

4 November 2019

Standing Committee on Community Affairs
References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Chair, Senator Rachel Siewert

Thank you for the opportunity to provide responses to the Committee members' questions as outlined below.

People with Disability Australia (PWDA) is a leading disability rights, advocacy and representative organisation of and for all people with disability. We are the only national, cross-disability organisation, and we represent the interests of the one in five Australians with disability. We are a non-profit, non-government organisation. We are also recognised as a Disabled People's Organisation as our membership and board are made up of people with disability.

PWDA is funded for a range of projects and activities to progress the rights of people with disability. This includes funding from the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) as a Disability Representative Organisation (DRO) to undertake systemic advocacy and representation. We are also funded to deliver individual advocacy through the National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP) across New South Wales and, in Logan, Sunshine Coast, Fraser Coast, Bundaberg and Mt Isa in Queensland.

In providing responses to the Committee's Questions on Notice, we have consulted with our Individual Advocacy programs in both New South Wales and Queensland. This feedback informs our answers to the Questions on Notice.

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Question 1 (Hansard page reference: 52)

Senator ASKEW: Would you have any indication of actual numbers of people who have received letters that have come in and looked for some support?

Ms Hollywood: No, I don't. I would have to take that on notice, if that's okay.

In response to Senator Askew's question, we offer the following:

Our individual advocates report that they have assisted, and continue to assist, people with disability who have received letters from Centrelink regarding a proposed overpayment/debt.

They have told us that sometimes referrals come from Centrelink social workers and psychologists because these officers realise that the person with disability, who has been identified as incurring a debt, may need additional support.

Our individual advocates report that sometimes providing the necessary supports may take place over an extended period of time. As one advocate reported, "[The supports required are] compounded when needing to support a client during appeals. This can extend the timelines considerably. Accessibility for people with complex disability and medical conditions can compound the timeframes again. Often Centrelink timelines exclude people who are reliant on support to complete Centrelink's requests."

Our individual advocates in Queensland also report that they may refer people with disability to specialist welfare services such as Basic Rights QLD. In NSW, advocates may also refer people to the Welfare Rights Centre.

Currently, our individual advocates record this work under a broad heading in our database called "Financial" advocacy support. This means that we are not able to provide specific numbers of people who have received letters and sought support from us.

In addition, our Individual Advocates report that while some of their work may relate to debts incurred while a person with disability is on Newstart or Disability Support Pension (DSP), their work often includes providing supports to enable the person with disability to access and demonstrate eligibility for the DSP when there is a review process.

Our advocates have confirmed we are experiencing an increase in the number of DSP-related matters and they may include, but not be limited to, seeking support to address a Centrelink claim for overpayment. People with disability may also be seeking support with applications for the DSP and Centrelink's review of their eligibility to the DSP.

For these reasons, PWDA supports a wide-ranging review of the DSP. Many people with disability are being forced onto Newstart when they should be eligible for the DSP.



Question 2 (Hansard page reference: 53)

Senator URQUHART:... I'm interested in whether or not you can provide an estimate of the costs to services of the impact of the Centrelink debt recovery program. I mean the impact on other work and other services that you do. How much has that cost your organisation? Have you noticed a reduction in other services that you're able to provide to the people who use your services because you're focused on trying to help people with this? It might be something that you need to take on notice for a little bit more detail, and I'm interested in detail, if you have it.

Ms Hollywood: I think I would need to take it on notice. Because we provide a generalist, individual advocacy service that's funded through the NDAP, we would actually have to look at our data and then make some analysis and estimate of cost. It's not something that I would have at hand here.

Senator URQUHART: No, that's fine. But are you able to take it on notice and maybe give us a bit more information around where that cost-shifting is, if it has occurred, because you're dealing with these issues?

Ms Hollywood: I'm happy to have a look at it and see what we can come up with.

In response to Senator Urquhart's questions, we offer the following:

As noted above, we have consulted with our Directors and staff who deliver our individual advocacy programs in NSW and QLD. Unfortunately, based on the way our data is recorded for the NDAP, we are not able to provide a clear assessment of the precise costs accrued to PWDA's NDAP program when people with disability are seeking individual advocacy support to address a potential Centrelink debt.

We agree the Senator's question is important and that this question would equally apply to all NDAP programs delivered across Australia. We would suggest that this question may inform further sector-wide research on how policy approaches in one government portfolio area impacts on another government-funded program area.

We can also confirm we do have more requests from people with disability for individual advocacy supports than our programs have the capacity to deliver. So, it follows that the time taken to respond to particular government policy areas, such as Centrelink Compliance matters, does impact on the overall individual advocacy supports we can provide.

Individual advocates also noted that there are very limited options to refer people on to other services as they are similarly at capacity. There are also parts of NSW where there is no locally based NDAP service. This is a concern when people with disability are seeking support to understand and/or challenge a Centrelink Compliance notice.



We thank you for the opportunity to provide these responses to the Questions on Notice and trust they are helpful.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information or clarification on any of the matters provided.

Your sincerely,

Romola Hollywood
Director Policy and Advocacy