

AUSTRALIANS in the welfare system will be out in force tomorrow in a National Day of Action against the Federal Government's cashless welfare card.

The protest will be outside the State Library, Melbourne at 12 noon, Saturday, March 12.

The 'Healthy Welfare' Card restricts 80 per cent of an unemployed welfare recipient's entitlement to a VISA-style debit card that cannot be spent on alcohol or gaming. Just 20 per cent of the welfare payment can be used as cash.

The Coalition Government plans to impose its income management system across three trial locations, starting shortly in Ceduna, South Australia, and later in the East Kimberley in Western Australia with a third location yet to be announced. When rolled out across these locations, the Healthy Welfare Card will be imposed on more than 10,000 unemployed Australians. The Government has indicated it wants to roll out the system nationally if the trials are successful.

But welfare groups have slammed the plan, claiming it is demeaning, invasive, unworkable and bureaucratic.

The president of the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union Owen Bennett said the card would "turn unemployed Australians into second-class citizens".

"Denying unemployed Australians the basic right to shop where they want is a shocking attack on the rights and dignity of Australia's most poor and vulnerable".

"For most unemployed workers, buying second-hand goods or going to the market is the only way to survive on the Newstart entitlement - a payment that is already \$190 per week below the poverty line", said Bennett.

"The card is a shameless attempt to distract people from the Government's systematic failure to create jobs". According to the Government's own statistics, in Australia there are 11 job seekers per job vacancy. Mr Bennett said this 'dire situation' had made the average duration of unemployment more than four years.

"Exactly how will forcing unemployed Australians to live on just \$60 cash per week address the growing employment crisis?"

The card was proposed by billionaire mining magnate Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest in his 2014 review into Indigenous Employment. Under his initial proposal, Forrest demanded the card be 100 per cent cashless.

Both the Coalition and the Labor party have supported trialling the card and it passed the Senate 37 votes to 10 on October 14, 2015, though Greens community services spokeswoman Rachel Siewert said there were a number of unanswered questions about merchant fees and other banking charges.

Potential cardholders in Ceduna are concerned about privacy, consumer protection, banking charges and the ability to stretch the 20 per cent cash component to cover a range of costs such as mortgage payments and other services that require cash.

Ceduna 'Anti-cashless card' working group convenor Dave Pav said aboriginal communities were advising the Government the card should be targeted as specific offenders. 'We are being treated like animals in a feed lot' he said.