

Senate Finance and Public Administration Standing Committee

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES – 20 October 2009 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Human Services Portfolio

Topic: Unplanned absences and leave

Question reference number: HS81

Senator: Scullion

Type of question: *Hansard F&PA page 120*

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Question:

Senator SCULLION—You might need to take this on notice. If it is clearly over your targeted area, you have a plan to reduce [unplanned leave rates]. I would like to have a look at those detailed plans. Is there any possibility of quantifying how those changes have reduced costs and what impact those plans have actually had on absenteeism?

Mr Pratt—I propose to give you, on notice, detail of the strategies each of the agencies is using to address their unplanned absences. If it would be helpful, I will also give you the trend figures over recent years. That will be able to show whether or not it is trending down or up.

Answer:

Department of Human Services (excluding CRS Australia)

The focus has been on working collaboratively with employees to support them to adopt good attendance habits and use leave responsibly. Most recent strategies include:

- introduction of a national policy for managing planned leave, unplanned leave and attendance across the Department, which:
 - articulates individual responsibilities for managers and staff in relation to work attendance and leave management;
 - provides a process focused on early intervention, open and ongoing discussions between staff and managers, strategies tailored to meet individual circumstances and provision of ongoing support to assist staff to minimise unscheduled absence from work;
 - provides detailed guidance to help managers and staff conduct leave conversation in a collaborative and supportive manner;
 - outlines privacy and confidentiality considerations when discussing employee health;

- reinforces the need for effective management of both planned and unplanned leave; and
- communicates the impact and cost of high levels of unplanned leave on the Department's staff, customers and business.
- rolling out interactive half-day workshops for all managers nationally on managing attendance and leave issues effectively with their staff. The sessions coincided with the rollout of the above policy;
- continued focus on return to work support (including locally based Rehabilitation Case Managers, gradual return to duties, workstation assessments, early intervention support and reasonable adjustment to assist those with a disability);
- increased investment in employee health, including free health checks and flu vaccinations for staff nationally; health risk profiling of our workforce in 2009; and the development of a targeting Wellbeing Strategy for 2010 to address key health risks;
- refining our absence notification processes to ensure a consistent approach across all sites;
- incorporating warm-transfers of calls to team leaders to support integral relationships between team members and their managers. The revised arrangements will be fully implemented by 30 November 2009; and
- quarterly reporting to all staff on the progress towards meeting our annual unplanned leave target and what is being done to assist staff to improve attendance.

CRS Australia

CRS Australia has the following measures in place to control/reduce unplanned absences:

- wall charts for all divisions and regions reporting absence levels and trends;
- close monitoring of Comcare claims and an early intervention program strategy;
- changes to the new Collective Agreement (2008-2011) include removing 'moving house' as a reason for compelling leave and requiring employees to provide documentation when carer's leave exceeds five days in a 12 month period; and
- responsibility for absence management has been incorporated in managers' annual performance agreements.

Centrelink

Centrelink's Attendance at Work Strategy aims to improve attendance by:

- providing a safe and healthy work environment;
- providing flexible working conditions;
- increasing job satisfaction and employee engagement;
- creating a positive working environment; and
- effectively managing absence from work.

The Strategy recognises that all employees have a responsibility to contribute to a positive attendance culture. Employees are expected to take appropriate action to arrange their personal affairs, maintain good health standards and take precaution against accidents both on and off the job to ensure their regular attendance at work.

Centrelink's procedures for reporting unscheduled absences play an important role in maintaining accountability. Centrelink assesses the capability and confidence of line managers in relation to managing attendance. Line managers are provided with development and support, including coaching, to build the required skills.

Centrelink has defined procedures for approving leave. When notified of an absence, line managers are required to ask questions to determine the appropriate leave to be approved and the level of support required to assist the employee to return to work.

When employees return from an absence, line managers follow up immediately with a one-to-one conversation with the employee. All outcomes from these conversations are documented.

Centrelink requires line managers to be supportive in their approach to managing attendance. For example, where possible, Carers rooms may be set up to support working parents and carers to come to work.

To effectively implement the Attendance at Work Strategy, team leaders and line managers must be able to; exercise discretion, document decisions and discussions, escalate matters quickly, provide regular feedback, set performance expectations, and identify when employees are experiencing difficulties.

Centrelink also monitors unscheduled absence levels at an organisational level. As part of this monitoring, a high level monthly report is produced for consideration and action by Centrelink Executive.

Australian Hearing

The following strategies are in place to reduce unplanned leave:

- Australian Hearing executives and managers conduct quarterly appraisals of national unplanned leave to ensure a consistent organisational approach; and
- Australian Hearing proactively manages potential hazards and injuries in the workplace through its Occupational Health & Safety programs and initiatives.

Medicare Australia

Medicare Australia made important changes in the Collective Agreement 2008–11 which will support reductions in unplanned leave. These included a reduction in the number of days of unplanned leave granted on appointment from 18 days to five and a reduction in the number of days of personal leave without a medical certificate from eight to seven.

Further support is being provided through the development and implementation of an Attendance Management Strategy titled 'Foster a Positive Attendance Culture'. This strategy contains the following key elements:

- reporting – a review of current benchmarks to establish nationally consistent benchmarks to address absenteeism and redevelop the reporting framework and associated user guides;
- support for managers - developing and building a compliance and education approach to attendance management by providing managers with support and capabilities to address high levels of unscheduled leave usage. This includes:
 - promotion of a positive attendance culture (for example, via email messages, posters and screen savers); and
 - revision of unplanned leave practices and associated support tools including:
 - reference materials for staff such as contact information, staff notification cards and induction module presentation/handouts; and
 - an attendance page on the Medicare Australia Intranet to support line managers.
- training and reference materials - development and provision of training and reference materials to all employees.

The Human Services portfolio trend information

Financial Year	Unscheduled Absence ¹ (Average Days per FTE)
2005-06	12.10 ²
2006-07	10.78 ³
2007-08	11.75 ³
2008-09	10.98 ³

¹ APSC definition of Unscheduled Absence

“Workplace absence (unscheduled absence) refers to absence from work in recognition of circumstances that can generally arise irregularly or unexpectedly, making it difficult to plan, approve or budget for in advance, and which is inclusive of planned medical procedures.”

² Figures are based on data from Child Support Agency, CRS Australia, Australian Hearing, Centrelink and Medicare Australia.

³ Figures are based on data from Department of Human Services, Child Support Agency, CRS Australia, Australian Hearing, Centrelink and Medicare Australia.