welfare Reform Bill 2008. Yes, we will all attempt to do our best with all the people we are trying to help, but there has to be a solution outside just awaiting a change in legislation, or the promise of a new government.

I hear many people I meet say we need to get Jeremy Corbyn into government and then things will change. But will they? The Labour Party has not said it will scrap Universal Credit and what is the track record of Labour on welfare reform?

The Conservatives’ Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 saw enormous cuts to welfare spending of £12 billion, affecting millions of people, including cuts to child tax credit and the household benefit cap. Yet at the time of the second reading of the Bill 184 Labour MPs abstained on the vote. Need I say more?



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