

# Chapter 4

## Human Services Portfolio

### Department of Human Services

4.1 This chapter contains key issues discussed during the 2012-2013 additional estimates hearings for the Human Services portfolio.

4.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 14 February 2013. Areas of the portfolio and agencies were called in the following order:

- Corporate
- Services to the Community

4.3 Senator the Hon. Kim Carr, Minister for Human Services, and department secretary Ms Kathryn Campbell both gave opening statements concerning a letter containing incorrect advice sent in December 2012 to people moving from the parenting payment to Newstart allowance. The letter incorrectly instructed recipients to destroy their healthcare cards. Senator Carr emphasised the achievements of the department in the past financial year before expressing his disappointment that the error could occur and confirming the department will conduct a review of its approach to communicating with citizens. Ms Campbell provided the committee with a full outline of the facts surrounding the incorrect advice, the department's response when it discovered the error, and the safeguards put in place to ensure such an error will not reoccur.

### *Corporate*<sup>1</sup>

4.4 The committee began with questions into the department's response when it discovered that incorrect advice had been sent to clients. Senator Fifield thanked the minister and secretary for addressing the issue first off,<sup>2</sup> and inquired into the delay between 30 November 2012, when departmental officers became aware of the error, and 13 January, when the minister and secretary became aware of the error. Ms Campbell noted that the department has a detailed escalation process that did not work on this occasion,<sup>3</sup> acknowledging the role of human error in the incident. Ms Campbell confirmed that reasonably senior staff had been responsible for the initial failure to review the entire letter, and then to escalate the incident, and that these staff had been counselled but that no code of practice breaches had been established. Ms Campbell also confirmed that the wider review would consider issues such as cutting down the number of paragraphs and templates for mail out letters.

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1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 92–106.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, p. 94.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, p. 95.

4.5 The committee queried whether large mail outs detailing significant changes in policy or activities should ever go through the minister's office. Ms Campbell and Senator Carr noted that 'business-as-usual' will generally not go through the office but noted that the review will look at issues of whether letters advising in changes of policy should be shown to the minister and follow different protocols to other standard letters.

4.6 Some committee members noted that the paragraphs instructing people to destroy their concession cards were quite harsh, and that a similar issue had arisen with regard to letters sent to income management recipients when a policy change occurred. The committee also inquired into the number of people who actually destroyed their cards, issues around eligibility for concession cards generally and for people transitioning between payments, and timeframes involved for people transitioning to a new payment to receive a new card.

4.7 The committee then moved to questions on a feature piece in the *Age* by the minister on the safety of DHS staff, and discussed the decision by the minister to cease face-to-face services for child support in the open plan Smart Centres. Ms Campbell and Senator Carr noted that face-to-face services will continue to be provided in existing centres with appropriate guarantees of security for staff, such as security staff, duress alarms, exits that allow safe exit if a violent situation occurs, and closed-circuit television.

4.8 The committee returned to the uptake of online services, requesting an update on the number of DHS customers registered online, and the number of people who report their income online. The minister noted that the department has introduced a series of apps for Smartphones, that there had been substantial progress in this area, and highlighted the department's preference for persuasive rather than draconian approach to online engagement. Senator Furner inquired into the effect of online engagement on the department's ability to respond more quickly to the recent natural disasters, such as flooding in Queensland and bushfires in Tasmania.

### *Services to the Community*<sup>4</sup>

4.9 The committee inquired into whether there had been movements in frontline staff for call centres. Ms Campbell responded that while the transition phase is still afoot this issue is difficult to discuss, but that the department is aiming to blend its workforce across master programs (Centrelink, Medicare, Child Support) and transitioning from call centres to Smart Centres where both call and processing work can occur.

4.10 The committee asked a range of questions about the public tip-off line, compliance program, and the weekly payment program before returning to issues surrounding people transferring from parenting payment single to different payments

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4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 14 February 2013, pp. 106–115.

provided by the department. Mr Sandison, Deputy Secretary, Participation, Families and Older Australians, noted that there is a dedicated team of departmental staff to support the group transitioning to a new payment, and that group is treated with a high priority in terms of engagement with the officers. Mr Sandison then outlined in more detail the processes of engaging with customers transitioning to a new payment, also answering questions from the committee about Centrepay arrangements for this group and the feedback provided to local offices in relation to people who are transitioning from one payment to another.

4.11 The committee also discussed Jobskills expos, with the department providing a general outline of its role in coordinating these figures relating to attendance at expos and how many jobseekers have gained employment as a result of attending. Finally the committee returned to a brief discussion of disaster recovery payments, with the department describing the way it operates in situations where there are power and telecommunications outages.

