

The Senate

Standing Committee on
Community Affairs

Additional estimates 2006–07

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Senate Community Affairs Committee Secretariat

Mr Elton Humphery – Secretary

Ms Leonie Peake – Research Officer

The Senate

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Phone: 02 6277 3515

Fax: 02 6277 5829

E-mail: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Internet: http://www.aph.gov.au/senate_ca

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Membership of the Committee

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Senate Community Affairs Committee

Report on Additional Estimates 2006-2007

1.1 On 8 February 2007 the Senate referred the following documents to the Committee for examination and report in relation to the portfolios of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; and Health and Ageing:

- particulars of proposed additional expenditure and statement of savings, together with the Final Budget Outcome 2005-06 and the Advance to the Finance Minister as a Final Charge for the year ended on 30 June 2006.

1.2 The Committee has considered the additional expenditure of the portfolios set out in their respective Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements 2006-2007 (PAES) and related budgetary documents. Explanations relating to the estimates were received from Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, Minister for Community Services, and Minister representing the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Senator the Hon Santo Santoro, Minister for Ageing and Minister representing the Minister for Health, and officers from the portfolio Departments at hearings held on 12 and 13 February 2007.

1.3 The Committee expresses its appreciation for the assistance of the Ministers; Dr Jeff Harmer, Secretary, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), and Ms Jane Halton, Secretary, Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA); and the officers who appeared before it.

1.4 In accordance with Standing Order 26, the date for submission to the Committee of written answers or additional information relating to the expenditure is 30 March 2007.

1.5 The Committee discussed many of the expenditure revisions and information contained in the Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements. These discussions are detailed in the Committee's *Hansard* transcripts of 12 and 13 February 2007, copies of which will be tabled in the Senate. *Hansard* transcripts of the estimates proceedings are also accessible on the Committee's website at http://www.apf.gov.au/senate_ca. Volumes of Additional Information received by the Committee containing answers to questions taken on notice and tabled documents relating to the Committee's hearings will also be tabled separately in the Senate and may also be accessed from the Committee's website.

Procedural matters

Rescheduling of the Committee's hearings

1.6 Some Senators expressed dissatisfaction with the Committee's move from Group B to Group A, particularly as this change was at short notice and without consultation with the Committee. This late rearrangement of the estimates program effectively reduced the Senators' preparation time for the hearings and the change of Committee room resulted in logistical problems for the large number of officers from DoHA who were required to be in the Committee room but had to remain in the waiting room.¹

1.7 Ms Halton, Secretary DoHA, indicated that remaining in Group A for the budget estimates hearings would present major difficulties for the DoHA as the scheduled hearings would clash with the dates of the World Health Assembly in Geneva which required the attendance of the Departmental Secretary, Chief Medical Officer and a number of other senior departmental officials. The Committee Chair understands, following informal discussions with members of the Government, that the Committee in future will revert to Group B.²

Request for forward estimates

1.8 DoHA was requested to provide for each of their 15 Outcomes a list of programs, current expense/revenue and cash forward estimates for 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10, and for the same years to identify the amounts obligated or forward committed under each of the outcomes.³ DoHA stated that they had conferred with the Department of Finance and Administration who advised the following:

The government's position on the publication of budget estimates is that the four-year projections are published only at the functional level in statement 6 of Budget Paper No. 1. Our portfolio budget statements publish only one year of forward estimates – the current budget year. We publish ours also at the program level. So, in answer to your question for each of the outcomes for 2006-07, the budget estimates by program are published in our PBS. For the years beyond the budget year, the information is not published and we are not authorised to release that. The same goes for commitments against outcomes and programs.⁴

1 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA70, 125-126.

2 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA125-126.

3 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA8-9.

4 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, p.CA44.

Provision of answers relating to supplementary Budget Estimates 2006-07

1.9 The Committee is disappointed to report that FaCSIA were very late in providing answers to questions on notice relating to the supplementary budget estimates. There were no answers provided by the due date which was 15 December 2006. Thirteen answers relating to the Tiwi Land Council were received on 22 December 2006, but there were no further answers until a large number were provided early in February 2007.

1.10 Whilst the Committee acknowledges that a large number of questions (327) were placed on notice with FaCSIA, who make considerable efforts to process the questions in a timely manner, there were still 18 answers outstanding at the date of the additional estimates hearing. The non provision of these answers makes it difficult for Senators to pursue these issues at the hearing.

1.11 The Committee is pleased to note that DoHA improved its record of provision of answers, with more than half of the answers being provided by the due date and shortly afterwards. The remaining answers were provided progressively, with all answers being received by the Committee prior to the additional estimates hearing.

Following-up Committee inquiries

1.12 The Committee retains a strong ongoing interest in the subjects of recent inquiries and particularly in progress and developments that have occurred since the Committee reported. These subjects, which received concerted questioning during the hearings, included status of negotiations for the new CSTDA and other disability services issues, programs for young people in nursing homes, abuse of residents in aged care and checks on homes, targeting Indigenous petrol sniffing, 99-year leasing arrangements in the Northern Territory, establishment and operation of Cancer Australia, developments with the pregnancy counselling and support hotline and preparations for the commencement of the Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Act 2006.

Issues

Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio

1.13 A range of questions on FaCSIA corporate matters were raised including the budget deficit, staffing levels, corporate credit card use and response to an ANAO report, water use and energy audits.⁵

1.14 The Committee questioned FaCSIA about the problem facing a number of pensioners who sell their home and have the proceeds assessed as an asset 12 months later if there is delay, outside their control, in them building or purchasing a new

5 Committee Hansard, 12.02.07, pp.CA4-14.

home. FaCSIA advised the Committee of proposed legislative changes that would make provision for ex-gratia payments to be made to assist pensioners.⁶

1.15 A number of issues regarding disability services were discussed, including the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement negotiation process, the National Disability Advocacy Program, and alternative accommodation for young people in nursing homes. Mental health issues and implementing COAG initiatives were also discussed at some length.⁷

1.16 Carer issues were strongly canvassed by the Committee, including mediation and counselling services, the disability trust, and unmet demand for support for young carers.⁸

1.17 Information was provided relating to the National Youth Roundtable⁹ and a number of women's issues were discussed, including violence prevention programs.¹⁰

1.18 Senators asked a wide range of questions relating to the Family Relationships Services Program, particularly changes to the data collection and storage process that require people accessing services to provide additional information. The Committee was assured that people's personal details would be protected because unique identifiers would be used which would provide de-identified data. This additional information would allow for more detailed analysis to be made of the program. Matters relating to the prevention of family breakdown were also raised.¹¹

1.19 Family issues were discussed, including the Communities for Children program and Early Childhood program. The Committee has sought and been provided with information on the operation of Family Tax Benefit (FTB) at recent estimates hearings. FaCSIA advised that primarily because this information was not produced on an ongoing basis in the Department for internal monitoring, it would now be collected on an annual basis and published in the Annual Report, rather than in response to estimates or other questions. This new procedure would also have resource saving implications. The Committee recognised that whilst this information would now be publicly available on an annual basis, concern was expressed that by the time the data was published in the Annual Report, due to the timing of estimates hearings at which the Committee could use the Annual Report, the data would be quite historical (possibly 12-15 months old) thereby reducing its immediate value and relevance for monitoring purposes.¹²

6 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA15-19.

7 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA20-40.

8 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA40-45.

9 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA45-49.

10 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA50-54.

11 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA55-64.

12 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA51-74.

1.20 A range of child care support questions were asked by the Committee, including recovery of childcare benefit overpayments and implementation of the childcare management system.¹³

1.21 The Committee questioned FaCSIA at some length on housing matters, including the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, the framework for national action on housing affordability, housing research, community housing, and rent assistance.¹⁴

1.22 In response to a request for details of expenditure to assist people affected by Cyclone Larry, FaCSIA provided information on income support eligibility and payments and ex-gratia and fuel relief payments to assist victims of disasters.¹⁵

1.23 Indigenous issues were again a considerable focus for questioning. Included in discussions were housing funding and housing provision for the Wadeye community, the community safety and family violence program and youth strategy. Other matters considered were the COAG trial evaluation and action being taken in response to the COAG evaluation recommendations, Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs), Indigenous Coordination Centres, the Strategic Interventions Task Force, Native Title representative bodies, policing in remote areas, Indigenous home ownership and 99-year leases on Indigenous communities.¹⁶

1.24 The Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations was asked to provide information relating to progress with the administration of the Mutitjulu Community Aboriginal Corporation. The Committee also sought information from the Aboriginal Hostels agency concerning staffing matters, in particular AWAs and the current certified agreement.¹⁷

Health and Ageing portfolio

1.25 DoHA informed the Committee on a wide range of topics during the hearing. A number of questions were asked relating to pregnancy counselling, particularly with regard to the tender process, the successful tenderer and operation of the pregnancy support helpline.¹⁸

1.26 A wide range of aged care issues were the subject of extensive questioning. Included in discussions were the Government's recently announced aged care package of reforms and additional funding; bed licence applications, allocations, and the

13 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA75-82.

14 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA84-95.

15 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA96-97.

16 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA97-128.

17 *Committee Hansard*, 12.02.07, pp.CA128-132.

18 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA9-17.

approvals round; allegations of abuse in aged care facilities; visits to, unannounced spot checks and audits of homes; police checks for aged care workers; and auditing of a support service.¹⁹

1.27 DoHA was asked questions relating to the use of pharmaceuticals in hospitals and the proposed changes announced in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) reform package. The National Immunisation Program and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee were also examined.²⁰

1.28 DoHA provided information relating to Medicare benefits, bulk-billing rates, patient contributions and Medicare safety net registrations and claims. A number of questions were also asked by the Committee concerning mental health and intellectual disability items under the Medical Benefits Scheme (MBS) and the Round the Clock Medicare package.²¹

1.29 Indigenous and rural health issues were raised as Senators sought information on the COAG trials, progress with the trachoma prevention program, ear and hearing health programs, and Indigenous children's health programs. The rollout of Opal fuel and the Opal communication strategy were also discussed.²²

1.30 Information was sought relating to a number of private health insurance matters including data on private health insurance coverage, the impact of broader health insurance cover on premiums and the projected outcomes. Broader health cover issues were also discussed with Medibank Private who advised the Committee regarding products and services they were developing for their members.²³

1.31 The recently established agency Cancer Australia appeared before the Committee for the first time. The CEO provided the Committee with an update on the progress of the various cancer programs and projects, consultation process, the operation of the agency, and future planning.²⁴

1.32 A wide range of questions were asked by Senators concerning the COAG initiatives covering mental health, including the implementation and progress with various programs and services.²⁵

1.33 Matters relating to districts of health workforce shortage, dental workforce populations, access to primary care services in rural and remote areas, plasma

19 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA17-48.

20 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA49-57.

21 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA57-69.

22 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA69-80.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA81-90.

24 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA91-97.

25 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA97-105.

fractionation services, the national blood supply; rape crisis centres, and organ donation, were also raised with DoHA.²⁶

1.34 Information was sought from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) regarding progress with the review of the guidelines which cover consent procedures for the use of excess ART embryos in research. The NHMRC advised that this was a matter they were very actively working on.²⁷

1.35 In addition to the above issues a number of administrative and process issues involving both portfolios were discussed during the estimates hearings and these are detailed in the *Hansard* transcripts of evidence.

Senator Gary Humphries
Chairman
March 2007

26 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA105-124.

27 *Committee Hansard*, 13.02.07, pp.CA124-125.