

QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING: 20 OCTOBER 2009

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP PORTFOLIO

(43) Program 4.3: Offshore Asylum Seeker Management

Senator Fierravanti-Wells (L&C 96-97) asked:

Provide an outline of the allowances paid to the irregular maritime arrivals on Christmas Island and do a comparison with the allowances paid to the various categories of persons by Centrelink. As well advise the changes that have been made to the regime since the change of government.

Answer:

People in the Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) and in alternative detention arrangements on Christmas Island are provided with food and other living necessities by the detention service providers (DSP). These people do not receive any cash allowance but can purchase incidentals through the use of a points-based system called the "purchasing allowance scheme" (PAS), which was first introduced by the previous government on 31 December 2006.

Incidental goods available for purchase through the scheme are not a substitute for the provision of basic entitlements to food, clothing or personal hygiene items that the DSP is responsible for providing. PAS points can be used to purchase from a limited number of discretionary items such as low cost canteen items.

The Minister directed the department to review the allocation of allowances on Christmas Island to ensure they were in line with community expectations. As a result of this review, PAS points may not be accumulated over successive weeks as was previously the case. They are reset weekly and any unused points forfeited.

In 2005, the previous government introduced the community detention program which afforded some people in immigration detention the ability to live in the community, subject to certain conditions, while their immigration status is resolved.

Allowances for clients in community detention arrangements were determined under the previous government. Families and single adults in community detention on Christmas Island or the mainland receive the equivalent of 89 per cent of Centrelink allowances (Newstart allowance). The 89 per cent was chosen by the previous government in 2005 to reflect the arrangements in place for the Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme that was established about 17 years ago.

The majority of allowances for clients in community detention on Christmas Island are allocated to store accounts and vouchers rather than cash. The store account covers the purchase of basic necessities such as groceries and other household items and cannot be accumulated. Clients in community detention are expected to provide for all their own meals from this allowance. Vouchers are used for public transport and the cash allowance component covers unforeseen costs and other miscellaneous expenses associated with community-based living.

The cash allowance component for clients in community detention on Christmas Island has also been significantly reduced as part of the department's review of the allocation of allowances on Christmas Island.

A family of two adults and two children could previously receive \$300 per fortnight in cash allowances. This same family now receives just \$20 per adult and \$10 per child each week. This provides just \$60 per week in cash for a family of two adults and two children. Single adults also receive \$20 per week.

Store accounts on Christmas Island are regularly monitored by the Red Cross to ensure the total value of allowances paid to asylum seekers does not exceed the 89 per cent of Centrelink allowances. If there is unused credit on a store at the end of a fortnight it does not carry forward to the next fortnight.