

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

1.1 On 8 February 2007, the Senate referred the provisions of the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 to the Finance and Public Administration Committee for inquiry and report by 15 March 2007, on the recommendation of the Selection of Bills Committee.

1.2 The Committee was charged with examining, among other things, the bill's provisions relating to the intended scope and purposes of the card; the information to be included in the card register and the card's chip and on the card's surface; and the range of offences aimed at prohibiting persons requiring an access card for identification purposes and prohibiting other improper uses of the card.

Purpose of the bill

1.3 The purpose of the bill is to facilitate the provision by participating agencies of benefits, services, programs, or facilities to some or all members of the public, through establishing a framework for the proposed Health and Social Services Access Card (the access card). According to the bill, the access card is intended to:

- Reduce complexity in accessing Commonwealth benefits;
- Facilitate a more convenient, user-friendly and reliable method of accessing those benefits;
- Reduce fraud on the Commonwealth;
- Improve access to Australian Government relief in emergency situations; and
- Permit access card owners to use their cards for such other lawful purposes as they choose.

1.4 The Explanatory Memorandum further explains that the bill:

- Sets out the objects and purposes of the legislation which will form a basis for the uses of the card and a basis for collection, use and disclosure of information on the register and card;
- Provides for the introduction of a new chip-based card to replace the Medicare Card and numerous other cards and vouchers used to access Australian Government benefits;
- Establishes the register and the card to provide certainty as to the information that will be on the register, surface of the card, and in the chip in the access card;

- Introduces a registration process for the card with substantially improved proof of identity arrangements;
- Prohibits unauthorised demands for, and use of, the access card for identity purposes; and
- Vests ownership of the access card in the card holder.

1.5 It is an object of the bill that the access card cannot be used as, or become, a national identity card.

1.6 The bill is the first part of a broader legislative package designed to establish the framework supporting the access card. It has been developed following a consultation process. The bill incorporates many of the recommendations made by the Access Card Consumer and Privacy Taskforce, led by Professor Allan Fels AO.¹ It has also been informed by public comments relating to an exposure draft of the bill, which was released for consultation on 13 December 2006.² As part of the continuing legislative process, ongoing consultations on a range of issues, such as the use of the card in dealing with dependents, are being undertaken. The Access Card Consumer and Privacy Taskforce is also continuing its consultations and will provide further advice to the Government.

Conduct of the Inquiry

1.7 The Committee advertised the inquiry in *The Australian* on 12 February, 21 February and 7 March 2007, inviting submissions by 28 February 2007. To help promote awareness of the inquiry, the committee also advertised in the *Australian Financial Review*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Melbourne Age* on 12 February 2007, and the Chair contacted by way of email the editors of as many news publications as possible, encouraging them to publicise details of the inquiry.

1.8 Sixty-six submissions were received, and these are listed at Appendix 1. Submissions were also posted on the Committee's website to facilitate public access. The Committee held hearings in Sydney on 2 March 2007, in Melbourne on 5 March 2007 and in Canberra on 6 March 2007. A list of the witnesses who appeared at the hearings is at Appendix 2, and copies of the Hansard transcript are available through the Internet at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fapa_ctte/index.htm.

1 The Taskforce undertook over 160 consultations and received more than 100 submissions. The Government also established an access card website with an email facility, which received over 500 comments from the public; and an access card information hotline which received over 1800 calls.

2 More the 120 submissions from government and non-government organisations, as well as individuals, were received in response to the exposure draft.

Acknowledgement

1.9 The committee appreciates the time and work of all those who provided written and oral submissions to the inquiry, particularly in light of the tight time frame imposed. Their work has assisted the committee considerably in its Inquiry.

Note on references

1.10 References in this report are to individual submissions as received by the committee, not to a bound volume. References to the committee Hansard are to the proof Hansard: page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.

