

## Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs

### BUDGET ESTIMATES - 2 JUNE 2011 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

#### Human Services Portfolio

**Topic:** Carer on Newstart Allowance

**Question reference number:** HS 35

**Senator:** Boyce

**Type of question:** Hansard page 113

**Date set by the committee for the return of answer:** 22 July 2011

**Number of pages:** 2

#### **Question:**

**Senator BOYCE:** I asked questions yesterday and I think some of them echoed what Senator Siewert was talking about here in terms of people on disability support pensions and how the checking up and so forth is going on. It was pointed out that in the past there had often been, in my experience, a lot of unnecessary inquiries from Centrelink because it was a general inquiry rather than an inquiry that was suited to the specific situation. I gave as an example the fact that people with Down's syndrome were generally asked once every year or two years if they had recovered from their condition.

I wanted to raise with you a particular case in Townsville, which I imagine, like Senator Fifield, you will have to take on notice, of a man who is caring for his wife who has a degenerative condition. She requires full-time nursing care. She is currently in a nursing home, but she cannot communicate at all except with him. She needs to be fed and no-one at the nursing home has time to do that. He has already been taken off Carers Allowance and put on Unemployment Allowance. He was then told that that would be how it would rest. He was not going to be required to go job hunting because of the fact that she is probably not going to live very long and he is the only person who can communicate with her. He then received a letter saying that he would have to go and have a job interview within the following week. He rang Centrelink and could not get the manager. He spoke to someone else who said that his exemption would be ongoing 'even though the letter says that I have to start job hunting on 14 June'. The Centrelink person on the phone 'told me that I had an interview due even though I had a letter in front of me exempting me until June 14', and that the 'stand-in manager told me to ignore the letter and to go for the interview'. The next day he spoke to the Centrelink manager who said she had 'flagged my file to be exempted time after time' and that 'any forms I was getting are auto generated and not to take them too seriously'.

**Senator Arbib:** I can say that I am sure the officials would be very happy to do this offline. If we could do this privately we might be able to better resolve the issue.

**Senator BOYCE:** I was intending to stop there. I am giving you an example of the sort of thing that continues to happen where the system and the people do not gel or do not sync. I would appreciate your assistance in this particular case. Maybe the police think everybody is a potential criminal because they spend their lives with criminals, but from where I sit Centrelink continues to not be particularly sensitive to the needs of clients.

**Ms Campbell:** We are happy to take this example on notice and determine what the issue is. We are happy on any occasion that we are presented with information like this to look into the case. I am not sure that we consider that this is a systemic problem. We work very hard to make sure that we are sensitive to customer needs and customer circumstances, but we are more than happy to look at this situation and get back to you.

**Answer:**

Details of specific cases cannot be canvassed publicly. Senator Boyce wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Human Services on 16 June 2011 concerning this case, and Ms Campbell responded on 22 June 2011.

The answer to Question on Notice HSW 28 provides general information on exempt job seekers and their reporting requirements.