

# Chapter 3

## Human Services Portfolio

### Department of Human Services

3.1 This chapter outlines key issues discussed during the 2012-2013 budget estimates hearings for the Human Services Portfolio.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Tuesday 29 May 2012. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Australian Hearing Services
- Corporate Operations and Enabling Services
- Child Support
- Centrelink
- Medicare Australia

3.3 Proceedings commenced with an opening statement by Senator the Hon Kim Carr, Minister for Human Services.<sup>1</sup> The Minister outlined the scope of the services provided by the department and declared his 'sincere appreciation' for the 'passion and professionalism' of the staff across the country. The Minister also reaffirmed the Government's commitment to closing the Chronic Disease Dental Scheme, declaring it to be 'bad policy' introduced by the previous Government. The Minister noted that the Government is working towards new arrangements and outlined retrospective changes to the Dental Services Determination to 'establish more appropriate compliance arrangements'. The Minister tabled the Opening Statement.

#### *Australian Hearing*<sup>2</sup>

3.4 The committee asked about the jurisdictional responsibility for the provision of hearing services in prison and the eligibility criteria for access to those services. The committee also probed the departmental advice provided to Australian Hearing and the costs of providing services to prisoners.

#### *Corporate Operations*<sup>3</sup>

3.5 Minister Carr advised that he had received a charter letter from the Prime Minister, but that he would need to take the date of receipt on notice.<sup>4</sup>

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1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 54–55.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 55–58.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 58–91.

3.6 Senator Fifield asked a series of questions about the tasks, membership and costs of various advisory groups including the National Multicultural Advisory Group and the National Place Based Advisory Group.<sup>5</sup>

3.7 Minister Carr gave 'advice to government' as the reason that advisory group minutes may not be made available to the committee. The Minister made no claim for public interest immunity and the committee did not push the issue, although it did place the request on notice.<sup>6</sup>

3.8 Senator Fifield asked about fraud prevention and compliance including both in relation to customers and also practitioners.<sup>7</sup>

3.9 Senator Fifield congratulated Ms Kathryn Campbell, Secretary of the Department of Human Services and Minister Carr about their reference to people as citizens. Minister Carr explained that he had made a statement at the ACOSS conference about the approach he was taking and that describing the Australian public as citizens:

emphasises that the nature of the relationship between this department and the people of this country is inclusive, and that is what the department is doing ... the fact remains that the relationship that the Commonwealth has with its citizens is not necessarily one of a commercial nature, and the concept of 'customer' relates more often in the literature to the notion of a commercial dialogue. People do not have a lot of choice, quite often, when they deal with the officers of the Commonwealth. We want to ensure that we are treating them in a manner which is consistent with, as I say, their rights and their responsibilities, not just in terms of some sort of mythical notion of the customer's democracy.<sup>8</sup>

3.10 Senator Furner put on record that he had received 'highly commendable' feedback about the response of the Department of Human Services to the flood disasters in Queensland.<sup>9</sup>

3.11 Senator Siewert returned again to the issue of guidelines for the income management referral model for state child protection and housing officers and was informed that this was a matter for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Department indicated that it was undertaking some vulnerable income management referrals through its social workers.<sup>10</sup> The

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4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 58.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 59–65.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 65.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 70–75.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 76.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 78.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 80.

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Department also pointed out that attendance at Centrelink was only compulsory if the referral was through the Child Protection Agency or through housing.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Centrelink***<sup>12</sup>

3.12 Minister Carr recommended that the Department of Human Services and the Community Affairs committee meet to discuss the structure of the hearing prior to the next estimates round.<sup>13</sup>

3.13 Senator Siewert raised a series of questions about the operation of the Centrelink hotline, tip-off line, and online application processes. Minister Carr pointed out there has been a steady take-up of online services and that Centrelink runs education programs on using online technology.<sup>14</sup> Mr Tidswell, Deputy Secretary also expected the National Broadband Network would assist access in remote communities.<sup>15</sup>

3.14 Senator Edwards examined the costs of administering the income recovery subsidy associated with the live cattle ban. Senator Edwards pointed out that the Department of Human Services administered \$68,000 worth of payments at a cost of \$1.22 million and that this 'is not a good result in anybody's governance terms'. Minister Carr replied 'that the costings were based on an indicative number of claims and that number was a worst-case scenario.'<sup>16</sup> Senator Edwards requested a breakdown of the \$1.22 million on notice.

### ***Medicare***<sup>17</sup>

3.15 Following questions from Senator McKenzie about the cessation of cash payments from Medicare, Minister Carr pointed out that:

this was the last remaining program the Commonwealth has that is paying in cash ... Cash payment as a method of transaction is declining right across this society. The officers made it clear to me that, in terms of the provision of security for officers on site, there was actually a better way to proceed. On that basis we have followed the trials that were established in 17 service centres and we are now rolling out this program across the country.<sup>18</sup>

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11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 83.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 91–112.

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 96.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 104.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 105.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 109–110.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 112–121.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 113.

3.16 Senator Di Natale commended Minister Carr for his opening statement on the negotiations over a national dental scheme:

I think it is a really sensible thing to have done. I think it is a really important step, particularly in terms of the current negotiations going on over a national dental scheme. I know this is not a forum where too many compliments are paid, but I think it is really sensible decision, so I would like to put that on the record.<sup>19</sup>

Senator Di Natale questioned the Minister and departmental officers about the audit process into claims made by dentists against the Commonwealth and Minister Carr stated that each case would be reviewed and declared his intention to prosecute should that be deemed necessary. The Minister also pointed out that the Government was negotiating with the dental profession to get an administrative scheme that works effectively.<sup>20</sup>

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19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, p. 114.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 29 May 2012, pp. 114–115.