



Committee Secretary
Senate Community Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into Family Assistance, Social Security and Veterans' Affairs Legislation (2005 Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2006

Vision Australia is the newly merged organisation incorporating the former businesses of Royal Blind Society of NSW, Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation and the National Information and Library Service. We are the largest blindness agency in Australia with a long history of professional service delivery.

Our organisation's purpose is to provide assistance to people who are blind or vision impaired so that they can access, and fully participate in, all facets of life. For example, our organisation attempts to remove barriers that prevent people who are blind or vision impaired from enjoying equal access and opportunities to participate in all facets of the community. In our efforts to provide these services, Vision Australia promotes awareness to government, government departments, community services and the general public about the barriers faced by people, who are blind or vision impaired in a predominantly sight orientated society.

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the ***Family Assistance, Social Security and Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (2005 Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2006***.

We refer to Schedule 6 – Carer Allowance backdating provisions. Vision Australia is concerned by the proposed reduction in the maximum backdating period for the claim lodgment date by carers of both children and adults. The proposed reduction in both circumstances is unrealistic and unreasonable. Standardizing backdating periods should not mean reducing time periods in such a way that individuals and families, facing massive emotional and physical challenges, are also then deprived of their rightful financial assistance. We propose that if standardization is the purpose of these changes then the Carer Allowance backdating provisions be standardized to 52 weeks.

Carers Allowance is of vital importance to parents of children who are diagnosed legally blind. Currently, under Clause 16 of Schedule 2 of the ***Social Security (Administration) Act 1999***, there is an eligible backdated period of 52 weeks. The proposed reduction to 12 weeks is unreasonable and unrealistic. Vision loss in a child comes with huge emotional ramifications - not only for the child but also for immediate family and friends. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect the family to notify Centrelink for potential Carer Allowances when they are struggling to come to terms with the emotional and physical challenges that their child is encountering.

A period of 12 weeks is inadequate when it is considered that a child with vision loss will spend that period undergoing multiple assessments of their vision loss and whether or not it may be rectifiable. Precedence will also obviously be given to their emotional and physical requirements, such as counseling and mobility training and general life skills, rather than immediately applying for potential allowances. The child's family may not even be aware that they are entitled to any allowances during the first 12 weeks. It is considered that the proposed reduction of the backdating provisions is unrealistic and harsh, and Vision Australia strongly recommends that the backdating provisions of 52 weeks are not reduced for carers of a child with a disability.

Similarly Vision Australia is also concerned about the proposed reduction in the Carers Allowance for adults, currently 26 weeks under Clause 17 of the above Act, to 12 weeks. This is also considered unreasonable and unrealistic. The sudden onset of vision loss in an adult also has huge emotional and physical ramifications. The emotional ramifications can include various stages of grief, including denial. The length of grieving can vary from individual to individual as no one case is an homogenous experience. It is unjustifiable to expect somebody in such an emotionally vulnerable situation to be contemplating eligibility for a Centrelink allowance.

The Senate Community Affairs Committee should acknowledge and appreciate that an adult who has just lost their vision has also lost their drivers licence and potentially their employment. They are also looking at months of ongoing rehabilitation in order to regain their independence and life skills. Precedence

must be given to counseling and training to assist that person to adjust, prior to any thought of potential allowances. There will also be extensive visits to professionals to consider the level of their vision loss. After the individual has become more comfortable in their ability in daily living skills then they may consider Centrelink allowances. Furthermore a person who has suddenly lost their vision may not even know that such benefits exist to them and their carer.

Organisations such as Vision Australia assist people who have a disability to access, and participate in, all facets of life. However adults, children, and families of children, faced with blindness or vision impairment may not even be aware of the existence of the organization and its services. It is therefore unlikely that they will immediately contact the organization - and then waiting lists mean that it may not be possible to see them immediately. At all times priority must be given to that adult or child's physical and emotional needs, to assist them in learning how to deal with their life changes.

Vision Australia therefore strongly recommends that the Senate Community Affairs Committee take on board the pertinent points made above when considering the timeframes in which an applicant should lodge for eligibility. As proposed above, if standardization is the purpose of these changes then the Carer Allowance backdating provisions should be standardized to 52 weeks. If the Committee approves the proposed 12 weeks they will be contributing to the emotional hardships experienced by both the individuals and their families.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Simpson
General Manager – Policy & Advocacy

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