

Community Affairs Legislation Committee

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES CROSS PORTFOLIO INDIGENOUS MATTERS 25 FEBRUARY 2011 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Human Services Portfolio

Topic: Support for families with no income

Question reference number: HS 5

Senator: Siewert

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Question:

Senator SIEWERT - I appreciate that this is also a DEEWR issue, but we are crossing over from DEEWR into general welfare for these families. Is there information on who has been referred to organisations? I presume here we are talking about NGOs that are coming in and supporting families. Is that what you mean?

Ms Hay - That is correct.

Senator SIEWERT - Do we have details on how those families are being supported and how they are putting food on the table?

Mr Tidswell - Senator, we will take that on notice to get some advice about how that is occurring. It is important to note that family tax benefit is still provided. That is not suspended; it is the income support payment. The whole goal here for our staff is to get the customer to do what needs to be done to enrol their child or get their child to school. Now, one of the things we would look at is that the parent has to do whatever is reasonably possible, but if there is a difficult adolescent or child and they have taken all reasonable steps we would accept that. In that sense, the game plan here is to try to get kids at school—get them enrolled and attending. It is not the desired effect to suspend payment. We work hard with those families to get those kids at school or enrolled at school and that really is the process we use.

Senator SIEWERT - I understand what you are intending. I disagree with it because of the approach that has been taken. I do not want to have an argument about that because we have had it, but what I am concerned about is what is happening with these families and whether it is creating more social problems.

Senator Arbib - We will get you the answers on that. I have asked Centrelink the same questions because, obviously, I have an interest in the area. My understanding is that there are welfare workers who are involved throughout the process, obviously attempting to get the children to engage in education but also looking at the welfare of the family and working in with the local school, of course, and the other agencies. So we will get you a more detailed answer on that, but we all agree that we are not just worried about the welfare of the children in terms of going to school but also their general welfare. The two matters are totally linked.

Answer:

Social Workers involved in the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure project provide early intervention by working with families to identify barriers preventing parents from being able to meet the school enrolment and/or attendance requirements, and supporting parents to engage with school authorities. Social Workers provide a holistic service so that risks to the children and wider family are identified and responded to, including through referral to appropriate support services.

For those families whose payments are suspended, Social Workers have ongoing contact with the parents to encourage and facilitate school engagement. They also work with the family to address the barriers identified by the parents and Social Worker, and make referrals to community-based services to address these barriers.

Referrals may include one or several of the following:

- financial/material aid services;
- drug and alcohol services; and
- medical and mental health services.

This pro-active approach by Social Workers has resulted in many families re-engaging with schools to increase attendance or exploring options for their children. It enables parents to make informed choices about services available to themselves and/or their children.