

Senate Finance and Public Administration Standing Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES – 24 FEBRUARY 2009

Human Services Portfolio

Department/Agency: Centrelink
Outcome/Output Group: Outcome 1/Output 1.1
Topic: Same-Sex Relationships

Senator: Hanson-Young
Question reference number: HS17
Type of question: Written
Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 9 April 2009

Question:

HS17a: Would the Minister please provide a breakdown by payment type, age and sex of the number of same-sex individuals estimated by the department to now be eligible for being assessed as a member of a couple?

HS17b: Based on the above, could the minister elaborate how many of these customers are anticipated to be in a same-sex relationship and may have their payment reduced?

HS17c: Could the minister further elaborate what the average reduction amount is anticipated to be per person affected by now being assessed as member of a couple?

HS17d: What costs would you estimate as arising in relation to the assessment of elderly age pensioners to see whether they are a member of a couple for Centrelink payments?

HS17e: Considering Centrelink have indicated an intention to provide social work support to all elderly couples, as the first point of contact with the agency, how much has been budgeted for this and how many extra positions will be created in the social work service area?

HS17f: Has the government budgeted for the reviews and appeals likely to result from the inappropriate assessment of elderly couples as being same sex partners when they do not regard themselves as such? Will independent community based advocacy be resourced to assist these couples, both at the point at which they are first in contact with Centrelink (culturally competent trained advocates?) and as they undergo the process of appealing the decision?

HS17g: What budget estimates have been made to resource these appeals?

HS17h: What comprehensive education programs will be conducted with Centrelink staff around servicing gay and lesbian clients, including those over 60 who may not in any way identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian' - how will it handle this, what resources has it put towards this training, how many hours, who will be trained? Have these programs commenced, if not why not?

Answer:

HS17a-c: Transferred to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

HS17d: Centrelink will not be assessing all age pensioners to determine if they are a member of a couple. From 1 July 2009, all customers in a same-sex relationship will be required to advise Centrelink if they are living as a member of a couple.

Assessments of age pensioners may be undertaken as part of normal business if there are indicators that a member of this customer group may be living as a member of a couple. This assessment may be based on information provided by the customer or through existing compliance processes. A minimal increase in member of a couple assessments is anticipated from 1 July 2009.

HS17e: Generally, the first point of contact for customers will be with Customer Service Advisors, through the dedicated enquiry line for same-sex relationship changes, or through Customer Service Centres. Referrals to social workers will then be arranged as needed. A relatively small number of social work referrals are anticipated and there will be a minor increase to existing social work funding.

HS17f: If a customer does not regard themselves as a member of a couple, but information becomes available to indicate that they may be a member of a couple for Centrelink purposes, an assessment may be undertaken. As is the case for assessments of opposite-sex relationships, if customers disagree with the decision an advocate of their choice can support them through the review process. Centrelink is not funded by the Government to resource community based advocacy.

HS17g: The likely small number of appeals, resulting specifically from assessments of same-sex members of a couple, were not separately funded.

HS17h: Centrelink staff have commenced Gay and Lesbian Awareness training. Centrelink engaged a trainer from Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, who developed the training and prepared 87 Centrelink trainers to deliver this training. The training will continue through to 30 June 2009 for all Centrelink Customer Service staff. (Each trainer has undertaken a trainer familiarisation course). The Gay and Lesbian Awareness training is one component of training for the introduction of the Removal of Same Sex Discrimination changes and is one hour in duration.

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