

Human Services Portfolio

5.1 The Committee took evidence from the Department of Human Services (DHS), Centrelink, Medicare and Australian Hearing on Thursday, 28 May 2009.

Department of Human Services

Agency staffing

5.2 The Department of Human Services (DHS) provided information on why the Portfolio Budget Statement for 2009–10 did not include a breakdown of staff between the core department, the Child Support Agency (CSA) and CRS Australia (CRS) as it had in previous years. Ms Helen Williams, Secretary of DHS, stated that a process of consolidation of processes across the department had been implemented. In explaining the reasons for this initiative, she stated:

The CRS and the child support program have always, as you know, been part of the department. When I looked across the department, I was concerned about a couple of things: firstly, that as head of the department I did not have proper accountability for the whole department—it was not pulling together properly—and, secondly, that I could see that, as we are all pressed for resources, we would get a lot more efficiency and effectiveness if, in fact, I brought together the enabling areas of the department—that is, things like human resources, financial planning, information technology et cetera.¹

5.3 The committee heard that this process was already underway with the child support program, making it difficult to give a separate staffing figure for the CSA. As CRS had not yet undergone the process of consolidation, the secretary confirmed the number of staff in CRS to be 2090 as at 31 March 2009.²

Increased resources for Child Support Agency

5.4 In discussing the increase in staffing for the department as a whole, the Secretary informed the committee that the majority of the increase in staff from 2008–09 to 2009–10 was due to an increase in funding for the child support program (CSP).³ Ms Williams provided more detail to the committee, and stated that Cabinet approved an increase in funding of \$239.7 million over four years to:

...firstly to maintain customer services for separated parents; CSP is funded according to the size of the case load and the complexity of cases. There was also a further amount to prevent growth in uncollected child support debt on 2008-09 levels. This measure also ensures that CSP has dedicated resources to support its efforts in pursuing those parents who are non-

1 Ms Helen Williams, DHS, *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 55.

2 *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 57.

3 Ms Helen Williams, DHS, *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 57.

compliant and not paying or minimising their child support. So the major increase in staffing was through that redone funding agreement.⁴

5.5 The department noted that uncollected debt as at 30 April 2009 was \$1.07 billion – \$793.4 million domestic debt and \$274.4 million international debt.⁵

Optical Surveillance

5.6 The committee heard that CSA had conducted a successful 12-month optical surveillance pilot program that was due to conclude in July 2009. During the course of the pilot program, eleven cases had been investigated, with six cases referred for prosecution and three cases where collection options had been identified.⁶ The department could not confirm whether the program would continue, and agreed to take the matter on notice.⁷

5.7 Other issues discussed with the committee included the treatment of redundancies with regard to child support payment assessments, the DHS response to a report by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, departure prohibition orders and the relocation of the Job Capability Assessment program to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Centrelink

5.8 The committee discussed overpayment by Centrelink to overseas pensioners due to incorrect declarations of foreign pensions. It also spent considerable time examining call centre performance, changes in staffing levels, and continuing plans to deliver customer services through the internet.

Medicare Australia

5.9 The committee briefly examined Medicare Australia. The notable issues covered during this examination included the opening of new centres in Western Australia and New South Wales, the rural health workforce, and the prevalence of fraud in the Medicare system.

Australian Hearing

5.10 The committee also briefly examined Australian Hearing. A substantive issue covered was the 25 per cent increase in rural outreach sites, with a focus on the Northern Territory.

4 Ms Helen Williams, DHS, *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, pp 59–60.

5 *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 62.

6 *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 73.

7 *Estimates Hansard*, 28.5.09, p. 74.