

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs

FAIRNESS, COURTESY AND EFFICIENCY?

A Report on the Quality of Service Provided by the
Department of Social Security

May 1989

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The wall chart shown on the cover was supplied by the Department of Social Security.

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee is to inquire into and report to Parliament on:

- i) the effectiveness of current methods of providing information to clients and potential clients of Social Security entitlements;
- ii) the effectiveness of methods currently used by the Department of Social Security to provide face to face contact with clients and potential clients; and
- iii) any proposals to enhance awareness and 'take-up' of entitlements by persons who qualify for assistance under Social Security programs.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAT	Administrative Appeals Tribunal
ACOA	Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association
ALO	Aboriginal Liaison Officer
CAAMA	Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association
DSS	Department of Social Security
DVA	Department of Veterans' Affairs
FAS	Family Allowance Supplement
JSA	Job Search Allowance
NIP	National Information Program
RSL	Returned Services League of Australia
SSAT	Social Security Appeals Tribunal
SSES	Social Security Enquiry System
TIS	Telephone Interpreter Service
YHA	Young Homeless Allowance

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Department of Social Security actively encourages regional office managers to produce supplementary information regarding their local office and related services. (para 2.27)
2. Community consultative committees be established to meet at regular intervals in order to facilitate the exchange of information and concerns between the Department of Social Security and the community. (para 3.23)
3. Such committees be established at area and regional office levels. (para 3.23)
4. A position of Community Liaison Officer be established in each regional office to facilitate communication between community agencies, the Department and its clients. (para 3.25)
5. A senior staff member at the Administrative Service Officer Class 3 level or above is available at the counter at all times. (para 4.14)
6. The staff selection process includes application of secondary selection criteria, one of which is the requirement for a high level of interpersonal skills. (para 4.14)
7. The Department of Social Security supports its staff adequately by giving them appropriate interpersonal skills training at all levels in the organisation and as soon as possible after entering the Department. (para 4.14)
8. Staff do not assume public contact duties until they have been employed in a regional office for an extended period, preferably six months. (para 4.14)
9. The Department of Social Security includes, as part of its staff training, information on the background to Departmental policies and the political and social context in which the Department operates, including information on the labour market. (para 4.14)
10. The Department of Social Security expands its use of toll free services to provide either a national or State based permanent facility. (para 4.22)
11. The permanent 008 facility to comprise two elements, one a 'help desk' for staff and the second an information hotline for clients. (para 4.22)
12. The Department of Social Security investigates the conduct of its field officers in order to assess the extent to which the guidelines are infringed. (para 4.35)

13. Letters of advice left by field officers incorporate:
 - the reason the field officer called;
 - the option of having the interview at home or in the regional office; and
 - advice to the effect that the client has the right to have a friend, advisor, interpreter or advocate present during the interview, wherever it may be held. (para 4.35)
14. All new clients are given, as a matter of course, a pre-grant interview, during which their rights and obligations are clearly outlined. (para 4.44)
15. All clients re-applying for benefits after a period of 12 months without social security support also be given a pre-grant interview. (para 4.44)
16. The Department of Social Security ensures that regional offices are equipped with the following:
 - play areas and toys for children;
 - toilet facilities for clients; and
 - a television set and/or video cassette recorder placed strategically in the waiting area. (para 4.51)
17. The Department of Social Security offers clients the option of private interviewing facilities prior to asking any personal questions. (para 4.51)
18. The Department of Social Security implements a revised set of standards for the content of letters to clients. As a minimum, these standards should include that letters:
 - are always dated and include the name of a contact officer;
 - are forwarded to the client prior to termination of payment;
 - set out the calculations on which the level of payment/termination of payment has been based;
 - include a simple, personalised explanation if payment has been altered or terminated;
 - advise alternative avenues of income support, where possible and/or avenues of appeal; and
 - are accompanied by a translation in a preferred language where applicable. (para 5.15)
19. The Department of Social Security develops a single application form for all clients. (para 5.24)
20. The application form comprises a number of streaming questions which indicate the most appropriate form of payment for which the client might be eligible. (para 5.24)

21. Initial application forms be evaluated at determining officer level. (para 5.27)
22. The Department of Social Security ensures that the wall chart is updated on a regular basis, and immediately major changes are announced. (para 5.32)
23. The wall chart is distributed as soon as possible after amendment, and in any case no later than two weeks after major announcements. (para 5.32)
24. The Department of Social Security establishes a consultative process with specific expert welfare bodies, (for example the Sydney Welfare Rights Centre) as an essential element of the process of revising its manuals. (para 5.38)
25. The Department of Social Security continues to produce manuals and amended pages in hard copy, any updates to be forwarded to welfare agencies immediately changes are made on-line. (para 5.38)
26. In any case, the Department of Social Security provides copies of its manuals and the Social Security Act and amendments *free-of-charge* to recognised welfare agencies. (para 5.38)
27. If, in future, the Department of Social Security does decide to move completely to on-line manuals, the Department must also look to providing major welfare agencies with appropriate support and software. (para 5.38)
28. The Department of Social Security's Corporate Television Unit be expanded to enable concentrated production of general client information, in addition to current training material. (para 5.42)
29. The Department of Social Security, in conjunction with the Braille and Talking Book Library, proceed with a trial program for the production of audio cassette tapes. (para 5.44)
30. The Department of Social Security investigates the potential of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's Radio Station 8 KIN FM and Imparja Television for the production of appropriate social security material for broadcast through these outlets. (para 6.10)
31. The Department of Social Security's regional office managers and Aboriginal workers promote a higher profile and easier access to their services throughout their areas of operation by seeking to appear regularly on Aboriginal radio and television programs. (para 6.10)
32. The Department of Social Security consults with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Public Service Commission regarding the proposed cross-cultural communication training course. (para 7.9)

33. The Department of Social Security makes a commitment to include cross-cultural awareness courses in its training programs for public contact staff and commences such courses at the earliest opportunity. (para 7.9)
34. The Department of Social Security encourages greater use of the telephone interpreter service through training programs and by installing conference telephones in at least one interviewing room in each regional office. (para 7.12)
35. A stock of application forms to be available in both English and major community languages. (para 7.16)
36. Where a client has nominated a language, communication with that client be in both English and the preferred language. (para 7.16)
37. The Department of Social Security investigates the possibility of running advertisements; similar to those which have appeared on SBS, on the ABC and other selected television stations. (para 7.23)
38. Regional office managers be encouraged to develop the use of local specialist media. (para 7.23)
39. The Department of Social Security develops an information outreach program for use in schools and such community organisations as youth refuges and welfare agencies. (para 8.17)
40. The Department of Social Security develops an in-house training module for its client contact staff comprising:
 - the technical aspects of Departmental programs available to young people; and
 - the economic and social climate facing young people, particularly homeless and unemployed young people. (para 8.17)
41. The Department of Social Security provides a report to the Minister for Social Security on the Youth Access Project, including details of progress made to address the recommendations made in the Report. (para 8.23)
42. The Department of Social Security moves quickly to provide staff in regional offices with a simple 'user friendly' computer aid along the lines of the Social Security Enquiry System. (para 9.19)
43. This project to commence with a trial of the modified Social Security Enquiry System in its regional offices. (para 9.19)
44. *The Department of Social Security consults with the Department of Veterans' Affairs to ensure that there is minimum duplication of effort in the adaption of similar systems in both Departments. (para 9.19)*

CHAPTER 1

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INQUIRY

Unless the Department communicates effectively with clients and potential clients, it cannot guarantee that it is performing its primary function effectively. (Department of Social Security in its submission to the Committee)

Introduction

1.1 On 3 February 1988, the Minister for Social Security, Mr Brian Howe, MP, wrote to the Chairman referring an inquiry to the Committee. The specific terms of reference were to examine:

- i) the effectiveness of current methods of providing information to clients and potential clients of social security entitlements;
- ii) the effectiveness of methods currently used by the Department of Social Security to provide face to face contact with clients and potential clients; and
- iii) any proposals to enhance awareness and 'take-up' of entitlements by persons who qualify for assistance under social security programs.

Aims of the Inquiry

1.2 The inquiry was not a review of the payments themselves but an investigation into the way the Department advises its clients of their entitlements, its general communication and the means by which access to DSS services can be improved. The inquiry attempted to take account of the full range of pensions, benefits and allowances administered by the Department of Social Security (DSS).

Course of the Inquiry

1.3 Advertisements calling for submissions were placed in major metropolitan newspapers in mid-February 1988, inviting interested individuals and organisations to make submissions to the inquiry. In addition a large number of organisations were contacted by letter, advising them of the inquiry and inviting contributions.

1.4 The inquiry program included:

- public hearings in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth;
- inspections in Sydney, Brisbane, Darwin, Queanbeyan, Melbourne and Adelaide;
- informal discussions with welfare workers in Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart; and

- visits to DSS offices at Bondi Junction, Glenroy, Edwardstown and Noarlunga for informal discussions with staff.

1.5 The Committee visited the Budget Rent-A-Car organisation's headquarters in Melbourne to gain an understanding of service delivery programs in the private sector. Counter operations, staff training, administrative techniques and management strategies were discussed and observed during the visit.

The Committee received 131 submissions from the following sectors:

Individuals	48
Welfare Organisations (Welfare Rights Centres, Community Groups)	20
Special Interest Groups/Pensioners, Mental Health, Women's Groups)	27
Government	16
Aboriginal Organisations	6
Ethnic/Migrant Groups	10
Other (including MP's)	<u>4</u>
Total	<u>131</u>

Preliminary Observations

1.6 The Committee has concluded that the Department of Social Security has substantial problems in its contact with clients. The principal causes are the pace of change over recent years and the complex range of human and social needs to which the social security system must respond. This has produced a complex system and affects every facet of the Department's operations, thereby creating pressures on staff and clients of the DSS.

1.7 While the Committee has observed innovative attempts at problem resolution and successful initiatives at regional office level, these have been hampered to some extent by lack of resources and support. The Committee sees a need for encouragement of local initiatives by central office.

1.8 Bearing in mind the legislative and administrative structure, the Committee has looked to positive means by which the Department could improve its client contact. It sees major opportunities in:

- the adoption of a modified expert computer system as a staff aid in regional offices;
- improved co-operation with welfare and community agencies;
- improved techniques for visual, written and electronic communication; and

- a strong commitment by both management and staff to the opportunity for changed work practices and improved staff skills presented by award restructure and second tier wage negotiations.

Complexity of the System

1.9 Although the inquiry commenced with an investigation into the Department's information and service delivery, it became clear that major problems stem from the complexity of the social security system.

1.10 The current administrative and legislative framework makes it very difficult for DSS to deliver entitlements with 'fairness, courtesy and efficiency'. It is a closely targeted system, comprising 25 different payments, all of which have varying eligibility criteria and payment schedules.

1.11 This complexity is a major inhibitor of the flow of accurate information, both from the Department to its clients and within the Department from central office to the regional offices.

1.12 In order to receive a social security entitlement a client needs to know of the existence of various benefits and pensions. In addition they must assume eligibility and then apply to the Department. However, the Committee feels that the responsibility for ensuring that people receive their entitlements lies with the Department and the most that should initially be expected of a client is to know to contact DSS if income support is needed.

1.13 The complexity of the forms can be a barrier to obtaining an entitlement. Many require detailed financial information. People with limited reading or comprehension skills or a poor grasp of English clearly start from behind. The Committee has been told that, as a general rule, staff are not encouraged to assist applicants to complete these forms.

1.14 Simplification of the system must be promoted as the primary means by which service delivery can be enhanced.

The Role of Welfare and Community Agencies

1.15 Welfare agencies and special interest groups are an integral part of the social security environment. The Committee received submissions from many of these organisations. They included Aboriginal, migrant, pensioner and welfare rights groups, community health/welfare/legal centres and disabled/handicapped persons' groups.

1.16 It is clear that the agencies often act as a substitute for the Department where problems arise. A substantial proportion of the workload of the agencies consists of assistance to DSS clients who are concerned to maintain or obtain their entitlements.

1.17 There is a great deal of practical and theoretical expertise in the community welfare area which the Department could use more effectively.

1.18 The Committee has recommended adoption of a formal liaison program to enhance use of the agencies. It believes they must be seen as an important avenue for information and consultation on client needs and entitlements.

Public Contact - at the counter and in the field

1.19 The counter or 'front office' in a DSS regional office is often the first point of contact for many clients or potential clients. Front office performance is therefore critical - a client's experiences at the counter will decide their impression of the Department and in all probability will influence their current and future dealings with DSS.

1.20 When clients approach a DSS regional office, particularly for the first time, they are likely to be in a situation of stress. If clients do not receive sympathetic, sensitive treatment at the counter, it is likely that stress levels will be increased and communication flows will suffer.

1.21 At each of the informal discussions held by the Committee, performance at the counter was always first on the agenda. It was also raised regularly in submissions and in evidence at public hearings. The major issues can be summarised as:

- difficulties for staff in coping with the range of problems presented by clients;
- attitudes of staff to clients;
- queues and length of waiting times before being attended to;
- lack of willingness to volunteer information;
- lack of consistency and accuracy in information received; and
- lack of experience and authority to make decisions.

1.22 In making these observations the Committee wishes to point out that many submissions were highly supportive of counter staff personnel. Those giving evidence recognised the difficulties of the position and cited poor employment practices as the principal cause of these problems at the counter. It is clear that the practice of assigning the most stressful and difficult positions in the office to the younger, least trained and least experienced staff members is unsatisfactory. The Committee accepts that the award and classification structures have inhibited opportunities to improve counter contact. However, it is clear that more attention must be given to this aspect of the service.

1.23 There is clearly an opportunity to overcome this problem with job redesign and reclassification of counter officer positions. The Committee stresses the need for all parties to give this a high priority.

In the field

1.24 The Department has an ongoing program of review part of which is conducted by field officers and mobile review teams.

1.25 The Committee received many complaints about field officers and mobile review teams from individuals and welfare agencies. Major criticisms were:

- a reluctance to advise clients of their rights;
- a reluctance to advise clients of the reason for the interview;
- non-display of proof of identity; and
- the use of inappropriate pressure on clients who are poorly equipped to deal with such situations.

1.26 While the Committee accepts the need for field reviews it is concerned at the extent of complaints about these activities. The Committee has made a number of recommendations to assist the Department in improving the operation of its field reviews.

The Image of Social Security

1.27 Many comments have been made to the Committee regarding the negative image of the Department and its clients within the community, and the media portrayal of social security recipients. Comments from DSS staff also indicate an image problem within DSS's own ranks at the regional office level.

1.28 Any campaign which promotes a 'crack-down on welfare fraud' can indirectly malign legitimate users of the social security system.

1.29 Although the Committee is aware that this is largely a matter for Government policy and promotion, it impinges on the matters under consideration by the Committee and therefore requires comment. The Government needs to be sensitive to the fact that consequent attitudes affect the Department's service delivery.

Pre-grant Interviews

1.30 The Committee also came to the conclusion that more emphasis should be placed on accurate assessment of client needs and entitlements at the pre-grant stage. Better communication and decision-making in the early stages will minimise the need for later review.

A Comfortable Waiting Area

1.31 The provision of basic facilities to alleviate the anxiety and frustration felt by waiting clients would serve to make DSS offices more pleasant. The Committee welcomes the changes taking place in some DSS regional offices but remains disappointed in the waiting area of many offices. The Committee has made specific recommendations regarding provision of facilities in regional offices in Chapter 4.

Other Forms of Communication

1.32 The Department relies heavily on written material such as leaflets, letters, posters and print advertising. It also relies heavily on written information to communicate with its own staff over new policies, changes to existing policies and new legislative provisions. In many instances the written material is couched in bureaucratic language, is too complex and fails to satisfy client and staff needs.

1.33 The Committee is particularly concerned that leaflets are relied upon as a primary medium when other methods can be more effective. A number of suggestions are contained in the report.

Letters to Clients

1.34 The Committee has seen examples demonstrating that problems stemming from the tone and complexity of letters could easily be eliminated with a more sensitive approach. However, the Committee is not satisfied with the general standard of letters being sent to clients from the Department.

1.35 Major problems with letters include:

- the lack of explanation regarding changes to payments;
- the complex language;
- timeliness;
- frequent examples of an insensitive tone; and
- failure to include translations in a client's preferred language.

1.36 The Committee has developed this matter further with examples and comments in Chapter 5.

Special Groups

1.37 The Committee noted that some sections of the community have special difficulties when dealing with the Department of Social Security. The Aboriginal population, people of non-English speaking background, young people and physically or mentally handicapped people are often disadvantaged in gaining access

to their entitlements. The Department has taken a number of specific steps to assist people in these categories and the Committee has made a number of recommendations to further enhance these efforts.

An Expert System as a Computer Aid for Staff

1.38 The Committee concluded that the social security system is so complex it is difficult for DSS staff to remain up-to-date. In 1987 and 1988 there were more than 200 administrative and legislative changes. A large component of the Department's training resources is dedicated to technical training, leaving gaps in areas such as interpersonal skills, communication skills and cross-cultural awareness.

1.39 There is an urgent need for the development of a computerised staff aid to help break down the problems of complexity.

1.40 There is currently available an expert computer system, which could be modified for use in the Department's regional offices. The Social Security Enquiry System (SSES), is designed to assist in the conduct of interviews with clients, to determine eligibility for a benefit, calculate the rate of benefit and identify obligations. A discussion of the SSES takes place in Chapter 9.

1.41 An expert system would assist in making the decision-making process more accurate and more objective. If this could be achieved, much of the stress would be dissipated and many of the resources devoted to post-decision reviews could be channelled elsewhere. An expert system would improve the ratio of accurate decisions taken in the first instance.

1.42 Simplification of social security policy is a Government responsibility and must be addressed through the political and legislative process. Adoption of an expert system is the Department's responsibility and should be addressed as a high priority.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY

The Department's Charter: to deliver social security entitlements with fairness, courtesy and efficiency.

Legislation

2.1 The Department of Social Security is responsible for the administration of the social security system. The conditions under which pensions, benefits and allowances may be paid are laid down principally by the *Social Security Act 1947* and the regulations made under that Act.

2.2 The social security portfolio is responsible for the entitlements of almost five million clients, with expenditure during 1987-88 of approximately \$18 billion.¹ This represents almost 23 per cent of Commonwealth outlays, plus over \$1 billion on behalf of other agencies and countries.

Programs

2.3 The Department makes 25 different payments in the form of pensions, benefits and allowances. These are:

Pensions and Benefits

Age Pension

Invalid Pension

Wife's Pension

Widow's Pension

Unemployment Benefit

Sickness Benefit

Special Benefit

Supporting Parents' Benefit

Carer's Pension

Double Orphan's Pension

Additional Pension for Children

Funeral Pension

Allowances

Rehabilitation Allowance

Sheltered Employment

Child Disability Allowance

Family Allowance

Family Allowance Supplement

Job Search Allowance

Young Homeless Allowance

Mothers/Guardians Allowance

Special Temporary Allowance

Rent Assistance

Incentive Allowance

Remote Area Allowance

Mobility Allowance

¹ Department of Social Security, Submissions Vol. 2, p. 405.

2.4 Total outlays on cash benefits by DSS are \$17 428 million. Details on numbers of pensioners and beneficiaries and outlays under the various categories are set out in the Department's 1987/88 Annual Report.

Departmental Objectives

2.5 The Department's corporate strategy has as its basis eight corporate goals and associated strategies, including:

- ensuring access to Departmental services, with special attention to particular disadvantaged groups;
- promoting wide community knowledge of services and the rights and obligations attached to entitlements;
- maintaining consistent delivery of social security entitlements and related services in accordance with legislation and Government policies;
- providing high quality service in a timely, fair and sensitive manner, including referral to other agencies for related support; and
- limiting misuse of the income security system.²

2.6 The Department is required to maintain access to entitlements, while ensuring that fraud and abuse of the social security system are minimised. The Department must maintain a balance between administrative effectiveness and 'humanising' the process of service delivery, particularly given the stressful situation many clients approaching the Department find themselves in.

2.7 The Youth Access Project Report highlighted this fundamental dilemma for the Department's front line staff, when it described the conflict between the community expectation that DSS is the Government 'helping' agency on the one hand and the existence of legislative limitations on the level and type of help DSS can provide on the other.³

National Information Program

2.8 The National Information Program (NIP) is a detailed publicity strategy currently prepared on an annual basis. The NIP establishes priorities for spending and is used to plan and unify information programs at national, State and regional levels. In 1987-88, the Department spent \$5.26 million on its National Information Program.⁴

² Department of Social Security, op. cit., p. 411.

³ Youth Access Project, Final Report, p. 5.

⁴ Department of Social Security, op. cit., p. 408.

2.9 The Department's National Information Program is currently heavily reliant on printed information, a reliance which assumes literacy. The Committee believes that there is undue emphasis placed on the dissemination of information via printed material. This is exacerbated by the fact that:

- there is a higher degree of illiteracy or semi-literacy within the Department's client population than would appear in overall community levels; and
- distribution of pamphlets and other written information is not sufficiently comprehensive to be available to all potential clients.

2.10 It should be noted that the Department recognises that the extent of illiteracy in the community is more widespread than is generally appreciated. The Secretary has acknowledged that the Department must ensure that those people understand their entitlements, know how to go about obtaining them and receive assistance where necessary.⁵

2.11 The Committee agrees that the need for written material will continue and that the program should be maintained. However, it is also worth noting that the Department is committed to developing more innovative community outreach campaigns and greater use of electronic media.

2.12 Later in the report the Committee makes a number of recommendations suggesting that the Department of Social Security actively pursues use of community and commercial radio, especially ethnic and rural broadcasting; community newspapers; video material; voice tapes, and pictorial material, to expand its information network.

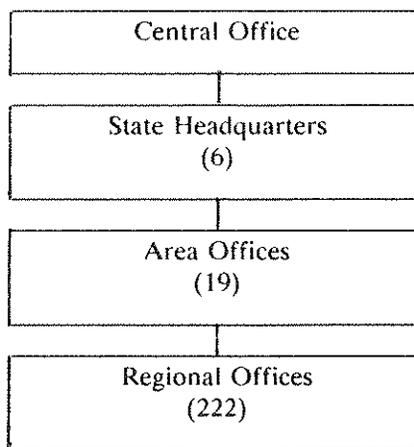
2.13 The direction of the NIP is currently being revised towards a client target group approach. While the Committee supports the revised approach, the Department should also consider a two-pronged approach with more information being targeted through the welfare agencies. This approach would formalise and enhance the existing 'de facto' arrangement between the Department and community agencies. An improvement in the Department's ability to provide the community welfare sector with timely and accurate advice about new policies and initiatives would maximise the effectiveness of these organisations.

Structure and Organisation

2.14 The Department of Social Security's administrative structure (Figure 1) comprises central office, State, area and regional offices. There are 222 regional offices throughout Australia.

⁵ D. Volker, 'Legislative Change - Maintaining Professionalism', Speech to the Australian Society of Accountants, Canberra, 18 November 1988, p. 6.

Figure 1



2.15 The central office consists of the executive and seven divisions. Each of the six State offices is headed by a director who reports to the Secretary of the Department. Area offices are controlled by area managers who report to the State director. Regional office managers report to the appropriate area office manager.

The Area Office

2.16 The Department has established 19 area offices throughout Australia. Each area office and the group of regional offices which report to it, form a self contained entity, responsible for service delivery to clients and staff, as well as for management of their own resources.

2.17 Part of the rationale for establishing area offices is improved communication through a flatter organisational structure. However, the Department has, in effect, instituted an additional level in the administrative hierarchy and it does not yet appear to have adequately defined the extent of the role and responsibilities of the area office vis-a-vis those of the State headquarters. This problem was highlighted in the Department's report on the evaluation of the south west area office's first 6 months of operation.⁹

2.18 The Committee commends the establishment of area offices and can see the potential they have for improved service delivery and regional office autonomy. However, the Department needs to critically evaluate the place of the State headquarters in its future organisational structure.

⁹ Department of Social Security, Restructuring Social Security - Paper No. 10, February 1988, p. 17.

The Regional Office

2.19 The 222 regional offices are the public face of the Department and the main source of information and services for clients. The administration of the majority of social security programs occurs at the regional office level. Visiting advisory services to country areas, social work services, along with special services to migrants and Aborigines are also provided. Regional offices range in size from 24 to 116 staff. A typical regional office structure is shown at Figure 2.

Figure 2

REGIONAL MANAGER	
ASSISTANT REGIONAL MANAGER	
PENSIONS SECTION	UNEMPLOYMENT & SICKNESS BENEFIT SECTION
REVIEW OFFICER	FAMILY ALLOWANCE & FAMILY ALLOWANCE SUPPLEMENT SECTION
SOCIAL WORKERS	WORD PROCESSORS REGIONAL SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATOR (RSA) REGIONAL HARDWARE CONTROLLER (RHC)
FIELD OFFICERS	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER COUNTER STAFF REGISTRY
INTERPRETERS	

2.20 Until recently, DSS has concentrated on developing large scale, self-contained regional offices, providing the full range of administrative functions for a large population base. In order to promote more flexibility within the structure, DSS is now moving to the establishment of local offices, ie. regional office satellites, which can be opened at relatively short notice to serve a local community when demand for such a service develops.

2.21 While local offices offer fewer services than those available at the regional office level, they serve to bring services closer to the client and are welcomed by the Committee.

2.22 The regional office network is further supplemented by other service outlets such as information offices, unemployment benefit offices together with visiting services, outreach officers and agency arrangements.

2.23 Regional office clerical staff are largely engaged in assessing claims and determining eligibility for the range of pensions and benefits. They also provide advice to clients on their entitlements and DSS services. Counter staff perform a large proportion of the public contact duties in the office. Counter staff at present provide a link between the client and the clerical decision makers.

2.24 All regional offices have one social worker, with two being employed at the larger offices. Social workers provide a casework service to people approaching the Department for income support and, where resources permit, social workers undertake some community liaison work.

Role of the Regional Office Manager

2.25 The regional office manager is responsible for the management of the office. Specific responsibilities include staff planning, workload management and the development of training and staff development plans and strategies. The regional manager is also responsible for liaison with the community at official and unofficial levels.

2.26 Regional office managers should be encouraged to develop supplementary local information programs. The Committee recognises that this already occurs in some regional offices and commends as an example the pamphlet available in Newport Regional Office. However, it appears that such information is produced in an ad hoc way, with no overall DSS guidelines.

2.27 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security actively encourages regional office managers to produce supplementary information regarding their local office and related services.

2.28 Regional office managers should also actively promote the services offered by their offices on local radio and in the local press. In assuming a high local profile regional managers can become a focal point for community groups. This must result in improved communications between the regional office and the community. Such a direction is strongly supported by the Committee.

2.29 It should also be noted that local Members of Parliament have a heavy involvement and direct interest in promoting social security programs. Regional managers should be encouraged to integrate their promotional activities with those of local MP's.

CHAPTER 3

THE INCOME SECURITY SYSTEM

There needs to be a fundamental attitude change in the minds of many people in the Department, particularly at the senior level where there tends to be the view that if a person really needs help he will be able to jump the hurdles and get it. In reality there is probably an inverse relationship between those who can jump the hurdles and those who most need help. (Julian Disney, Co-ordinator, Welfare Rights Centre, in evidence to the Committee)

Complexity of the Social Security System

3.1 *The Australian social security system is a specifically targeted, highly complex system. The Department administers 25 different payments, some in conjunction with other departments. Most of the programs have highly specific eligibility criteria and complex assets and income tests. There exists overlap with other systems, given the spread of income security programs across a large number of State and Commonwealth agencies.*

3.2 *The 1987 May Economic Statement introduced a large number of policy and administrative changes into the social security system. These are included in Appendix 3. While these increased the scope of the benefits many of the changes announced introduced greater complexity into the system. Further, regional office staff appeared to be inadequately briefed, given the number and complexity of the changes and the short period of time available for the Department's central office to provide regional office staff with information.*

3.3 *However, it must be recognised that the Departmental personnel are constrained by the policy process, with embargoes on promoting changes until they are announced by Government. This means that regional office staff are often unable to respond promptly to queries with consistent and accurate information. This has caused problems in contact with clients and welfare agencies, who are similarly unable to obtain accurate information themselves.*

3.4 *The Davey House Family Resource Centre, located at Wonthaggi District Hospital, summed up the situation from a client's and welfare agency point of view:*

... we are increasingly concerned with the direction that has been taken recently with new benefits, allowances, entitlements and eligibility criteria which, ... served to complicate, confuse and increase pressure on all involved.⁷

⁷ Davey House Family Resource Centre, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 248.

3.5 The South West Metropolitan Social Development Council's submission argued that the recent fast rate of change with regard to social security entitlements had greatly increased the necessity for social security clients to seek information and advocacy. They further argued that the ability of the Department to perform its proper role of providing information and assisting with claims has been diminished by the rate of changes in payments, increased workloads and reduced staff.⁸

3.6 In informal discussions with the Committee, staff complained that the complex provisions regarding assets tests and definition of income require them to be 'financial experts', an area in which staff are not experienced.

3.7 The Committee agrees that the proliferation of different categories of payment and the different eligibility criteria, rates of payment and supplementary benefits relating to each, has served to complicate the income security system. It is desirable to develop a single application form, which initially screens the client, thereby assisting in determining the appropriate category of payment. Sometimes people are encouraged to apply for a particular payment, but can miss out on income support if this is the wrong category. A proposal for a single application form is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

3.8 The Department acknowledges that the current system is too complex. In many instances it is no longer possible to refer to the legislation when taking decisions, given the Act's complexity, inconsistency and unwieldy character.⁹ The Committee notes that the Government is undertaking a review of the legislation with the objective of simplifying the Act. This should be regarded as an urgent task.

The Social Security Image

3.9 Many comments have been made to the Committee regarding the negative image of the Department and its clients within the community, and the media portrayal of social security recipients. Comments from DSS staff also indicate an image problem within DSS's own ranks at the regional office level. There was a definite desire expressed at informal discussions not to be identified with DSS either by clients or by the general community outside the Departmental setting.

3.10 The Community Information Support Service of South Australia argued that social security matters can only be considered within a social and economic climate, with the political process having a big role to play in terms of establishing an image of welfare recipients. They went on to say:

Where the Federal Government creates a positive climate then you are more likely to create a situation in which the information can successfully be disseminated and transferred.¹⁰

⁸ South West Metropolitan Social Development Council, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 301.

⁹ D. Volker, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Transcript of evidence, p. 253.

3.11 The South West Metropolitan Social Development Council's Emergency Relief Committee and Standing Committee on Poverty, in their combined submission, said:

It would appear that government media strategies have been mainly targeted to highlighting 'welfare fraud' and the need to reduce social security and, more generally, welfare expenditure.¹¹

The South West Metropolitan Social Development Council states:

People will not be encouraged to pursue their Social Security entitlements unless there is a change in community attitudes towards poverty, the reasons for poverty, and social security recipients. Change in community attitudes will not occur without pressure from public opinion. The Federal Government has a responsibility to encourage rational debate with the aim of dispelling the myths surrounding poverty and of selling the legitimacy of the social security system to the public.¹²

3.12 The Government has commenced this process with its highly successful Family Allowance Supplement campaign. The positive components of this campaign strategy should be transferred to other programs.

The Role of Welfare and Community Agencies

3.13 Welfare agencies, community groups and special interest groups are an integral part of the environment in which the Department of Social Security operates. These groups differ widely in their primary goals; some are practitioners in the welfare area, others have become involved through necessity, by advocating on behalf of their clients. However, they have in common the activity of providing advice and assistance on social security issues to their own members or client groups. At times, this is provided at the expense of their other 'legitimate' activities:

While we have no choice but to provide a resource for people with Department of Social Security problems or queries, we are somewhat resentful of the economic burden to the agency, and of the amount of time currently devoted to the Department of Social Security role which could normally be carried out by a clerk, and time which we could more constructively and creatively put towards the role for which we are intended.¹³

3.14 The Davey House Family Resource Centre at Wonthaggi District Hospital estimates that almost 30 percent of its workload is assisting people with applications for social security pensions and benefits, information regarding other DSS matters and sorting out problems with delays, payment cancellations and other matters.¹⁴

¹¹ South West Metropolitan Social Development Council op. cit., p. 304.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Davey House Family Resource Centre, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁴ Transcript of evidence, p. 180.

3.15 Many groups stated that when people wanted DSS information they did not necessarily go to their local regional office to get it, but preferred to contact an organisation with which they were familiar, which they could trust to give them accurate information and whom they perceived as having a genuine desire to assist. The Davey House Family Resource Centre stated that:

In a positive sense, local people... probably receive a better service where there are problems than they would if they had access to (the) Department of Social Security directly, i.e. they receive a personalised service from a welfare perspective, with support and advocacy – rather than a bureaucratic service...¹⁵

3.16 The Combined Pensioner's Association said older people, in particular, preferred to contact them because:

- they can be sure they will get the correct information, something they do not always get from the Department;
- they will not be passed from one officer to another; and
- they are not confronted with a patronising attitude, because they are dealing with their peer group.¹⁶

3.17 As noted earlier the many changes made to the social security system in 1987/88 highlighted the problem of getting accurate and timely information to clients. The welfare agencies carried much of the load of advising clients on the effects of the changes. As a result of experiences in 1987, officers of the Department now place more emphasis on getting information to welfare agencies, but this appears to be an ad hoc arrangement left up to individual regional managers or State directors. Many agencies commented that they receive support from their regional office, but more could be done, particularly if encouraged by central office.

3.18 The Welfare Rights Centre in Sydney is currently producing a handbook for social security advisers. The Centre also devotes considerable resources to keeping welfare workers up to date through its newsletters and special information circulars.

3.19 Representatives from the Centre suggest that the Department needs to encourage the active involvement of external groups in the process of problem identification and solution.

3.20 While the Committee accepts that the Department is hesitant to consult too widely as 'people would feel that you were attempting to get them to do your work for you', on balance it feels that the welfare agencies are clearly willing to assist in the problem solving process.¹⁷ The number and quality of submissions to this inquiry supports this fact.

¹⁵ Davey House Family Resource Centre, op. cit., p. 248.

¹⁶ Transcript of evidence, p. 3.

¹⁷ Transcript of evidence, p. 500.

3.21 While many welfare agencies may resent performing a role which they rightfully attribute to the Department, they have expressed to the Committee their willingness to participate in an expanded consultative process.

3.22 The Committee believes that the agencies must be recognised as an important contributor to the process. They need to be given appropriate briefing and support. It is recommended that the Department include agencies in an ongoing formal liaison program.

3.23 Accordingly, the Committee recommends that:

- **community consultative committees be established to meet at regular intervals in order to facilitate the exchange of information and concerns between the Department and the community;**
- **such committees be established at area and regional office levels.**

3.24 Some regional offices have established community liaison officers, but again there is no formal policy. The Department does acknowledge that a significant part of the social worker's role is liaison with community welfare organisations.¹⁸ However, the Committee regards the role of the social worker and that of the community liaison officer as separate. Social workers should be more involved in case work, with the general community liaison work being done by the outreach officer.

3.25 The Committee further recommends that:

- **a position of Community Liaison Officer be established in each regional office to facilitate communication between community agencies, the Department and its clients.**

¹⁸ Department of Social Security, op. cit., p. 473.

CHAPTER 4

PERSONAL CONTACT

Clients of the Department and workers in other organisations repeatedly state that the client in a regional office feels to be accorded no respect and appears to have the rights of a second class citizen. (Community Information Support Service of South Australia in its submission)

Introduction

4.1 Client contact with DSS is most often with the regional office and is in the form of:

- face-to-face contact at the counter;
- telephone contact;
- face-to-face contact with field officers or review teams.

The Counter

4.2 Although, the attitude of staff to clients was the single most common complaint made to the Committee, many submissions were very supportive of the counter staff themselves, acknowledging that often the youngest, least trained or least experienced staff members are placed on the counter. Lack of maturity and experience places a great deal of stress on counter staff. Uncertainty can be interpreted by clients as a lack of sympathy, with little real understanding of the difficult circumstances many clients find themselves in.

4.3 The point was often made that it was difficult for clients to talk directly to the decision makers. Where clients had a query which required counter staff to consult with assessing staff, clients complained the counter staff return with the response but often with little or no explanation.

4.4 The lack of knowledge and experience can lead to inaccuracy and inconsistency in information given out. The Committee also heard reports that there is a lack of willingness to volunteer information or explore alternative avenues of income support with the client.

4.5 The Family Conciliation Centre referred to this when they stated:

Although specific questions are answered when people make enquiries ..., further information, such as other entitlements or avenues that may be open, even where obviously relevant, is not provided without being solicited, e.g., people are not informed of the availability of special benefits or emergency relief during the waiting period for other benefits.¹⁹

4.6 This perception was borne out by the Committee's investigations. At one informal meeting with DSS regional office staff, the comment was made that whilst they did not volunteer information about payments such as Special Benefit they did attempt to 'comply with reasonable requests'. Such a practice puts the onus on the client to know what entitlements are available and to request them. However, many clients simply do not know the full range of benefits or may be reluctant to request additional assistance.

4.7 The Department has, as one of its corporate goals, referral to other agencies for related support. However, staff are not sufficiently trained in alternative avenues of support and have too few resources to spend sufficient time with each client.

4.8 The stress level evident on both sides of the counter can be aggravated by long waiting times before a client sees somebody in authority. Long queues place pressure on counter staff to deal with each client as quickly as possible, without necessarily exploring all possible avenues of assistance.

Job Redesign

4.9 Until recently there was a separation of public contact work ('front office') and processing/decision-making duties ('back office'). As a result of the second tier wage agreement, DSS has negotiated an agreement to eliminate demarcation associated with public contact work within DSS.

4.10 In January 1988 the Joint Second Tier Implementation Steering Group established two working groups to examine opportunities for job redesign in the regional offices. Both groups suggested the establishment of a combined counter officer/assessor position, with one group also suggesting an upgrading of the classification of public contact officers to reflect an increased emphasis on public contact skills.

4.11 The Committee urges the Department to maximise prospects arising from current restructuring negotiations.

¹⁹ Family Conciliation Centre, Submissions Vol 3, p. 227.

Staff Training

4.12 The Committee stresses the need for experienced staff to work in public contact positions. Before a staff member is established as a counter officer, that staff member should have experience in other areas of the Department, where they can become familiar with the technical aspects of the DSS environment. It is also preferable that staff should have received training in public contact skills prior to performing public contact duties.

4.13 The Department's staff training programs currently emphasise the technical aspects of DSS work. In 1987-88 approximately 17 000 days of training were undertaken by the Department.²⁰ However, in reality, this averages out to only 1 day per staff member for the year. This is hardly sufficient for technical training requirements, and does little for communication and interpersonal skills training.

4.14 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- a senior staff member at the Administrative Service Officer Class 3 level or above is available at the counter at all times;
- the staff selection process includes application of secondary selection criteria, one of which is the requirement for a high level of interpersonal skills;
- the Department of Social Security supports its staff adequately by giving them appropriate interpersonal skills training at all levels in the organisation and as soon as possible after entering the Department;
- staff do not assume public contact duties until they have been employed in a regional office for an extended period, preferably six months; and
- the Department of Social Security includes, as part of its staff training, information on the background to Departmental policies and the political and social context in which the Department operates, including information on the labour market.

Telephone contact

4.15 The Committee received a number of submissions which were critical of the telephone service provided by the Department. Criticisms can be summarised as follows:

- the length of time clients are kept waiting;
- the number of times they are transferred from one officer to another;
- staff providing hotline services are often unable to give adequate and accurate information;

²⁰ Transcript of evidence, p. 525.

- hotlines are inadequately advertised; and
- the lack of written follow-up of advice given over the telephone.

008 Facility

4.16 The Committee has observed a number of situations where an 008 facility is a key service tool. The use of a national 008 facility operating at Budget Rent-A-Car headquarters in Melbourne was most impressive. This facility comprises:

- a client service to process rentals locally and overseas; and
- a 'help desk' which Budget staff Australia-wide can contact for assistance with policy and product information.

4.17 Mr Richard Llewellyn, disability adviser to the Premier of South Australia, recommended to the Committee the provision of toll free information hotline services as the most effective way of addressing enquiries related to DSS entitlements.²¹

4.18 The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) established an 008 client enquiry facility five years ago. The number is widely publicised on DVA client material and DVA has advised that the facility is used extensively. Enquiries range from existing clients seeking clarification of particular points, to complaints and initial inquiries from potential clients.

4.19 DVA believes that the 008 number has improved access for country clients who do not have physical access to a major centre or capital city office. DVA also expects that as clients become older and generally less mobile, the availability of such a facility will assume increased importance for client contact with the Department.

4.20 The Committee agrees that toll free information services can be very effective and commends the Department for its use of toll free hotlines for special programs in the past. However, the Committee would like to see the Department expand its use of 008 numbers into a permanent facility for the use of clients and staff.

4.21 An 008 facility would especially assist those clients who may be house bound, have literacy difficulties or who have simply not been able to pursue their queries with staff in their regional office. Counter staff should be provided with a direct dial telephone link to a 'Help Desk' for quick access to an accurate, consistent source of advice.

4.22 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- **the Department expands its use of toll free services to provide either a national or State based permanent facility; and**

²¹ R. Llewellyn, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 2.

- the permanent 008 facility to comprise two elements, one a 'help desk' for staff and the second an information hotline for clients.

Field Officers and Mobile Review Teams

4.23 Field officers are attached to regional offices and have the task of ensuring that recipients remain qualified for a particular payment, or for a level of payment. Field officers are required to adhere to guidelines established by the Department's Central Office. These guidelines are at Appendix 4.

4.24 Field officers do not have decision-making authority. Their role is to investigate the client's circumstances and make a report to the appropriate officer in the regional office. However, the extent of a field officer's authority is not always understood by clients and situations occur where powers may be exceeded and rights infringed upon.

4.25 The Department expanded the field review process by establishing unemployment benefit mobile review teams in 1986-87. In mid-1987 DSS extended these teams to cover supporting parents benefit and to act on information volunteered by the public on alleged incorrect payments of social security benefits.

4.26 The Department regards the mobile review teams as highly effective. For example, in 1987/88 the unemployment benefit team completed 62 084 reviews, cancelling 23% of beneficiaries payments. The sole parent review team conducted 9 731 reviews, cancelling 12% of payments.²²

4.27 However the Committee heard many complaints about field officers, both from welfare agencies at public hearings and individuals in submissions. While the Committee accepts the need for field teams, it is concerned at the extent of these complaints.

4.28 The Welfare Rights Unit in Melbourne has undertaken a study into investigations by DSS field officers. In their report on the study they concluded that:-

- many field officers do not adhere to and actively contravene the guidelines laid down in the National Field Officers Handbook; and
- recipients of social security payments are often harassed, coerced and intimidated by field officers.²³

4.29 The Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau produces a small visiting card outlining guidelines for clients to follow when a social security officer calls. The information contained in this card is as follows:

²² Department of Social Security, Annual Report, 1987-88, AGPS, Canberra, p. 105.

²³ Welfare Rights Unit, Investigations by Social Security Field Officers, Myths and Realities, p. 16.

IF A SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICER KNOCKS

1. **DON'T** answer any questions not in writing
2. **DON'T** answer anything unless you understand
3. **DON'T** let them in. You can go to their office
4. **DON'T** answer questions now unless you want to
5. **DO** ask for identification
6. **DO** ask them to come back later if it is convenient
7. **DO** get advice if you are worried
8. **DO** have a friend or interpreter if you wish
9. **DO** keep any later appointments
10. **DO** be courteous

CALL YOUR LOCAL LEGAL SERVICE

4.30 The Committee is concerned that such a card is thought necessary. Although the Department does attempt to advise clients of appeal rights, it does not appear to advise clients of their rights regarding visits by field officers. The Committee is concerned at this gap in the Department's information. It creates the potential for added stresses between the Department and its clients and further decreases morale and co-operation on both sides.

4.31 The National Field Officers' Handbook sets out guidelines for appropriate behaviour for field officers. While the guidelines are clearly reasonable, they are only administrative and, as such, are only as sound as the practices which govern their implementation. The guidelines do not have the force of law and field officers, therefore, are not legally bound by these guidelines.

4.32 While the Committee accepts the need for review teams it also understands that the review environment is highly charged by a number of factors:

- social pressure to 'crack down';
- the community belief that substantial fraud exists; and
- social criticism of those people receiving benefits.

4.33 DSS staff, particularly field officers and review teams, need to understand that many recipients of DSS payments are fearful of the Department, given its ability to exercise power over their sole means of support. For this reason, any communication from the Department is viewed with anxiety; the sudden presence of a field officer on the doorstep is even more disturbing.

4.34 The Committee has also noted that a substantial number of 'cut-offs' arising from the mobile review team reviews are subsequently restored within a 6 week

period.²⁴ This is clearly not satisfactory. The process may be tough but it must be fair.

4.35 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security investigates the conduct of its field officers in order to assess the extent to which the guidelines are infringed; and
- letters of advice left by field officers incorporate:
 - the reason the field officer called;
 - the option of having the interview at home or in the regional office; and
 - advice to the effect that the client has the right to have a friend, advisor, interpreter or advocate present during the interview, wherever it may be held.

Pre-grant Interviews

4.36 The Committee believes that 'first contact' or pre-grant interviews are an important means of advising people of their rights and obligations to the Department as well as an essential part of its information gathering and disseminating process.

4.37 Because interviews are demanding on staff time, revised admission procedures have been developed to enable some applicants to be assessed solely on the basis of the application form.

4.38 This practice of streaming reduces the number of pre-grant interviews.

4.39 The ACOA, in its submission, pointed out that it did not oppose streaming per se but emphasised the importance of the pre-grant interview for the following reasons:

- i) a structured discussion with an experienced interviewing officer reinforces claimants' understanding of their rights and obligations; and
- ii) decision making is improved by virtue of obtaining necessary information quickly and being able to advise of decisions on the spot.²⁵

²⁴ In a letter from the Department to the Committee on 22 February 1989, the Department advised that of the 18 809 unemployment benefit cancellations, 4 535 (24.11%) were subsequently reinstated, of the 1 449 supporting parent benefit cancellations, 281 (19.39%) were reinstated, and of the 1 441 cancellations resulting from information from the public, 290 (20.12%) were reinstated

²⁵ Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association, Submissions Vol. 3, p. 989.

4.40 ACOA further argues that the increased emphasis on streaming has been closely linked to significantly increased review activity such as the mobile review teams.²⁶ The Department itself noted in its Annual Report that increased resources have been allocated to mobile review teams, with the number of reviews conducted in 1987/88 being substantially higher than in 1986/87:

- i) regional office field reviews increased by over 100 per cent to 336 751;
- ii) mobile team reviews increased over 250 per cent to 75 652.²⁷

4.41 The reduction in resources for pre-grant interviews could be regarded as a trade-off for the increased detection and correction later in the process. As mentioned earlier the Committee believes that there may now be too much emphasis on enforcement after the event, rather than advice and assistance before a claim is approved. Reduced client service at the initial stage thereby potentially increases the need for review.

4.42 The Committee accepts that there are benefits in streaming. Detailed formal interviews should be avoided where they are obviously unnecessary. However, as always, the problem arises over where the line is drawn. Much of the decision-making in this area is undertaken by regional office staff, who, if pressured by an overload of work, are more likely to decide against a pre-grant interview, when in fact one could be justified.

4.43 The Committee concludes that more emphasis should be placed on the pre-grant stage, during which a client's eligibility for some form of income support can best be determined and where clients' rights and obligations can be clearly established. The Secretary has affirmed that the Department's highest priority is to get decisions right in the first instance and not have to rely on review.²⁸

4.44 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- all new clients are given, as a matter of course, a pre-grant interview, during which their rights and obligations are clearly outlined;
- all clients re-applying for benefits after a period of 12 months without social security support also be given a pre-grant interview.

Regional Office Facilities

4.45 During the course of the Committee's investigations there was substantial criticism of the physical layout of regional offices. Criticism included claims that people stand in long queues, there are no toilet or child-care facilities and there is no privacy for the recipients as questions are asked at a counter.²⁹

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 910.

²⁷ Department of Social Security, Annual Report, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

²⁸ D. Volker, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁹ Welfare Rights Unit, Submissions Vol. 3, p. 736.

4.46 Clients often are required to wait for considerable periods in regional offices. If clients are stressed, apprehensive or accompanied by small children, lengthy waiting times can exacerbate their sense of frustration. The Smith Family organisation at Parramatta provides the following facilities to make waiting a little more comfortable and less stressful:

- a large waiting room with partitions in some areas for privacy;
- facilities and toys for children;
- a private area and change table for mothers with young children;
- toilets;
- magazines and other information for clients to read.

4.47 The availability of such facilities can help to defuse much of the antagonism likely to arise in stressed circumstances.

4.48 The Committee observed change and remodelling taking place in a number of regional offices. Clearly, new office plans are becoming responsive to such needs. However, the rate of change varies between offices and the committee was shown a number of different approaches to improving the waiting environment.

4.49 The availability of some form of entertainment is proving beneficial to clients. In particular, a television set and/or a video cassette recorder located in a strategic part of the public waiting area provides a helpful distraction. The equipment can be used to provide information on DSS programs or simply to entertain clients while they wait.

Privacy

4.50 DSS has refurbished or relocated many of its regional offices and most now have private interview facilities available. However, before a client gets to the point where they can be offered a private room, much information is sought over the counter. Older people in particular find this distressing.

4.51 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security ensures that regional offices are equipped with the following:
 - play areas and toys for children;
 - toilet facilities for clients;
 - a television set and/or video cassette recorder, placed strategically in the waiting area; and
- the Department of Social Security offers clients the option of private interviewing facilities prior to asking any personal questions.

CHAPTER 5

WRITTEN AND AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIAL

Where information is recognised as an issue, it is often seen in terms of additional pamphlets or translations into extra languages... the requirements of the Department in order to meet people's information needs are much more complicated than this. (Community Information Support Service of South Australia in its submission)

Introduction

5.1 The Department's written material comprises the following:

- application forms;
- information in the form of letters, forms and pamphlets for the purpose of providing information to clients or potential clients; and
- internal documentation, such as wall charts and manuals, designed for use within the Department, but which also are used extensively by external welfare agencies.

Letters

5.2 Letters emanating from the Department of Social Security have been heavily criticised by welfare agencies and clients. The Department addressed this aspect of its information dissemination role briefly in its submission and provided samples of many of its letters to the Committee.

5.3 Major criticisms regarding letters were:

- the lack of explanation about variations to payment and the calculations used to determine level of payment;
- letters were too complex and often in small print, making them physically difficult to read and to understand (they were described as 'gobbledegook' to the Committee);
- the lack of sensitivity and the threatening tone of some letters;
- the timing of letters advising of a termination or variation to payment (usually arriving after the cut-off point);
- the lack of a date and name of a contact officer; and
- letters were always in English and were not accompanied by a translation in the client's preferred language.

5.4 It became clear to the Committee that many Departmental letters lack explanation of a variation to the level of payment or cancellation of payment. Often, the advice is a bald statement of fact. Clients can be financially disadvantaged through lack of knowledge if letters do not set out clearly all relevant information.

5.5 The Committee is concerned to note that many routine letters are not as helpful as they might be. For example, letters advising that Family Allowance is no longer payable for children who turn 16, do not advise that such children may be eligible for an AUSTUDY payment. Such letters could advise clients to contact the Department of Employment and Education and Training or, better still, a leaflet on AUSTUDY could be enclosed. Similarly, letters advising that Supporting Parents Benefit is no longer payable, make no mention of AUSTUDY payments for children who turn 16 and who are still in full-time education.

5.6 While not wishing to be overly critical, the Committee has chosen some examples to highlight the need for an improved approach to direct correspondence to clients.

Example 1 – cancellation of sickness benefit.

Department of Social Security Commonwealth of Australia 50202 8896
 COMMONHEALTH OFFICES,
[REDACTED]
Telephone [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
2800
REGIONAL MANAGER
DEPT OF SOCIAL SECURITY,
[REDACTED]
Please address any correspondence to the above address.
Reference Number [REDACTED]
20 OCTOBER 1988

DEAR SIR,

YOUR SICKNESS BENEFIT HAS BEEN CANCELLED FROM 18 SEPTEMBER 1988 BECAUSE YOUR MEDICAL CERTIFICATE HAS ENDED SO THE DEPARTMENT DOES NOT KNOW IF YOU ARE STILL UNFIT FOR WORK.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,

[REDACTED]
REGIONAL MANAGER

[REDACTED]

5.7 Putting aside the poor quality and lack of sensitivity of the text, this letter fails to advise the client of alternative avenues of income support. The letter is dated 4 weeks after cancellation, and makes no reference to preliminary advice, giving the client time to pursue alternatives. A notice such as this so long after the event indicates that the advice is regarded as an administrative procedure with little effort devoted to providing useful information to the client.

Example 2 - unemployment benefit

Department of Social Security
COMMONWEALTH OFFICES,
[REDACTED]
Telephone [REDACTED]

Commonwealth of Australia

31/202 8805

REGIONAL MANAGER
DEPT OF SOCIAL
SECURITY,
[REDACTED]
Please address any correspondence
to the above address

Reference Number [REDACTED]

20 OCTOBER 1988

DEAR MADAM,

YOU WILL NOT BE PAID UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT PROVIDED
ACCEPTABLE PROOF OF YOUR IDENTITY.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,
[REDACTED]

REGIONAL MANAGER

Further information regarding your rights and obligations is set out on the back of this form. Please bring this notice with you when making enquiries.

5.8 Again, the letter is abrupt and lacks any explanation of the decision making process, avenues of appeal or what constitutes acceptable proof of identity. A better approach would be to state what does constitute acceptable proof of identity and provide an appropriate pamphlet or other information with the letter.

Example 3 - sickness benefit

Department of Social Security Commonwealth of Australia



40702 4711

Telephone [REDACTED]

REGIONAL MANAGER
DEPT OF SOCIAL
SECURITY,

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Please address any correspondence
to the above address

Reference Number

DEAR MADAM,

YOU WILL NOT BE PAID SICKNESS BENEFIT BECAUSE YOUR LUMP SUM
COMPENSATION PREVENTS PAYMENT UNTIL 7 SEPTEMBER 1988.

DEPENDING ON YOUR INCOME YOU MAY BE ABLE TO GET FAMILY ALLOWANCE
SUPPLEMENT (FAS) FOR YOUR CHILD/CHILDREN. THE MAXIMUM RATE OF FAMILY
ALLOWANCE SUPPLEMENT VARIES FROM \$17 PER WEEK TO \$28 PER WEEK FOR EACH
CHILD DEPENDING ON HIS OR HER AGE. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT
FAS, PLEASE GET IN TOUCH WITH US AT THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,

[REDACTED]
REGIONAL MANAGER

[REDACTED]

5.9 The Welfare Rights Centre provided this sample letter.³⁰ The letter could have been improved by:

- i) offering an explanation of how the period of ineligibility for sickness benefit was calculated;
- ii) deleting the information concerning Family Allowance Supplement, as the client involved had no dependent children, and had so indicated on her application form;
- iii) stating which other payments would be similarly affected by the period of ineligibility;
- iv) stating that the claimant has a right to appeal against an adverse decision.

5.10 The issue of lump sum compensation payments and preclusion periods is complex, with the possibility that inaccurate, insufficient information can cause considerable stress, insecurity and financial hardship. Situations such as this can best be handled by interview at an early stage.

³⁰ Welfare Rights Centre, correspondence, 18 October 1988.

Example 4 - age pension cancellation

Date	Reference No.	For inquiries call at
Run/Batch		or telephone
		or address letters to

Dear

You were granted an Age Pension on 9-7-87 at \$208.20 pf. This pension was paid up to and including instalment 24-12-87 and was then cancelled.

You were paid a ~~change~~ payment on 23-12-87 for this period of \$2706.90.

From 1-7-87 sub section 3(8) apply to married couples who are separated, but continue living in the same home. It applies to all people in receipt of pensions.

Where the Delegate determines that a married person is living separately and apart from his or her spouse in the same home sub section 3(8) allows them to be treated as ~~separated~~ for a limited period should they continue to live in the same home.

This period is for either 26 weeks or 52 weeks where either party has filed a claim with a court relating to their interest in the home property they live in.

The 26 (or 52) week period commences from:

- * 14-5-87 where the separation under one roof occurs before 14-5-87 or the date of separation under one roof where this occurs on or after 14-5-87.

Where the full 26 (or 52) week period has already elapsed and co-residence is continuing, sub section 3(8) operates immediately to treat the person as married; a determination should be made to reject the claim or assess the rate ~~at~~ a married basis as appropriate.

Please read the back of this advice.

Yours sincerely

24-2-88

**NOTICE OF A DECISION IN YOUR CASE UNDER THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT 1947
BY A DELEGATE OF THE SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY**

Example 5 - reverse of standard letter

NOTICE UNDER SECTION 163 OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT

The authority for the notification requirements listed below and on the front of this notice is in Section 163 of the Social Security Act. The rate of your benefit may need to be varied if certain events or changes of circumstances occur. For this reason you are required to tell the Department immediately if any of the following occur, or if you know in advance that they are likely to occur. If you are paid too much benefit because you fail to tell the Department when you are required to do so, the overpayment may be recovered from you. There are also penalties for not telling the Department when required to do so.

You must tell us if:

- you, or your spouse, start paid work.
- you, or your spouse, start any form of profession, trade, business or self-employment.
- you marry, or reconcile with your estranged spouse, or start living with someone as their spouse.
- you stop living with your spouse, whether due to marital breakdown or ill health.
- you, or your spouse, leave, or decide to leave Australia (including holidays).
- you, or your spouse, start to receive, or stop receiving, income, or if your income increases above the rate last notified.
- you, or your spouse, claim or receive compensation (whether periodic or lump sum).
- you, or your spouse, are granted a pension, benefit or allowance (other than family allowance) by this Department, or any payment from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, or a similar type of payment from an overseas source.
- you, or your spouse, receive payment under the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme.
- you apply for, or vary your, enrolment at a school, college, university or other educational institution.
- you, or your spouse, begin to receive maintenance for yourself or your children (whether periodic lump sum or capital transfer) including any regular support or assistance similar to maintenance (such as payments made to another person or organisation on your behalf for mortgage, rent, school fees etc.), or
 - the amount of maintenance you or your spouse receive increases.
- you are living apart from a spouse for whom you receive extra benefit, and you stop paying them maintenance or you pay them a reduced amount of maintenance.
- you get rent assistance and stop paying, or start to pay less, for your rent, lodging or board and lodging.
- you get rent assistance and you start to pay rent to a State, Territory or Commonwealth Housing Authority.
- you are under 25 years and receive rent assistance with your unemployment benefit, sickness benefit or special benefit, and you move in with your parent(s) or guardian(s).
- a child under 18 years of age enters your care and control.
- you get extra benefit for a child under 16 years and the child
 - leaves your care and control; or
 - stops being maintained by you; or
 - leaves Australia.
- you get extra benefit for a student aged 16-24 years and the student
 - becomes less dependent on you (e.g. the student's personal income increases or the student marries); or
 - stops being a full-time student; or
 - starts work; or
 - leaves Australia; or
 - applies for, or gets, an education allowance from a Commonwealth department or the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme.
- you are over 24 years of age and the value of your (and your spouse's) assets increase above or decrease below the allowable levels. If you have not been told of the allowable levels, contact your local office of the Department of Social Security.
- you get extra benefit for a student aged 16-24 years and you apply for, or start receiving, a payment for the student under an education allowance from a Commonwealth department or the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme.

- you get extra benefit for a child or a student and he or she is granted a pension, benefit or allowance by this Department;
 - you spouse dies;
 - you get extra benefit for a child or student, and he or she dies;
 - you, or your spouse, or any of your dependent children/students are
 - charged with an offence and are in custody on remand; or
 - in jail after being convicted of an offence; or
 - charged with an offence and are in a psychiatric institution.
- If you are paid Young Homeless Allowance you must also notify if any of the following occur:
- you move back to your parent's or guardian's home;
 - you receive or are likely to receive continuing support from your parents or another person;
 - you receive continuing support from another Commonwealth Department, or a State or Territory Authority.

PLEASE NOTE SPOUSE INCLUDES A DE FACTO SPOUSE

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

If you change your address you should advise the Department immediately. If mail is returned to the Department unclaimed your payments may be stopped.

WHAT IS INCOME

Income includes personal earnings; sick or holiday pay; sick or accident insurance; compensation; bank interest; net profit from shop or business; gifts or allowances (including an allotment or a dependant's allowance) of a regular nature; superannuation; retiring allowance or similar payments; payment for long service leave; interest on mortgage, loans or bonds; dividends from shares or debentures; an annuity or income from a deceased estate; income from rent, boarders or lodgers; mine's pension; overseas pension; war pension (disability pension); Government Assistance for example payments under the Austudy Scheme, an allowance under a Labour Force Training Program (Forma Training Program) and the value of board and/or lodging received in return for services.

Income does not include Family Allowance; health insurance benefits; pay and allowances received by Defence Forces Reservists (Army, Navy and Air Force) other than pay and allowances in respect of full-time continuous service.

WHAT ARE ASSETS

Assessable Assets include the value of goods, money, investments, real estate, personal property, an interest in any property, any debt owing to you or your spouse and any other right or interest. Assessable assets do not include the value of the home you live in and special aids for disabled people.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS

If you have any questions please contact this office.

If you think a mistake has been made with your benefit you should contact the Review Officer who can tell you why the decision was made and reconsider the decision if necessary.

If you still disagree with the decision you can appeal directly to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal who will independently review your case. More details are available at any of our offices.

If you do not apply for a review of the decision, an appeal within 3 months of the date of this advice you can only be paid from the date you appeal.

TAXATION

Unemployment, sickness and special benefits, like wages and salaries form part of your taxable income. However, additional benefits for children, Remote Area Allowance and Rent Assistance are not taxable. If tax is not being deducted from your benefit you may be asked to pay tax in a lump sum at the end of the financial year. The Taxation Office can advise you on how much tax, if any you are liable to pay based on your annual income, including any benefit received from this Department. You may also obtain advice from the Taxation Office of how much tax you should have deducted.

If tax is not already deducted from your benefit and you wish to have deductions made please contact the Department at the address on the front of this form.

5.11 The letter, advising of cancellation of aged pension, is an example of the 'gobbledegook' type often raised in informal discussions with the Committee. It was sent to advise the client that her age pension would be cancelled. The letter also attempts to explain the provisions of sub-section 3(8) of the Social Security Act, relating to couples who are separated but continue to live in the same house.

5.12 The letter is very confusing. The Committee was advised that when the recipient sought an explanation from the Department she did not receive any useful clarification. After she contacted the Welfare Rights Centre they found that she remained entitled to an age pension at the reduced rate of \$40 per week. The Department had incorrectly cancelled her pension on the wrong assumption that her spouse's income would preclude her from receiving any payment. Many letters fall into this 'simply confusing' category.

5.13 The Gagudju Association, an Aboriginal organisation in the Northern Territory, acts as an agency for the Department of Social Security at Jabiru. One of their main areas of activity is liaison with DSS for clients whose benefits have been delayed or cancelled, 'mainly due to people not understanding the contents of letters they have received from Social Security.'³¹

5.14 Generally speaking, in many Departmental letters there is little attempt to enlarge on a decision, the means by which that decision was reached, or alternative courses of action for the client. Mostly, the client is referred to the reverse of the letter which contains a large slab of information, most of which, is not directed to the individual client and their particular circumstances. It is difficult to read and any supplementary information needs to be obtained by telephone or by a personal visit to the regional office.

5.15 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security implements a revised set of standards for the content of letters to clients. As a minimum, these standards should include that letters:
 - are always dated and include the name of a contact officer;
 - are forwarded to the client prior to termination of payment;
 - set out the calculations on which the level of payment/termination of payment has been based;
 - include a simple, personalised explanation if payment has been altered or terminated;
 - advise alternative avenues of income support, where possible and/or avenues of appeal; and

³¹ Gagudju Association Inc., Submissions Vol. 1, p. 19.

- are accompanied by a translation in a preferred language where applicable.

Leaflets

5.16 Several factors place limitations on leaflets as a means of advising the community about Departmental programs and entitlements:

- inadequate targeting;
- timing and current application;
- availability; and
- the above average level of illiteracy in the social security client base.

5.17 Therefore, the Committee believes that the Department needs to assess its target audience for particular leaflets more specifically and tailor them appropriately. For example there is scope for more comprehensive leaflets for use by staff and the community agencies. Those directed to the general community need to be simpler, directing clients to ways of obtaining full information, written in plain English and given a more attractive and eye-catching appearance through improved use of creative artwork.

5.18 Leaflets also need to be available immediately changes are announced, with out of date material being removed as soon as possible from public display. Many organisations, have extensive networks to cope with the need for up-dated information on a regular basis. The Department should look closely at systems used to ensure updated material is promptly available.

Regional Approach

5.19 A number of regional offices have begun to produce leaflets relating to their own area and regional office operation. The Committee commends this practice and feels that it should be encouraged by central office. Information provided to clients should have maximum relevance to the local area.

Forms

5.20 The Department recognises that forms are the most critical element in its information gathering process and DSS has a program to develop more effective and simple forms, including the use of plain English, the standardisation of forms and computer aided design.

5.21 The Committee commends this approach, but feels there are some areas which still require attention:

- the complexity and range of individual forms; and

- the need to improve the position of those with literacy difficulties.

5.22 The expert computer system discussed in Chapter 10 commences its 'interview' with a number of streaming questions. The same principle could be applied to an initial application form to determine which category or categories of payment a client is eligible to apply for. The onus must always be on the Department to find the appropriate benefit for each claimant. The applicant should not be required to 'self-select'.

5.23 The Committee regards the single initial application form as an aid and starting point for this shift in responsibility.

5.24 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security develops a single application form for all clients; and
- the application form comprises a number of streaming questions which indicate the most appropriate form of payment for which the client might be eligible.

5.25 Initial assessment of the application form should be done at face-to-face level with the client. Therefore, the Committee believes that a determining officer should be available and act as part of the first contact process.

5.26 Evaluation of the standardised initial claim form at determining officer level also has the effect of taking some of the decision-making responsibility from pressured front counter staff and placing it with the determining officer, where it really belongs.

5.27 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- initial application forms be evaluated at determining officer level.

Internal Documentation

5.28 The Department has a huge task in producing technical documentation for its own staff. Such documentation comprises manuals, wall charts, instructions and handbooks. This internal documentation is designed to assist staff on the correct interpretation and application of social security legislation.

5.29 The Committee was particularly interested in the wall charts and administrative manuals produced by the Department. The five manuals are highly complex, containing approximately 4 000 pages of information. The wall chart is a large sheet in tabular format designed for quick reference. Both the wall chart and the manuals are used extensively by community and welfare agencies.

Wall chart

5.30 The following problems with the wall chart have been raised in submissions and informal discussions:

- it is often distributed after changes have come into effect;
- the benefits system is now so complex that the 'ready reference' purpose of the wall chart is becoming more and more difficult to achieve; and
- a number of recurring errors have reduced the wall chart's reliability.

5.31 The Committee recognises that with the increased complexity of the social security system it is difficult for the Department to simplify the wall chart without severely reducing its accuracy and usefulness as a tool. However, the Department can control the timing of the publication and the accuracy of the information contained in it.

5.32 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security ensures that the wall chart is updated on a regular basis, and immediately major changes are announced; and
- the wall chart is distributed as soon as possible after amendment, and in any case no later than two weeks after major announcements.

Manuals

5.33 The Department is engaged in a continuous program of revising its comprehensive set of manuals. In 1988, 2 500 pages of amendments were distributed.

5.34 The sheer size and complexity of the manuals means that referencing relevant sections is not an easy task. Many staff decline to use them, relying instead on the instructions issued by Central Office. The Department acknowledges this problem and has developed training handbooks to provide staff with better access to information on routine aspects of their work, with the more comprehensive manuals being used mainly for more complex case work.

5.35 The Welfare Rights Centre, in particular, has been critical of the Department's manuals, recommending that they be more concise, clear and internally consistent and that they make greater use of simple charts and diagrams, modern typography and layout techniques.³²

³² Welfare Rights Centre, Submissions Vol. 3, p. 982.

5.36 Community agencies use the manuals as a fundamental tool for their social security work and have developed a great deal of expertise in their use. The Department should seek input from these organisations to enhance the production and revision of manuals and other working documents.

5.37 There is a possibility that with the advent of on-line manuals the hard copy version could be phased out. Given the role that the manuals play, the Committee does not support the phasing out of hard copy manuals and updates at the present time.

5.38 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security establishes a consultative process with specific expert welfare bodies, (for example the Sydney Welfare Rights Centre), as an essential element of the process of revising its manuals;
- the Department of Social Security continues to produce manuals and amended pages in hard copy, any updates to be forwarded to welfare agencies immediately changes are made on-line;
- in any case, the Department of Social Security provides copies of its manuals and the Social Security Act and amendments *free-of-charge* to recognised welfare agencies; and
- if, in future, the Department of Social Security does decide to move completely to on-line manuals without providing hard copy, the Department must also look to providing major welfare agencies with appropriate support and software.

Audio Visual Material

5.39 As stated earlier, the Committee is of the view that the Department of Social Security could be more creative in the use of audio visual material. The Committee feels that the Department should look to diversifying its information tools by increased use of audio visual material. Many submissions suggested DSS produce information videotapes, particularly in relation to migrant communities, where a basic tape can be sub-titled or voiceovers used in the different community languages.

5.40 The Corporate Television Unit, which operates within the Department, provides scope for increased production of video material. However, apart from two tapes produced on the Family Allowance Supplement and child support, and an Aboriginal Community video, the unit appears to be dedicated to the production of tapes for internal training purposes. The Committee would like to see the Corporate Television Unit more involved in the production of videotapes for its client population.

5.41 Such videos could be distributed to regional offices and community agencies. Videotapes also have the advantage of portability and can be widely and easily distributed, at comparatively low cost.

5.42 The Committee recommends that:

- **the Department of Social Security's Corporate Television Unit be expanded to enable concentrated production of general client information, in addition to current training material.**

Audio Cassettes

5.43 The Braille and Talking Book Library has applied to the Department for funding to produce a number of DSS pamphlets on audio cassette. Although the material is intended primarily for the blind it could also be used as an information tool by those people with low literacy levels. The Committee believes that the proposal has great potential, particularly given the relatively low level of funding requested.

5.44 The Committee recommends that:

- **the Department of Social Security, in conjunction with the Braille and Talking Book Library, proceed with a trial program for the production of audio cassette tapes.**

CHAPTER 6

THE ABORIGINAL POPULATION

Essentially, the targeting of Aboriginals needs to recognise cultural, language, literacy and remoteness problems. (Department of Aboriginal Affairs in its submission)

Introduction

6.1 The Committee acknowledges that the Department of Social Security has a particularly difficult task in reaching many sections of the Aboriginal community.

6.2 The majority of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live in rural and smaller urban areas with almost a third of the population living in centres of less than 1 000 people.

6.3 The Aboriginal population has lower levels of education, and a lower standard of health than the population as a whole. As a result, many Aboriginals are highly dependent on DSS services. However, culture, language and physical isolation often make it difficult to obtain entitlements. For the same reasons, the Department has a difficult task ensuring Aboriginal access to its services.

Major Problems

6.4 The Department of Aboriginal Affairs summarised difficulties experienced by Aboriginal people as follows:

- lack of knowledge and/or uncertainty about available programs and procedures used;
- confusion and frustration with completing forms;
- uncertainty about instructions, obligations and rights;
- irrelevance of conditions attached to programs and procedures;
- delays, terminations, inconsistent treatment and outcomes without satisfactory explanations;
- harassment, unhelpfulness and lack of direction from staff;
- lack of appropriate contact with/by Departments, especially in remote areas;

- understanding and responding to Departmental correspondence; and
- literacy and language barriers.³³

6.5 The Committee has concluded that the single most important barrier to access of DSS services by Aborigines is language. Pamphlets and forms are inappropriate and often not well understood. Much of the time of Aboriginal support agencies is taken up with explanations regarding DSS communications.

6.6 Aboriginal organisations have repeated requests for simpler written material and more use of pictorial information, posters and comics. Increased use of electronic formats such as video and Aboriginal radio and television has also been suggested. Observations and suggestions made by the Aboriginal community are consistent with views expressed by other communities.

Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association

6.7 The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) holds the licence for the public radio station 8 KIN FM. The signal is receivable via translator facilities and shortwave radio anywhere in the remote areas of central Australia. CAAMMA's subsidiary company, Imparja Television, holds the Central Zone Remote Commercial Television Licence, and commenced broadcasting on 2 January 1988. Re-transmission sites are operating at Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Bathurst Island, Coober Pedy, Woomera and Ceduna, thereby ensuring that much of Central and Northern Australia have access to the station.

6.8 Both organisations aim to provide broadcasting services in a number of information areas, including social security.³⁴ CAAMA argues that it has significant potential as an outlet for DSS information. Clearly, there is the commitment and ability to produce relevant information for Aboriginal people and the Committee believes that this should be tested.

6.9 Aboriginal media could and should be used for both introductory and ongoing publicity for DSS programs. A higher public profile for DSS regional office managers and Aboriginal workers in the region should also be encouraged.

6.10 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security investigates the potential of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's Radio Station 8 KIN FM and Imparja Television for the production of appropriate social security material for broadcast through these outlets; and

³³ Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Submissions Vol. 1, pp. 188-189.

³⁴ Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 322.

- the Department of Social Security's regional office managers and Aboriginal workers promote a higher profile and easier access to their services throughout their areas of operation by seeking to appear regularly on Aboriginal radio and television programs.

Aboriginal Liaison

6.11 In November 1985 a task force was established by the Minister to examine existing Departmental services to Aboriginal clients in remote areas of northern Australia and to recommend improved methods of service delivery.³⁵ In July 1986 the Remote Area Task Force Report, was presented to the Minister for Social Security.

6.12 The terms of reference for the task force included:

- examination of service delivery and access to services;
- design of a pilot program using intermediaries in remote areas to handle the less complex service related matters affecting Aboriginal clients;
- examination of ways of formally recognising the existence and role of other third parties (Aboriginal representatives, community leaders, etc.); and
- examination of methods of facilitating payments and the provision of information to remote communities.³⁶

6.13 The report made recommendations on major areas such as:

- income security;
 - including extending reporting periods, extending the community payments scheme;
 - off-setting some payments to arrive in communities on the off-pension pay week;
 - availability of split payments, and staffing;
 - including a suggested structure for Aboriginal Liaison Units in Alice Springs and Darwin;
 - review of Aboriginal liaison and counter office positions;
 - extension of the community agents scheme; and
 - provision of support and training for community agents.

³⁵ Remote Area Task Force Report, July 1986, p. 3.

³⁶ *ibid.*

6.14 The Committee was heartened to see that many of the recommendations in the Remote Area Task Force Report had already been implemented in part or in full. As a result more emphasis has been placed on general liaison and problem prevention activities.

6.15 The Department now uses a range of intermediaries to assist in liaison with Aboriginal people. These include:

- Aboriginal liaison officers;
- Aboriginal counter officers;
- contact people in each community; and
- community agents.

6.16 The Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) Scheme has recently been established to provide a primary contact point between Aboriginal clients and DSS. ALO's are to liaise with Aboriginal communities and groups on Departmental programs, to provide feedback on the effectiveness and the level of penetration of DSS programs and to provide input from an Aboriginal perspective to the Department on its programs. Their formal role is set out in Appendix 5.

6.17 The Department has produced a comprehensive induction package for ALO's, comprising 8 booklets and a video. Apart from format considerations (the booklets are individually bound, making updating more difficult and expensive) the package is commendable and a similar program could be extended to other sections of the Department dealing with other people of non-English speaking background or with a different cultural heritage.

6.18 The Department also uses paid and unpaid agents or contact people in the community. The Department has trialled a Community Agents Pilot Scheme, which funded 10 remote communities to employ a part-time agent to attend to social security matters.

6.19 The Tangentyere Council was one of the communities to take part in the scheme. Tangentyere Council's submission was very supportive of the scheme, arguing that it provided the Council with a staff member with special expertise and familiarity with social security matters and staff.³⁷

6.20 The community agents scheme, whereby community organisations are provided with funds to employ a person to assist with less complex social security needs of members, has been extended to 11 communities. Funds have been allocated in the 1988/89 Budget for an extension of these arrangements to a total of 40 communities, with an additional 20 being added to the scheme in 1989/90 and 1990/91.³⁸

³⁷ Tangentyere Council Inc., Submissions Vol. 2, pp. 559-560.

³⁸ Department of Social Security, supplementary information, 8 December 1988, p. 34.

6.21 Funding will also allow communities to install such facilities as telecommunications, office equipment and travel to support the agents' activities.³⁹

6.22 The Department has established the North Australia Development Unit (NADU) to examine service delivery options for remote area people.

6.23 It has become clear that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive a significantly lower level of income support than they may be entitled to. In order to assist people in these communities the Department has established Remote Visiting Teams to complement the existing Aboriginal and Islander Officer and Community Agents Schemes. The teams comprise a DSS benefits expert and a liaison officer or local community member. The community visits will involve interviewing everyone in the community to ensure that people receive full access to social security information and advice.

6.24 The emphasis of the service is on 'helping', the main aim being directed to helping people obtain their correct entitlement. People who are not current clients also form part of the target group.

6.25 Posters have been produced to advertise the visits by the teams and liaison officers have been requested to organise radio advertisements in English and/or local languages.

6.26 The Committee is impressed by the positive stance taken to promote social security programs among the remote communities. DSS is actively fostering a better understanding and creating links between the remote communities and the Department's regional offices. Such developments are highly commended by the Committee.

³⁹ *ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

CLIENTS OF NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND

For many people who are forced through life circumstances to rely on income from the Department of Social Security, the process of seeking eligibility is trying and often demeaning. For a person who speaks little English and views life through a different set of cultural markers the process is extremely trying and very rarely aided by anyone who understands them or their language. (Migrant Resource Centre of Canberra and Queanbeyan in its submission)

Introduction

7.1 People of non-English speaking background comprise a significant proportion of the Australian population and a slightly higher proportion of social security recipients. Almost 21 per cent of Australians were born overseas, 13.6 per cent being born in non-English speaking countries.⁴⁰ Figures provided to the Committee show that:

- 27.3 per cent of social security beneficiaries (unemployment, sickness and special benefit) were born overseas, with 18.5 per cent being born in non-English speaking countries; and
- 29.1 per cent of social security pensioners were born overseas, 17.8 per cent of whom were born in non-English speaking countries.⁴¹

7.2 Migrant Resource Centres often fulfil the role of go-between for clients and DSS. The Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre, which has 11 workers, spends 40 per cent of its time on social security matters.⁴² The Migrant Resource Centre of Canberra and Queanbeyan has 7 staff, 2 of whom deal wholly with welfare cases, although the remaining 5 also become involved in social security matters.⁴³

Language Barriers

7.3 The primary barrier to access by people of non-English speaking background is language, with cultural differences also having an impact. In some cases, cultural barriers can restrict access to information and advice outside the family network. People of non-English speaking background tend to rely heavily on word of mouth information regarding DSS entitlements. Applications for benefits often depend upon reports of others' experiences. New arrivals are heavily reliant on the family network.

⁴⁰ Office of Multicultural Affairs, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 221.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Transcript of evidence, p. 32.

⁴³ Migrant Resource Centre of Canberra and Queanbeyan, Submissions Vol. 1, p. 174.

7.4 Many of the difficulties experienced by people of non-English speaking background parallel those experienced by the general community. However, the difficulties are compounded by their language and cultural barriers. This makes overcoming the barriers doubly difficult.

7.5 The Committee acknowledges the Department's efforts to provide for people of non-English speaking background. DSS was one of the first to recognise the language needs of clients by adopting, in 1985, a comprehensive National Language Services Policy. This policy aims to provide services in languages familiar to clients through:

- a) bi-lingual and multi-lingual staff;
- b) sessional interpreters and the Telephone Interpreter Service;
- c) translated posters and pamphlets; and
- d) announcements in the ethnic press and electronic media in different community languages.⁴⁴

Staffing and Training

7.6 Some submissions commended the establishment of State based Migrant Services Units. However, it appears that there are still insufficient numbers of bi-lingual staff. The Committee acknowledges that it is not possible to staff regional offices with people familiar with the range of cultures and languages which are now present in many communities.

7.7 Part of the answer does lie in recruiting bi-lingual/ multi-lingual staff and attaching them to appropriate offices. However, possibly more importantly, is the availability of cultural awareness training programs in addition to interpersonal skills training for DSS staff. The Office of Multicultural Affairs, in consultation with the Public Service Commission, has recently commissioned consultants to begin developing a training package in cross-cultural communication for use in the training of management and staff involved in face-to-face communication with the public.⁴⁵

7.8 The Committee agrees that such training courses should become an integral part of DSS training programs for its public contact staff.

7.9 The Committee recommends that:

- ***the Department of Social Security consults with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Public Service Commission regarding the proposed cross-cultural communication training course;***

⁴⁴ Department of Social Security, Submissions Vol. 2, p. 428.

⁴⁵ Office of Multicultural Affairs, op. cit., p. 232.

- the Department of Social Security makes a commitment to include cross-cultural awareness courses in its training programs for public contact staff and commences such courses at the earliest opportunity.

Telephone Interpreter Service

7.10 The Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) is one means by which the Department delivers its services to non-English speaking clients. However, there is a belief in some areas that the Department does not encourage the use of the telephone interpreter service sufficiently.

7.11 At present clients and staff find the process difficult and cumbersome because it is not possible to conduct a three-way conversation. Interviews result in disjointed discussions on telephones and are passed from one person to another. Greater benefit can be made of this service, but it will be necessary to provide extra training programs in the use of TIS and the use of conference telephones.

7.12 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security encourages greater use of the telephone interpreter service through training programs and by installing conference telephones in at least one interviewing room in each regional office.

Written Communication

7.13 Although the Department produces many of its leaflets and posters in community languages, much other written material is still available only in English. The most significant are claim forms and letters. One of the most frequent requests to the Committee was the need for material in preferred languages as well as English.

7.14 Although clients of non-English speaking background may become sufficiently proficient in English to get by in day-to-day matters, their level of proficiency may not be sufficient to cope with complex social security concepts or complex application forms. The unfamiliarity of their surroundings and the often difficult circumstances in which such clients find themselves could contribute to language inhibition.

7.15 Given the level of financial and other detail sought by the Department prior to granting an application for pension or benefit and the importance to the client of ensuring that they are providing the correct responses to questions, it is essential that clients have a clear understanding of what is being asked. Similarly, if the Department needs to communicate with individual clients it is equally important that clients have a clear understanding of what is being asked, why it is being asked and the time period for response.

7.16 The Committee therefore recommends that:

- a stock of application forms be available in both English and major community languages; and
- where a client has nominated a language, communication with that client be in both English and the preferred language.

7.17 The Department is encouraged to produce more material, composed initially in community languages and not simply translated from the English. It is not always possible to translate materially directly and retain the intended meaning.

7.18 The Committee visited the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau in Melbourne and was very impressed by the facilities available there. The reception area had toys and a blackboard for children and large stocks of translated pamphlets arranged by language. Private interviewing rooms were available for clients to discuss their cases with staff.

7.19 However, the Committee was most impressed by the large whiteboard in the reception area. The whiteboard was used to convey the 'message of the week' to visitors. It is written in English and in 14 other community languages. The sign at the front of the Centre is also translated into these same languages.

7.20 Volunteers write up the different messages in community languages. The system is not costly, makes effective use of unpaid helpers and works very well as a communication medium.

The Media

7.21 One of the most common suggestions for improving communication is broader use of selective media, particularly radio and specialist television. The Committee is impressed by the standard of the social security community service advertisements run on SBS. If DSS cannot afford to use commercial networked television as a primary medium, selected outlets such as the SBS, ABC, KIN 8 and local regional stations provide opportunities for raising awareness.

7.22 Local radio and community newspapers have also been suggested as important avenues for reaching a large number of people cheaply and effectively.

7.23 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security investigates the possibility of running advertisements, similar to those which have appeared on SBS, on the ABC and other selected television stations; and
- regional office managers be encouraged to develop the use of local specialist media.

CHAPTER 8

YOUTH ACCESS

For many young people, attempting to obtain income security payments from the Department of Social Security can be a nightmare. Young people are forced to deal with a large bureaucratic system in which they are made to feel powerless. The system relies on written and oral communication skills, a fixed address of abode, understanding bureaucratic language, easy access to family identification, personal identification and the ability to be assertive. (Western Aftercare Flats Programme Ltd. in its submission)

Introduction

8.1 A significant number of young people have great difficulty with DSS services. They tend to be unsophisticated in dealing with the bureaucracy and not conversant with their rights.

8.2 This view was reflected in many submissions received by the Committee and in discussions with welfare workers. It was frequently stated that there was little attempt by the Department to publicise the availability of programs to young people.

Written Information

8.3 It became clear to the Committee that written material for young people needs to be specifically developed with this audience in mind. Major problems with material currently available are:

- the ineffectiveness of leaflets and brochures as a means of disseminating *information to this target group*;
- the predominance of material written only in English; and
- the limited availability of the material.

8.4 Publications produced by DSS are limited in imagination and explanation. A pamphlet produced by the Y.A.C. Youth Incomes Working Group (Melbourne) explaining how to claim Job Search Allowance was tabled at a public hearing.⁴⁶ By contrast with DSS publications, it gives a step-by-step guide to claiming JSA and, if necessary, Young Homeless Allowance. Much use is made of cartoons and the pamphlet also contains succinct, plain English explanations on why different questions are being asked and what the consequences of various actions might be.

⁴⁶ Appendix 6.

8.5 The Department should be encouraged to evaluate the material produced by the welfare sector when developing its own material. Consideration should also be given to contracting out the development of integrated media packages with a specific target audience in mind.

8.6 The Committee has been informed that the Streetwise Comics series, which was funded by the Commonwealth Office of Youth Affairs and targeted specifically at the teenage population, has generally been regarded as successful. There is scope for the Department to adopt similar techniques with other groups.

Personal Contact

8.7 The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report on youth homelessness commented that:

many young people have been permanently discouraged by the reception given their initial enquiries by counter staff of the Department of Social Security...⁴⁷

8.8 A major problem raised in that Report was the reluctance of DSS counter staff to volunteer additional information. It is particularly important for the Department to ensure that young people approaching them for income support are advised in a friendly, sensitive way of all options available to them. Because young people are generally inexperienced in dealing with the bureaucracy and often lack self-confidence, they may require additional assistance in pressing their claims. The Human Rights Commission stated:

Many youth workers gave evidence to the Inquiry that no young person known to them had been successful in obtaining the [Young Homeless Allowance] without the significant and persistent assistance of an adult advocate.⁴⁸ This was borne out in informal discussions the Committee had with welfare workers in Sydney, where similar comments were made.

The Young Homeless Allowance

8.9 The Young Homeless Allowance (YHA) was introduced in July 1986 as a supplement to Job Search Allowance, Sickness and Special Benefit. To qualify for YHA a young person must satisfy the Department that they have lived away from home for as least 6 weeks and

- have no parental home;
- are not allowed to live at home; or
- because of exceptional circumstances they cannot be expected to live at home.

⁴⁷ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Our Homeless Children*, AGPS, Canberra, 1989, p. 156

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 157.

8.10 The Human Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Report dealt extensively with the problems young people have in gaining social security entitlements. These problems are exacerbated for homeless youth.

8.11 In its discussion on the Young Homeless Allowance, the Commission criticised the harsh eligibility criteria and the six week qualifying period. The Commission found that, although 90% of claims for YHA were approved, many applications were never submitted because of the disincentive effects of such factors as the eligibility criteria and the low rate of payment.⁴⁹

8.12 The Committee notes that these factors are a matter of Government policy and expects that this will be considered by the Government in its response to the Commission's Report.

8.13 However, the Commission did outline specific criticisms of the implementation of the allowance. These included:

- the lack of information about the allowance;
- discouragement of enquirers by Departmental staff attitudes, breaches of individual privacy and insensitive assessment processes;
- complex application procedures and the time and effort required to succeed;
- requirement for multiple forms of identification; and
- verification procedures.⁵⁰

8.14 The Committee's own analysis confirms that for the reasons spelt out in the report many young people who should be receiving YHA have been discouraged from applying.

8.15 The Department has advised the Committee that it has produced revised guidelines for the administration of the YHA. These guidelines are aimed at speeding up the assessment process, delays in processing time being one of the deterrents to applying for YHA. The guidelines also define the role of the social worker in the assessment process, giving the social worker a more determinative role in the absence of other verification data.

8.16 The Department has produced a Young Homeless Allowance information kit, aimed primarily at community workers. The kit contains revised posters, information booklets and application forms for AUSTUDY and YHA and a sample application form for unemployment benefit. These first steps are welcomed. However, the Committee feels that the Department must promote its programmes for young people more widely and must train its staff to deal more sensitively and effectively with young people.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, pp. 151-155.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p. 156.

8.17 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security develops an information outreach programme for use in schools and such community organisations as youth refuges and welfare agencies, and
- the Department of Social Security develops an in-house training module for its client contact staff comprising:
 - the technical aspects of Departmental programmes available to young people; and
 - the economic and social climate facing young people, particularly homeless and unemployed young people.

The Youth Access Project

8.18 The Youth Access Project was set up by the Minister for Social Security in April 1986 after a market research survey showed a high degree of alienation from DSS amongst young people and a high degree of misunderstanding about entitlements and how to obtain them.

8.19 The major problem areas to emerge were:

- on the client side:
 - young people had not developed independent living skills, including skills in dealing with the bureaucracy;
 - many are suspicious and distrustful of authority i.e. the Department; and
 - there is a strong reliance on their peer group for information and support;
- on the departmental side:
 - although personal communication or contact with DSS staff was the primary means by which young people gained knowledge of and access to DSS services, the quality of such contact between staff and clients was poor, with widespread tension existing in this area.⁵¹

8.20 Major recommendations included:

- priority to be given to development of the understanding by DSS staff of the background to their tasks and training in inter-personal and communication skills;
- fundamental changes to the way staff are selected and trained;
- entrenched myths and misunderstandings amongst staff and clients to be tackled 'head-on';
- clear acknowledgement of the dual roles public contact staff have to play;

⁵¹ Youth Access Project, op. cit., p. 4.

- more emphasis to be placed on more effective departmental communication to staff;
- pre-production research and testing of major information materials to become the norm;
- youth oriented information to be presented in a simple, easy-to-read manner; ie non-patronising, highly visual in style, with an emphasis on material that can be understood by people with low literacy levels; and
- the adoption of community consultation at a whole range of levels.⁵²

8.21 Many, if not all, of the recommendations in this report are not only appropriate for the Department's dealings with its younger clients, but should be applied to other sectors of the client base.

8.22 *While acknowledging that the Department has attempted to promote particular programs, such as Job Search Allowance (JSA) and, together with the Department of Employment, Education and Training, AUSTUDY, the Committee's experience with YHA and JSA indicates that implementation of the recommendations of the Youth Access Project is still incomplete.*

8.23 The Committee recommends that:

- **the Department of Social Security provides a report to the Minister on the Youth Access Project, including details of progress made to address the recommendations made in the Report.**

⁵² *ibid*, pp. 7-8.

CHAPTER 9

REGIONAL OFFICE COMPUTER AID

The introduction of new technologies is one of the means by which DSS will be able to keep pace with increasing demands from the community for better information about services the Department offers ... DSS believes that the Social Security Enquiry System has the potential to improve greatly clients' ability to establish their eligibility for a social security payment and to exercise their rights of review and appeal. (Department of Social Security, Annual Report, pp 24-25)

Introduction

9.1 The Committee has concluded that there are real prospects for improving services and staff capacity with the introduction of an expert computer system in each regional office.

9.2 With this in mind, the Committee examined a current project developed under funding provided by the NSW and Victorian Law Foundations and the Myer Foundation. This project has developed the Social Security Enquiry System (SSES).

9.3 The SSES is a legal expert system, developed to benefit DSS clients. The primary method used by SSES is an interview, conducted in a 'user friendly' manner. This question and answer session allows very precise identification of the problem and any relevant issues. The system operates on a personal computer.

9.4 The SSES contains an annotated copy of the Act, commentary on individual cases and DSS administrative manuals. It has been designed to allow welfare workers to establish eligibility for income support and, if necessary, prepare documentation to assist in the process.

9.5 A client's eligibility or otherwise is established through a series of filter questions raised through the interview. A commentary provides extracts from leading cases, summaries of cases, and gives practical advice on preparing and presenting a case on each issue.

9.6 The SSES is designed to easily accommodate updating of changes to legislation, case law, administrative policy and the system of appeal and review. It is envisaged that an agency would subscribe to a service which would supply and update the system, for an annual fee.

Training

9.7 The SSES could have major benefits for training particularly in technical areas. The system has been designed so that legislative and policy changes are automatically implemented and the user is advised of those changes as they are required to apply the new law. Therefore, it has the potential to provide continuous on-the-job training, reducing the need for detailed instructions to staff. Training programmes could concentrate more on areas of interpersonal skills, communications and cross-cultural awareness.

9.8 DSS staff currently receive on average 1 day of training per year. This is obviously not enough, given the level and rate of change in the social security system. Any development which releases staff from their technical training requirements in order to concentrate on improved service delivery and improved staff-client relationships can only be encouraged.

9.9 To the extent that the SSES automatically assesses claims across the full range of entitlements, it removes the need for staff to have detailed knowledge of the regulatory and procedural detail.

Potential Applications

9.10 SSES was developed primarily to help non-professional advocates advise clients on entitlements and appeals. However, given the overlap with DSS requirements, and the capability of modifying the system for use by the Department in its regional offices, the SSES has definite benefits and is the obvious choice.

9.11 The Department is aware of the potential benefits of expert systems at the local level. Funds have been invested in research and development of an expert system. However, the development is not advanced and could not be viable for quite some time.

Departmental Criticisms

9.12 The Committee was advised that DSS has two major reservations about the SSES. These are:

- a) that it is sometimes a fine line between advising clients of their eligibility and prompting clients on desired responses. If the SSES headed in the latter direction DSS could not co-operate in its development or maintenance; and

- b) DSS staff themselves would not be casual users of the system, but generally experienced and skilled and the Department regards the step-by-step user interface as potentially frustrating for such users.⁵³

9.13 The Committee does not agree with either of these reservations. The system has been designed to work on objective information and to enhance objective assessment by departmental officers.

9.14 The Committee accepts that there is no necessity to use the step-by-step method to access the system. Fast track access by experienced users to individual segments of the system is available.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

9.15 The Department of Veterans' Affairs is developing the Veterans' Affairs Enquiry System based on the SSES. The system will include the *Veterans' Entitlement Act 1986* and associated acts, together with the relevant case law.

9.16 DVA's first priority will be to provide the system to welfare officers in such organisations as the RSL to assist clients to assess their eligibility for assistance under the Veterans' Entitlement Act, to the point of producing the claim in both document and electronic format for submission to the Department.

9.17 DVA sees the system as a means of providing better service to clients, and, at the same time, increasing Departmental efficiency through the use of standardised applications. These benefits also clearly apply to DSS.

9.18 The Committee believes that the adoption by the Department of Social Security of an expert system in its regional offices would:

- improve the quality and consistency of primary decision-making;
- enhance and expedite review procedures;
- assure a comprehensive coverage of legislative criteria in assessment of entitlements; and
- facilitate a change in emphasis in training from a concentration on updating knowledge to an increased emphasis on improved service delivery and an improved client relationship.

9.19 The Committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Security moves quickly to provide staff in regional offices with a simple 'user friendly' computer aid along the lines of the Social Security Enquiry System;

⁵³ Department of Social Security, Supplementary information, op. cit., p. 40.

- this project to commence with a trial of the modified SSES system in regional offices; and
- the Department of Social Security consults with the Department of Veterans' Affairs to ensure that there is minimum duplication of effort in the adaption of similar systems in both Departments.

N P O'KEEFE, MP
Chairman
2 May 1989

APPENDIX 1

DETAILS OF HEARINGS AND WITNESSES

Thursday 12 May 1988, Sydney

Australian Pensioners Federation/Combined Pensioners
Association of New South Wales

Mr J P Barber
Ms N M Hewett
Mrs N McGuire

Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre

Ms P Johnson

Southern Metropolitan Mental Health Service

Mrs A L Jones

Wednesday 18 May, 1988, Canberra

ACT Council of Social Service

Mr J R Tomlinson

Department of Social Security

Mr D Bayada
Mr C Butel
Mrs M Healy
Mr J Humphreys
Mr H Jongen
Ms E Kleanthi
Mr J J MacFarlane
Mr J F O'Brien
Mr V Rogers
Ms J Stafford
Mr D Volker
Ms E Watson
Mr B Wraith

Wednesday 1 June, 1988, Melbourne

Campaign for Economic Justice

Ms R L Gillespie

Community Links Action Resource Centre

Ms N J Blair
Ms K Neilsen

Davey House Family Resource Centre

Mr T Holman
Ms M Macs
Mr A J Pickersgill

East Preston Community Health Centre

Mr R T Miles

Nunawading and Eastern Suburbs Community
Legal Service Inc.

Ms S Panagiotidis

St Kilda Legal Service

Mr M D'Argaville

Turkish Welfare Workers Association

Mrs A A Karaman

Welfare Rights Unit

Ms A Burgess

Ms P Jamieson

Ms B Kliger

Tuesday 5 July, 1988, Fremantle

Fremantle Migrant Resource Centre

Ms J B Newman

Mr A Orlando

South West Metropolitan Social Development Council's
Standing Committee on Poverty and Emergency Relief
Committee

Ms G Blake

Ms N Hosken

Mrs J Healey

Mr G T Kempin

Wednesday 6 July, 1988, Adelaide

Community Information Support Service of South Australia

Mrs D J Bryan

Ms L C Portway

Ms R Walshe

Welfare Rights Centre South Australia

Ms C Parham

Mr N D Wilkinson

Ms E Wilson

Wednesday 17 August, 1988, Canberra

Department of Aboriginal Affairs

Mrs G M Humes

Mr B V Shaw

Mr R F Toohey

Department of Employment, Education and Training

Ms S Butler
Mr C S Coleman
Mr K M Spiller

Social Change Media

Mr S S Kidney

Monday 12 September, 1988, Sydney

Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association

Mr J Farrow

Australian Public Service Association

Mr P E Feltham

Welfare Rights Centre

Mr J Disney
Mr J R Rome
Ms M T B Shiner

Thursday 15 September, 1988, Adelaide

Department for Community Welfare

Mr F Althuisen
Mr B Walker

Private citizen

Ms R A O'Donnell

Wednesday 26 October 1988, Canberra

Department of Social Security

Ms J Bevan
Mr C Butel
Mr B Godfrey
Mr J Humphreys
Mr T Murphy
Mr D Volker
Mr J Wadeson

APPENDIX 2

LIST OF EXHIBITS

18 May 1988, Canberra

Aboriginal Information Video in English and Aurukun Vietnamese Kit

1 June 1988, Melbourne

YAC Youth Incomes Pamphlet

15 September 1988, Adelaide

Letter of 17 June, 1988, Department of Social Security to Ms R O'Donnell

26 October 1988, Canberra

Aboriginal Liaison Officer Induction Package 'Trends' Booklet

**SUMMARY OF MAJOR POLICY AND ADMINISTRATIVE
CHANGES IN 1987/88**

Effective from:

July 1987

- Free area increased from \$30 to \$40 a week for single pensioners and from \$50 to \$70 for married couples. The amount disregarded for each child was doubled to \$12 a week.
- Payment of arrears standardised.
- Amount of withholdings for clients with overpayments increased.
- Access to external information to assess entitlements expanded.
- Ability to recover debts from ex-clients improved.
- Investment income advisory units introduced in State Headquarters.
- The separate income test on rent assistance was removed.
- Emphasis on medical impairment for invalid pension eligibility.
- Begin phasing out of class B widow's pension (most people protected).
- Class A widow's pension and supporting parent's benefit to cease at 6 months or 12 months after grant if still co-residing with former partner.
- Begin bringing sickness benefit rates in line with UB rates.
- The one week waiting period UB to begin from date of registration with the CES.
- Minimum postponement periods for voluntary job leavers made standard.
- Introduction of work intention questionnaire for UB eligibility.
- Removal of 1982 rent assistance savings clause for all people in State housing.

September 1987

- Reduction to 15 of the maximum age for children to qualify the parent for class A widow's pension and supporting parent's benefit.
- Imposition of penalties on overpayments if debt not repaid within 3 months.
- Extension of 6 week waiting period to 13 weeks for school and education leavers under 21 without dependents and requirement of CES registration.
- Administrative changes for assessing investment income introduced.
- Progressive interview of 18-20 year olds on unemployment benefit for 1 to 2 years, with activity test (in place of work test) after 1 year.
- Introduction of "Employer Report" certificates.

October 1987

- Income test on all family allowances (replaced the income test applying to 16 and 17 year olds).
- Eligibility for family allowance removed for children not yet brought to Australia.
- Tightened proof of separation procedures adopted for class A widow's pension and supporting parent's benefit.
- New review procedures for sickness beneficiaries introduced. Greater emphasis on selective and medical reviews.
- Exclusion from pensions/benefits of prohibited non-citizens and most temporary entrants.
- Portability of carer's pension to cease except where covered by reciprocal agreement.
- Selective home interviews for invalid pensioners after 12 months on pension.

November 1987

- Earnings credit of up to \$1,000 for pensioners introduced. Pensioners with income below permissible level allowed to accrue credits which may be used when earnings are received.

- Pensioners seeking to have their property or business disregarded under the assets test hardship provisions deemed to have income of 2.5% of value of the property, or market rental value, whichever is the higher.

December 1987

- Indexation increases in most rates of pension and benefit.
- Assets test introduced for unemployment, sickness and special benefit for people aged 25 years and over.
- Application of benefits income test to be on a fortnightly basis rather than weekly.
- Sickness benefit rates brought into line with UB in the case of new grants.
- Family allowance supplement (FAS) replaced FIS providing a higher level of assistance to a substantially greater number of families with children (\$22 under 13 years, and \$28 for older children), and rent assistance extended.
- 12 month rule for deferred income investments extended to unemployment and sickness beneficiaries.
- Rate of additional pension and benefit for children increased in line with FAS rates.
- Child disability allowance (CDA) replaced handicapped child's allowance (HCA), paid free of income test and covers all categories previously covered by HCA. Distinction between severely and substantially handicapped removed.

January 1988

- Introduction of job search allowance (JSA), with an activity test and parental income test and removal of UB for those under 18.
- Indexation of JSA and intermediate UB rates deferred to January 1989.
- Earnings on deferred income investments including friendly society bonds assessed as regular income.
- PHB card holders allowed to retain fringe benefits for 3 months after private income exceeds cut-out limits by up to 25 per cent.
- Increase in rate of Young Homeless Allowance (YHA).

February 1988

- Eligibility for carer's pension extended to people who are not close relatives
- Eligibility for double orphan's pension extended to a child with one parent dead and the other living indefinitely in a nursing home or similar institution.
- Unemployment, sickness or special benefit paid at single rate if beneficiary living apart from their spouse indefinitely due to illness.

June 1988

- Indexation increases in most rates of pension and benefit.
- Introduction of Child Support Scheme to ensure financial support for children is provided by non-custodial parents.

Source: Department of Social Security, Annual Report 1987/88, pp 4-7.

EXTRACT FROM THE NATIONAL FIELD OFFICER HANDBOOK

The National Field Officer Handbook, produced by the Training and Staff Development Division of the Department of Social Security in July 1987, outlines very clearly do's and don'ts for field officers. These do's and don'ts outline appropriate behaviour for field officer interviews.

THE DO'S

- DO** Familiarise yourself with the contents of the client's file prior to interview.
- DO** Establish that you are speaking to the client before identifying yourself and disclosing the purpose of the interview. Identify yourself correctly and produce your Identification Card when:
- . the client has been identified.
 - . any other person requests you to do so.
- DO** Explain the specific reason for your visit and give the client an overview of the stages of the interview. Explain that your role is not to make decisions but to collect information on which decisions might be based.
- DO** Ensure that a correct record of the interview (statement/report/answers on a proforma) is made and that all relevant points are covered. At the end of the interview check the accuracy of your record of the interview by reading back to the client any notes you made or answers that you recorded.
- DO** Allow time for the client to ask any questions he/she may have at the time of the interview.
- DO** Use DSS leaflets to provide clients with information.

DO Vacate the premises upon request. Advise the client that the interview may have to be conducted at a later date (perhaps RO?).

DO Engage the services of a professional interpreter if the client is unable to communicate clearly in English. Children under 16 years of age should not be used as interpreters. Use older children or friends/neighbours with discretion. Record the names of those who assisted with the interview in your report, and note the language in which the interview was conducted.

THE DONT'S

DO NOT Enter premises unless invited to do so. If asked inside use your discretion. If you refuse an invitation, note the fact.

DO NOT Coerce statements from clients. If the client is not prepared to make a statement do not force him/her to do so. You should note that you offered the client the opportunity to make a statement and that this was declined. The client's reasons, if known, should be noted.

DO NOT Question clients about sexual relationships when enquiring about their domestic circumstances, unless it is essential to establish a matter relevant to the enquiry. Questions on the subject should be limited to establishing the existence and exclusiveness of such a relationship.

DO NOT Look in any other rooms even if invited to do so.

DO NOT Give false or misleading information.

DO NOT Give an opinion as to the client's continuing entitlement. You may not be in command of all the facts and may therefore give misleading information. It is the responsibility of the delegated officer to make a decision on the client's continuing entitlement.

DO NOT Question children. At most you can inquire as to when the client is likely to be home, or whether the client resides in the house.

DO NOT Smoke.

DO NOT Accept gifts.

- DO NOT** Accept alcoholic drinks. Use your discretion about accepting other beverages bearing in mind that in some cultures it would be considered very rude to allow a person who has visited a home to leave without having refreshments.
- DO NOT** Show clients information obtained from third parties, ie, dob-in letters etc.
- DO NOT** Take anything out of letter boxes. If the premises appear to be vacant ask the local Postmaster to investigate and return uncollected mail to senders.

ROLE OF ABORIGINAL LIAISON OFFICERS

- Establish effective consultative mechanisms with Aboriginal communities, agencies, and other relevant groups to seek advice on the delivery of programmes and to ensure the effective co-ordination of Departmental services to Aboriginal people.
- Provide a consultative service to Aboriginal people on the intricacies of Departmental programmes.
- Provide information to the Department on the impact of programmes on Aboriginal people and in respect of access problems associated with those programmes.
- Provide an input to the development cycle of new Departmental programmes to ensure the interests of Aboriginal people are taken into account.
- Act as a resource for Departmental officers in their dealings with Aboriginal clients – particularly in complex cases.
- Provide relevant input into Departmental training programmes to ensure that Aboriginal cultural perspectives are understood and taken into account.
- Provide cultural-awareness training to staff in respect of the special needs of Aboriginal people, the cultural differences, and the access difficulties faced.
- Assist in the planning and delivery of information programmes for Aboriginal people and agencies.
- Provide assistance to individual Aboriginals in their dealings with the Department.
- Provide assistance to Aboriginal groups in their dealings with the Department and other departments and organisations involved in the provision of services for Aboriginal people.

Source: Introductory Booklet - Aboriginal Liaison Officer Introductory Package, p. 13.

* * - JOB SEARCH ALLOWANCE -

everything you ever wanted to know but nobody ever told you

THE UNDER 18 DOLE HAS BEEN REPLACED BY THE JOB SEARCH ALLOWANCE (J.S.A.). THIS PAMPHLET WILL EXPLAIN HOW J.S.A. WORKS.

Step 1 : Register At The C.E.S.

TO GET J.S.A. YOU HAVE TO FIRST REGISTER AT THE C.E.S. IF YOU HAVE JUST LEFT SCHOOL YOU HAVE TO WAIT 13 WEEKS BEFORE YOUR FIRST PAYMENT - SO REGISTER STRAIGHT AWAY. THE C.E.S. WILL GIVE YOU A FORM TO TAKE TO D.S.S. (DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SECURITY).



Step 2 : Going To D.S.S.

TAKE I.D. : (e.g.) SCHOOL REPORT, BANK BOOK, LEASE, BIRTH CERTIFICATE, A BILL OR OFFICIAL LETTER (WITH LETTERHEAD) FROM SOMEONE WHO KNOWS YOU.

IF YOUR PARENT(S) GUARDIAN HAVE RECEIVED FAMILY ALLOWANCE OR THE FAMILY ASSISTANCE SCHEME FOR YOU, THE D.S.S. FILE COULD BE USED AS I.D.

MAKE SURE YOU SHOW THEM YOUR I.D. - DON'T WAIT TO BE ASKED.



- * IF YOU HAVE NO FAMILY HOME, OR CAN'T LIVE AT HOME FOR ANY REASON, YOU SHOULD APPLY FOR THE YOUNG HOMELESS ALLOWANCE (Y.H.A.) WHICH ENTITLES YOU TO AN EXTRA \$26 PER WEEK.
- * IF YOU HAVE BEEN GETTING Y.H.A. FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, GET A COPY OF A LETTER THAT SAYS THIS FROM THEM AND TAKE IT WITH YOU TO D.S.S.
- * WHILE YOU ARE WAITING FOR ANY OF THESE BENEFITS YOU CAN APPLY FOR SPECIAL BENEFITS.

O.K. NOW YOU'VE GOT THE FORM CALLED "CLAIM FOR JOB SEARCH ALLOWANCE". YOU CAN GET \$25 PER WEEK ON J.S.A. - YOU MAY GET UP TO \$50 PER WEEK BUT IT DEPENDS.

You Will Get The Full \$50 Per Week If :

- A. YOU CAN'T LIVE AT HOME (DON'T FORGET : YOU CAN ALSO APPLY FOR Y.H.A.).
- OR B. YOU HAVE LIVED AWAY FROM HOME FOR 6 MONTHS
AND YOU HAVE WORKED FULL-TIME FOR 13 WEEKS OR MORE OF THOSE 6 MONTHS;
AND YOU DON'T RECEIVE ANY MONEY REGULARLY FROM YOUR PARENTS.
(NOTE: ONCE OR TWICE IS NOT REGULARLY)
- OR C. YOU HAVE APPLIED FOR Y.H.A. WITHIN SIX WEEKS OF LEAVING HOME.
- OR D. YOU HAVE BEEN ON THE DOLE CONTINUOUSLY SINCE MAY 13TH 1987 OR BEFORE.
- OR E. YOU ARE MARRIED AND/OR HAVE A DEPENDENT.
- OR F. YOU ARE AN ORPHAN.



THAT'S WHY THEY ASK YOU THOSE QUESTIONS IN NO. 31 OF THE APPLICATION FORM!

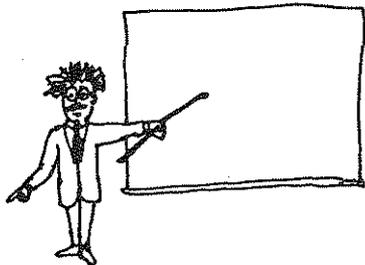
YOU WILL HAVE TO PROVIDE PROOF THAT YOU HAVE WORKED FOR 13 WEEKS IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS. YOU SHOULD GET A FORM SIGNED BY YOUR EMPLOYER. IT IS CALLED A JOB SEPARATION FORM. IF YOUR EMPLOYER DOESN'T HAVE ONE, YOU CAN GET ONE AT THE POST OFFICE.

REMEMBER - SHOW YOUR PROOF - DON'T WAIT TO BE ASKED

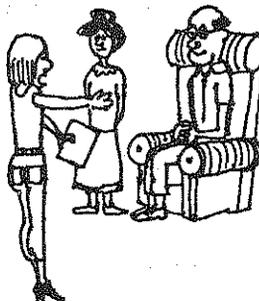
CHECK A - E AGAIN ON PAGE 2 IF THIS DOESN'T APPLY TO YOU OR YOU ARE STILL LIVING AT HOME THEN WHETHER OR NOT YOU GET MORE THAN \$25.00 PER WEEK WILL DEPEND ON HOW MUCH YOUR PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN EARNED IN THE LAST FINANCIAL YEAR (JULY 1986 TO JUNE 1987)

This Is How It Works :

IF YOU HAVE NO OTHER BROTHERS AND SISTERS, THEN YOUR PARENTS/GUARDIAN HAVE TO HAVE EARNED LESS THAN \$16,000 FOR YOU TO RECEIVE THE FULL \$25.00 EXTRA. IF YOU HAVE ONE YOUNGER SISTER OR BROTHER, THE FIGURE BECOMES \$17,200. THIS FIGURE RISES BY \$2,500 FOR EACH OTHER YOUNGER BROTHER OR SISTER YOU HAVE. IF YOUR PARENTS EARNED MORE THAN THIS, THEN THE AMOUNT YOU GET WILL BE REDUCED. THIS IS CALLED MEANS-TESTING.



IF YOUR PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN'S INCOME IS TO BE TESTFD, D.S.S. WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER FORM. THIS IS CALLED A PARENTAL INCOME TEST QUESTIONNAIRE AND MUST BE SIGNED BY PARENT(S) OR GUARDIAN. YOUR PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN WILL BE ASKED FOR THEIR TAX FILE NUMBER BUT THEY CAN PUT IN A COPY OF THEIR GROUP CERTIFICATE OR THEIR TAX ASSESSMENT NOTICE WITH THE TAX FILE NUMBER CROSSED OUT. TELL YOUR PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN ABOUT THIS. GET THIS FORM BACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

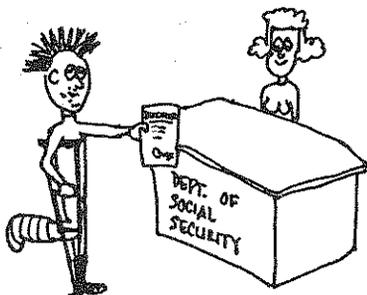


QUESTION 15 ON THE APPLICATION FORM ASKS YOU WHAT JOBS YOU'VE BEEN FOR, SO MAKE SURE YOU FILL THIS IN. QUESTIONS 21 - 29 WILL GIVE YOU A LAUGH AND YOU'LL PROBABLY ANSWER "NO" TO ALL OF THESE.

OK. NOW YOU'VE FILLED IN THE FORM, YOU'LL HAVE AN INTERVIEW WITH A D.S.S. OFFICER.

ASK IF YOU CAN HAVE COPIES OF ALL THE FORMS, IN CASE THEY GET LOST! ALSO ASK FOR THE INTERVIEWER'S NAME SO IF THERE IS ANY HASSLES YOU CAN FOLLOW IT UP.

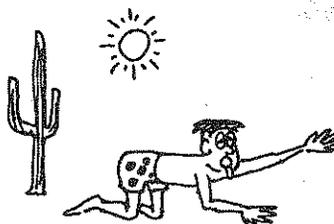
TO CONTINUE GETTING J.S.A. YOU WILL HAVE TO GO TO THE C.E.S. EVERY TWO WEEKS, PROVE THAT YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR WORK, AND MAYBE GO TO A JOB SEARCH TRAINING COURSE AS WELL, (THESE WILL PROBABLY BE RUN THROUGH THE LOCAL C.Y.S.S.). IF YOU DON'T, WITHOUT A REASONABLE EXCUSE, YOU COULD LOSE YOUR BENEFIT.



For Example :

IF YOU ARE SICK, GET A DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE AND TAKE IT TO D.S.S. STRAIGHT AWAY. AGAIN KEEP A COPY. YOU CAN'T GET SICKNESS BENEFITS IF YOU ARE ON J.S.A. IF YOU ARE SICK, YOU WILL NEED TO GET A DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE AND TAKE IT TO D.S.S. IN ORDER TO KEEP GETTING J.S.A.

IF DURING THE 13 WEEK WAITING PERIOD FOR YOUR FIRST J.S.A. PAYMENT, YOU HAVE NO MONEY AND ARE IN HARDSHIP, YOU CAN APPLY FOR SPECIAL BENEFIT. YOU MUST PROVE THAT YOU ARE IN DIRE STRAIGHTS TO GET SPECIAL BENEFIT. GET A LETTER SUPPORTING YOUR CASE FROM A YOUTH WORKER OR SOCIAL WORKER, ETC. THE CONDITIONS FOR GETTING SPECIAL BENEFIT IN THIS CASE, ARE THE SAME AS FOR Y.H.A.



Remember: At D.S.S. You Have The Right To:-

- BE GIVEN FULL AND CORRECT INFORMATION. IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, KEEP ASKING UNTIL YOU DO.
- ASK TO BE INTERVIEWED IN PRIVATE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO EXPLAIN YOUR PROBLEM IN FRONT OF AN OFFICE FULL OF PEOPLE.
- HAVE AN INTERPRETER OR TRANSLATOR IF NEEDED.
- ASK TO SEE A WELFARE OFFICE IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF URGENT ASSISTANCE.
- POLITE TREATMENT BY STAFF.
- GET COPIES OF EVERYTHING.

THE UNDER 18 DOLE NO LONGER EXISTS. INSTEAD THERE IS A JOB SEARCH ALLOWANCE WHICH MEANS LESS MONEY FOR MOST UNEMPLOYED YOUNG PEOPLE AND MORE HASSLE PROVING THAT YOU SHOULD GET IT.

THE GOVERNMENT SEEM TO THINK THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CAN SURVIVE WITHOUT MONEY OR THAT PARENTS CAN AFFORD TO SUPPORT THEM. THEY ARE DENYING YOUNG PEOPLE THE RIGHT TO AN INCOME OF THEIR OWN. THEY ARE ALSO DENYING THE FACT THAT THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH JOBS TO GO AROUND.

THE YOUTH ACCOMMODATION COALITION OF VICTORIA (Y.A.C.) IS DOING SOMETHING ABOUT THIS. WE HAVE PUT TOGETHER THIS LEAFLET TO HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE COMPLICATED AND UNFAIR PROCEDURES INVOLVED. WE ARE PLANNING MORE ACTION.

IF YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS OR WOULD LIKE TO HELP, CALL KATHLEEN AT Y.A.C. ON (03) 417 4099.

LET THE GOVERNMENT KNOW HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT THESE CHANGES. WRITE TO :

THE HON. BRIAN HOWE, M.P.,
MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
CANBERRA. A.C.T. 2600.

THESE ARE BIG CHANGES. IF YOU NEED HELP TO WORK THROUGH IT ALL, CONTACT A C.Y.S.S. (COMMUNITY YOUTH SUPPORT SCHEME) IN YOUR AREA OR A YOUTH WORKER. YOUR LOCAL COUNCIL SHOULD BE ABLE TO PUT YOU IN TOUCH WITH SOMEONE. EVERY OFFICE OF SOCIAL SECURITY HAS A SOCIAL WORKER WHO MAY BE ABLE TO HELP ALSO.