

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE CHRISTMAS ISLAND TRAGEDY

HEARING: Friday, 27 May 2011, Canberra

Questions on Notice to the Department of Regional Australia

QUESTION: (from Senator Fielding)

Has there been a debrief from those who have provided the counselling services, the psychologists or psychiatrists, I cannot remember which ones were sent or whether both were sent? Has there been a debrief on what the survivors and the rescuers have been feeling?

GOVERNMENT POSITION:

The Department cannot comment regarding the debriefing of survivors. This question is best directed to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (answered during the hearing).

The counsellors deployed to Christmas Island by the Western Australian Department of Child Protection were in regular contact with staff of the Department's Indian Ocean Territories Health Service and Indian Ocean Territories Administration to debrief on circumstances as they unfolded.

QUESTION: (Mrs Markus)

There are protocols about communication and the use of radios between different organisations and agencies involved, including the volunteer emergency services you have referred to. Could you clarify in writing with the committee what your plans are to improve those and also comment on the inadequacies or weaknesses of those protocols and training around the radio communications issue? What would your plans be to improve the protocols of communication between the various agencies? I know different radio frequencies, for example, are often a challenge. How would that be coordinated and what would you recommend? How was it not coordinated leading up and during the actual event?

GOVERNMENT POSITION:

The communication arrangements in place on 15 December 2010, established in accordance with the Island's Emergency Management Plan, worked well on the day. As noted on page 20 of the Department's submission to the Joint Select Committee, there were some issues such

as the availability of radios and the use of mobile phones in proximity to the water, which are being addressed with the provision of additional equipment and training.

The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service *SIEV 221 Internal Review* of 10 January 2011 recommended (recommendation 7) that ‘communication protocols and procedures between Customs and Border Protection at Christmas Island and BPC response vessels should be reviewed.’ On Island agencies and volunteer organisations met with Customs and Border Protection staff on 1 June 2011 to consider how best to integrate local radio communications arrangements with Customs arrangements and protocols. This work is continuing, with Regional Australia in the lead.