

Senate Community Affairs Committee
ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
2010-11 Supplementary Estimates Hearings

Outcome Number: 7

Question No: 264

Topic: Closing the Gap Monitoring Report

Hansard Page: 22/10/10 – CA19

Senator Scullion asked:

There was an interesting move in the last year, from June 2009 till June 2010—an 18 per cent increase in the NTER for people on disability support pensions. Was that as a consequence of a review or an assessment? There was an 18 per cent increase for those people on a disability allowance between June 2009 and June 2010.

I wonder first of all if you actually examine trends like that to ensure there is no perverse outcome— secondly, if that has been done on this information, given that it has only just been received; and, thirdly, if you could provide me with your assessment when it is made or if it has already been made.

Answer:

The increase in number of Disability Support Pension (DSP) recipients in Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) communities over the period is largely due to three factors:

- increased servicing of remote communities under the NTER. This has resulted in better liaison with health clinics/other medical personnel and improved awareness of customer health issues. There has been assessment of people's needs through Job Capacity Assessors visiting communities. As a result many previously "hidden" health issues were uncovered and customers for whom DSP is the appropriate payment were identified and assisted to claim.
- the removal of Remote Area Exemptions which has led to an increase in reviews of customers' circumstances by Centrelink.
- from December 2009, policy was changed to allow, in limited circumstances, a claimant's eligibility for DSP to be based on diagnosis of a psychological/mental health medical condition provided solely by a Centrelink registered psychologist. The diagnosis must be provided as part of a specialist assessment and documented in a Job Capacity Assessment report. There are two situations in which this provision may be applied:
 1. vulnerable claimants with suspected mental health conditions who are living in remote communities with little or no access to health services; and/or
 2. vulnerable claimants with suspected mental health conditions who have been identified by customer service centre staff or employment service providers as continually unable to comply with requirements, and demonstrating behaviours consistent with a chronic mental health condition.

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Also claimants from remote areas who have limited access to doctors can have their DSP medical report completed by a community nurse rather than a medical practitioner.

An increase in the number of people on DSP in the NT in 2009-10 was not an unexpected outcome due to the lifting of Remote Area Exemptions (referred to above). Accordingly, this has not been identified by the Department as a trend which requires further examination.