

Chapter 4

Human Services Portfolio

Department of Human Services

4.1 This chapter contains the key issues discussed during the 2010-2011 additional estimates hearings for the Human Services portfolio.

4.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 24 February 2011. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Human Services (including Child Support)
- Corporate Operations and Enabling Services
- Centrelink Agency
- Medicare Australia Agency
- Australian Hearing

Human Services (including Child Support)

4.3 The committee sought further information on the process of automatic deduction from an individual's pay for child support. Specifically, they sought information on the issue of an employer deducting the amount but not passing it on to the CSA. Officers explained that automatic deduction can occur at the request of either the CSA or the employee. Officers noted there are a variety of reasons why the payments have not been transmitted to the CSA and that there are methods to follow when this occurs:

Generally speaking, we would start by taking the matter up with the employer to see whether we can get it resolved and, in particular, get the money transmitted to us. If that is not able to be done, we can terminate employer withholding arrangements in those sorts of circumstances. We can also—as we have in a small number of cases—move into more formal investigations and prosecution.¹

Paid Parental Leave (PPL)

4.4 The committee asked officers to detail the current maternity and paternity leave schemes in the employee collective agreement. Officers explained each agency across the portfolio has their own specific arrangements that vary from 12 to 14 weeks. The department confirmed that employees eligible for the existing schemes would also be eligible for the incoming Paid Parental Leave.²

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 78.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 79–80.

Staffing Arrangements

4.5 The committee sought an update on the current staffing arrangements in place, including: turnover rate, recruitment, training and leave taken. Officers detailed the staffing arrangements in terms of the current integration of the agencies and the department, noting the separation rate of both.³

4.6 Officers explained that given the sometimes difficult nature of the work, a high degree of effort is taken to ensure staff adapt to the working environment. This includes classroom training, a buddy program where experienced staff work together with new starters on phone calls, and then eventually begin to work more independently with customers on the phone. However officers noted there will inevitably be a proportion of new staff that, once familiar with the work, will decide it does not suit them.⁴

Centrelink Agency

Emergency Relief Payments and Services

4.7 The department gave the committee an overview of the emergency relief payments. Three different means of support were identified: the Australian government disaster recovery payment; the disaster income recovery subsidy; and wage subsidies. Officers informed the committee that a coordinated effort involving the ATO, DIAC and the Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman resulted in 700,000 claims being processed, and over 80 social workers and more than 300 staff door-knocking with the Red Cross and providing assistance in evacuation and recovery centres. Over 2,500 staff were involved in work across Australia in call centres, customer service centres, processing centres, in the national office and in boats travelling through flooded streets.⁵

4.8 Ms Carolyn Hogg, Chief Executive Officer, Centrelink, informed the committee that these services have had an impact on the day-to-day work and standards of service. Noting that this time of year is traditionally busy, customers that were not directly affected by the series of natural disasters had to wait longer for services both in Centrelink offices and over the phone.⁶

4.9 The committee asked the department to list the total payments for the Australian Government Disaster Relief Payment (AGDRP) scheme. Officers detailed the following:

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 80–81.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 80.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 81.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 81.

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- As of 31 January, the total number of payments made was 328,717. The total value of these payments was \$388 million (\$388,292,599.99).
 - The total number of payments as of midnight Wednesday 23 February was 636,725, with a total value of \$739,515,199.99.⁷

4.10 The committee queried the sharp rise in the number of payments in the last three weeks, noting the figure had almost doubled. Officers explained this can be attributed to Cyclone Yasi, with records showing 227,696 people affected.⁸

4.11 The committee asked the department to provide a breakdown of the specific processes in place to inform affected people of their eligibility for support. Officers explained that staff are still working in communities affected to ensure people are aware of the payments. To this end, they have made announcements on community and local radio.⁹ Applications can be made in Centrelink offices, online and over the phone, with recipients having to sign a declaration before they can receive any payments.¹⁰ Officers confirmed that payments are always made into bank accounts, and that there are no legal obligations imposed on the recipient to use the money in any pre-determined way.¹¹

Disaster Relief Fraud Task Force

4.12 The committee sought further information on the task force investigating fraudulent claims. The department informed the committee that the task force was established as a result of discussions within the portfolio and with the minister, in the first week after the floods in South-East Queensland. Officers explained they have experience in dealing with this type of fraud from previous disasters and as such, were prepared to implement risk checks on the types of activities seen previously. The committee noted that the powers, roles and responsibilities of the Disaster Relief Fraud Task Force were the same as the existing Centrelink Fraud Investigation Unit, and therefore queried why there was a need to set up this additional task force. The department explained that based on experience from previous disasters, it is beneficial to have a group of staff focus on that particular payment at that time, because many of these claims can be quite complex, especially if people have made multiple claims.¹²

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 82.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 83.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 83.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 83.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 85.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 85–86.

4.13 The committee concluded its questioning on the disaster relief services by commending the department on its work and the services provided throughout the numerous disasters since 31 December 2010.¹³

News for Seniors

4.14 The committee sought further information on the Centrelink magazine *News for Seniors*. Officers informed the committee that the key purpose of this publication is to provide pensioners with information on current government policy. Its intent is to be a user-friendly guide that outlines assistance that pensioners may be entitled to. The magazine was introduced in the late 1990s, it is issued on a quarterly basis, and is currently the largest circulated publication in the country.¹⁴

4.15 The committee queried staffing arrangements, advertising offsets and production costs. Officers advised the committee there are two staff employed full-time for production, noting the cost for each edition is approximately \$1 million, with part of the cost offset by advertising.¹⁵

4.16 The committee questioned advertising protocol and whether or not there are any restrictions as to what can and cannot be advertised. Officers told the committee there are 'quite rigid' constraints. There is a disclaimer in every edition to emphasise that the magazine does not necessarily endorse particular advertisers and officers explained they have been very selective in terms of the advertisers that have chosen.¹⁶

Medicare Australia Agency

4.17 The committee sought further information on issues encountered by practitioners having their registration transferred to the national registration scheme through AHPRA, the national registration body. Officers explained Medicare is involved in the registration process solely so that practitioners can claim Medicare benefits.¹⁷ By way of explanation, officers detailed the process Medicare staff experience when AHRPA give notification of registration problems:

We receive information from AHPRA...If there are any doctors that have not registered and we have been notified by AHPRA that we need to deregister them, we send a letter to them to inform them of the case. We make two phone calls to alert them to that...That is to alert them that they will be deregistered and it is also to inform them that they cannot claim medical rebates while they are deregistered.¹⁸

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 87–89.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 96–97.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 97.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 97–98.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 115–116.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 115.

4.18 Officers stated they were unable to provide information specifically on patients that have had their Medicare rebates refused, as rebates can be refused for a number of reasons. Officers informed the committee that deregistrations are a normal part of business, and there has not been a rise in phone calls or complaints since the transferral to AHPRA.¹⁹

Individual Health Identifiers (IHIs)

4.19 The committee sought further information on Individual Health Identifiers (IHIs). Officers informed the committee IHIs have been assigned to 23.5 million individuals and there are three categories: individual, organisation and professional. The committee raised concerns about privacy and ease of access to information. Officers explained individuals can log into an online account, go to their local Medicare office or call Medicare to access their information, which would include an identification check prior to accessing the information.²⁰ Officers emphasised the steps taken to ensure privacy:

We have taken these privacy matters very seriously. We have worked with the National eHealth Transition Authority and the Department of Health to always act in the best interests of Australians and protect the privacy of their health information and data, which is very precious to us.²¹

4.20 Officers also noted that records are kept so that individuals can request details of who has looked at their IHI.²²

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 116.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, pp 118–120.

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 120.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 23 February 2011, p. 119.

