

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Public Hearing – 20 August 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 1

Question reference number: SQ20-000557

Senator: Katy Gallagher

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 47/48

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

CHAIR: When were you appointed to the ERC?

Senator Ruston: I'm going to have to take that on notice. I've probably been on it for a couple of months. I'm sorry, Chair; I will really have to take that on notice. That wasn't a question I was expecting.

CHAIR: But it wasn't when you were appointed as Minister for Families and Social Services?

Senator Ruston: No.

CHAIR: So when you became the minister for social services you didn't sit on the ERC. Was it before the budget last year?

Senator Ruston: I've only been on the ERC for a relatively short period of time.

CHAIR: This year? Post pandemic?

Senator Ruston: Yes.

CHAIR: So the pandemic was underway?

Senator Ruston: Yes

CHAIR: So it was some point after March. Do you know why you were appointed then? What was the reason given?

Senator Ruston: I would like to think that I had demonstrated that I had the necessary skills to make a contribution to the debate.

CHAIR: I'm not doubting your capacity to serve on it; I'm asking what the reason was. Did the Prime Minister give you a reason about why you were suddenly appointed to the ERC?

Senator Ruston: I don't think I was just suddenly appointed to the ERC. Clearly he must have believed that I had the skills to make a contribution. I don't think that I need to go into any more detail than that about discussions that relate to the appointment to a cabinet committee.

CHAIR: So you just got the invite and you started attending the meetings?

Senator Ruston: I was formally requested to join the ERC and—

CHAIR: Okay. Could you take on notice for the committee when that was. That would be good.

Senator Ruston: Sure.

Answer:

The Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston became a member of the Expenditure Review Committee on Monday 22 June 2020.

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Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 3

Question reference number: SQ20-000559

Senator: James Paterson

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 57

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

Senator PATERSON: Thank you. Perhaps on notice, given the limited time, is there any evidence on the take-up of those services and the calls to those hotlines that you can provide?

Senator Ruston: Yes, sure. We are happy to do that.

Answer:

In May, June and July 2020, 1800RESPECT received around 86,000 contacts compared to around 55,000 in the same period in 2019.

In May, June and July 2020, MensLine received around 19,588 contacts compared to 19,481 in the same period 2019.

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Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 5

Question reference number: SQ20-000561

Senator: Rachel Siewert

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 62/63

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Did you provide advice to government to reintroduce the liquid assets test?

Ms Campbell: Yes, we did.

Senator SIEWERT: You provided advice recommending the reintroduction of the test.

Ms Campbell: I said I provided advice. I didn't detail the content of that advice.

CHAIR: Although you're able to, and the committee, as you know, doesn't accept that advice to government is able to be withheld from this committee.

Ms Campbell: But, of course, I can take that question on notice and ask the minister whether she considers that that goes to the cabinet deliberations and whether that may be—

CHAIR: Indeed.

Senator SIEWERT: My question is: did you provide advice that the liquid asset tests should be reintroduced?

Ms Campbell: I'll take that on notice.

Senator SIEWERT: Can you also take on notice whether that was the case or whether the government asked you specifically to start the process of reintroduction of the liquid asset test?

Ms Campbell: I'll take the question on notice.

Answer:

The department provided advice to Government on a range of issues in relation to temporary measures introduced in response to COVID-19, including the liquid assets test waiting period. This advice was provided in the context of Cabinet deliberation of issues.

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Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 7

Question reference number: SQ20-000562

Senator: Rachel Siewert

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 64

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: I'm deeply concerned they didn't get the supplement, but the point is there are a lot of people on DSP who've had to drop out of the workforce and have faced extra costs. So why wasn't consideration given to increasing the threshold for them as well?
Ms Campbell: I'll take that question on notice.

Answer:

As at 28 June 2019, approximately 7.8% of Disability Support Pension recipients reported earnings. As at 26 June 2020, approximately 6.9% of Disability Support Pension recipients reported earnings.

Pensions, including the Disability Support Pension, are long-term payments for people who are not expected to work to support themselves, with this expectation reflected in a higher base rate of payment.

Additional financial support through the two \$750 Economic Support Payments were made to Disability Support Pension recipients in recognition of the difficulties and extra costs caused by COVID-19. Specialist services such as Disability Employment Services and Australian Disability Enterprises are also available to help recipients of the Disability Support Pension to reengage with the workforce.

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Public Hearing – 20 August 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 12

Question reference number: SQ20-000567

Senator: Rachel Siewert

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Thank you. Obviously, I will continue to pursue that issue. I have a small set of questions about specialist social service legal centres and community legal centres that specialise in work around social security matters. Are you considering increased capacity for the peak services that access ongoing core funding to enable them to provide the level of service that they are being asked to provide by the community?

Ms Campbell: Are you talking about Welfare Rights?

Senator SIEWERT: They are now called Economic Justice Australia.

Ms Campbell: We're just looking to see whether we can find someone who is tracking this. Otherwise, we might be best to take it on notice.

Mr Bennett: I think for this one we will take it on notice.

Senator SIEWERT: Okay. Have you looked at the documents the sector has been developing around the increased need for services when you are considering support for services?

Mr Bennett: Our relationship with Economic Justice is more in the policy space than in the provision of support for legal services. The reason I said I would take it on notice is that I'd have to go back to the funding arrangement to look at what it covers.

Ms Campbell: I know that we do provide funding. We'll take that on notice and see what representations we received with regard to that.

Senator SIEWERT: If you could take it on notice, that would be fantastic. But I would also like to know the level of demand that you've seen in on those services. That would be appreciated as well.

Ms Campbell: Yes, we'll take that on notice.

Answer:

The department does not fund Economic Justice Australia for specialist social service legal centres and community legal centres. The department has a standing funding arrangement with Economic Justice Australia for the provision of evidence and advice about the department's programs, policies and initiatives. The current funding agreement is for \$250,000 annually for the three year period 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2021, under the Families and Communities Services Improvement (FCSI) Activity.

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Public Hearing – 20 August 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 15

Question reference number: SQ20-000570

Senator: Katy Gallagher

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 69

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

CHAIR: As part of that, presumably financial pressure is one of the stresses. Is the department looking at some specific carer coronavirus payment that will assist those who have perhaps been able to cope in normal times but might need to buy in services and are not covered by the NDIS or other services? I was listening to a man on the radio, talking about the care he provides to his wife. I'm not sure of the circumstance, but it seems to me that, if he was able to buy in a nurse for a couple of nights into his house, that would assist his life at the moment. But that wouldn't necessarily fall within any of the existing programs, because we're in a new world.

Ms Campbell: It might fall, depending on the circumstances, in home care, in the aged-care space or—

CHAIR: But we know there are 100,000 people waiting for home care packages in aged care; this is the issue. Are you giving consideration to some type of special payment for carers?

Ms Rule: I haven't given that type of advice about a payment, but I can take on notice as to whether anybody else has.

Answer:

The Government provides a range of assistance for carers through the Carer Gateway. Carers can access individually tailored services within their local area through Carer Gateway service providers. Services include support planning, targeted financial support packages (including flexible respite options), counselling, peer support, information and advice, and where necessary, access to emergency respite. Care receivers may also be eligible for support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme or aged care services.

Eligible pensioners, including Carer Payment recipients, received two Economic Support Payments of \$750, paid in April and July 2020. Eligible Carer Allowance recipients also received these payments.

In addition, carers in receipt of Carer Payment and/or Carer Allowance for the period that covers 1 July may be eligible for the annual Carer Supplement. Eligible carers receive a \$600 Carer Supplement for each Carer Allowance they receive, with an additional \$600 supplement paid to recipients of Carer Payment. Carers who receive Carer Allowance for a child under 16 years may also be eligible for the annual \$1,000 Child Disability Assistance Payment.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 17

Question reference number: SQ20-000572

Senator: Jordon Steele-John

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 52

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 01 September 2020

Question:

Senator STEELE-JOHN: Thank you very much. When the government announced the COVID-19 jobseeker supplement rate, there was—as we now know very clearly—no commensurate increase for the disability support pension beyond the two one-off economic support payments, despite the fact that disabled people on the DSP are on very low incomes and facing increasing costs such as groceries, home deliveries and medical service supplies. We've discussed this at length previously. Is DSS or Services Australia able to tell us how many inquiries it has received from people on the DSP who are concerned that the coronavirus supplement has not been applied to the payment? Subsequent to that, I'd also like to know exactly how many DSP and carer payment recipients have sought information related to switching from that payment to the jobseeker payment.

Senator Ruston: I might ask the secretary to answer those questions, because that's not the kind of detail that I would have. Would it be okay for me to get Secretary Campbell to respond to you?

Senator STEELE-JOHN: Yes, thank you.

Ms Campbell: We will just check, but I think it's unlikely we're going to have that level of granularity of data. The first part of the question, about inquiries, which relates more to the policy issue—that would be a departmental answer. We'll take that one on notice; I'm not seeing anyone rush up to the table with the detail on that. I want to see whether there is anyone from Services Australia—Mr Egan may have a little bit of data about people transferring from those payments.

Mr Egan: Senator, I don't have the data that you're referring to but we have taken significant steps to communicate with customers about the merits and benefits of different payments, including some targeted communications with people who are currently in receipt of disability support pension. They include fact sheets, information on our website and communication through disability peak bodies. We're conscious of the fact—

Senator STEELE-JOHN: I'm aware of that. That's all right, folks; can you just take the questions on notice and I'll move on for the sake of time. But thank you, if you can take that on notice that would be great.....

Answer:

The Department of Social Services (the department) has received correspondence in relation to the coronavirus supplement. However, the department does not record information at the level where it would be able to provide the numbers of correspondence that relate to these specific matters.

Services Australia has no ready-made data source to track how many Disability Support Pension and Carer Payment recipients have sought information related to switching from one of those payments to the JobSeeker Payment. It is not common practice to track recipients requesting information about moving between payments.