

MHS Consumer and Carer Council  
Chairperson  
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The Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Thursday, July 12, 2007

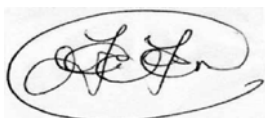
Dear Sir / Madam

Following a letter sent by the Consumer and Carer Council, (Wodonga Regional Mental Health Service), to Mr Hank Jorgen dated 27th April 2007; the group wish to make a submission and recommendations to your committee under section 2b terms of reference, '*...identifying any possible remaining gaps or shortfalls in funding and in the range of services available for people with a mental illness...*'

The Consumer and Carer Council, recognises many initiatives outlined in the Mental Health Strategies and Disability Service Standards because it encourages empowerment of consumers and carers. However, whilst most services are moving towards these initiatives in their service delivery, the group believes they have identified gaps and shortfalls with Centrelink that are both disempowering and at times excluding some people from receiving assistance.

The Consumer and Carer Council, (Wodonga Regional Mental Health Service), are a group of people comprising consumers and carers who believe that everyone is entitled to the highest quality services and should not be penalised because of their illness and issues with access. We look forward to the release of your report into the findings of this inquiry. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Fred Ford', enclosed within a hand-drawn oval border.

Fred Ford.  
Chairperson on behalf of the MHS Consumer and Carer Council Members

## **Re: Inquiry into mental health services in Australia**

The group wish to bring to the Senate Community Affairs Committee's attention to the enormous pressure that Centrelink is placing on clients and their families due to:-

- The process involved in applying for and reviewing the Disability Support Pension and Carer Payment and Allowance
- Procedural changes in place, that no longer allows people to make appointments over the phone. People suffering mental illness are required to personally attend 'A walk in' at both the Albury and Wangaratta Centrelink offices and presumably other offices around the country.

### **Assessment and review processes for Disability Support Pension and Carer Payment and Allowance**

The application and review forms / processes are heavily weighted towards physical and intellectual disability. The result is some people who experience mental illness and or their carers are not receiving entitlements that they otherwise should. This is placing a lot of stress on families.

A lot of emphasis is placed on personal care and needs by Centrelink. In reality, mental illness issues and peoples needs are more around support, encouragement and empowerment. These activities may include assistance with medication, encouragement and assistance to undertake every day activities both domestically and within the community. For families / carers this can also include being aware of the early signs of the onset of a major episode and encouraging and or assisting a person to seek intervention.

Mental illness is not something that can be seen and the level of disability is not easily assessed because of its episodic nature. There needs to be sensitivity in this process and thought should be given to agencies such as Centrelink having guidelines specific to mental illness when assessing a person's eligibility to receive entitlements.

This is evident in some of our own experiences and those of families in contact with our group. We know of situations where a person has been deemed ineligible, (at either application or review level), for DSP and they have been forced onto Newstart, only to become unwell due to the pressures of trying to find or maintain employment. Families and individuals are experiencing hardship in the community. Most people with a mental illness would like to continue working or return to work but the reality is that many are unable. This in turn adds unnecessary pressures to sufferers, families and carers. As a consequence, carers can become unwell themselves.

Legislation talks about mental illness intervention being carried out in a least restrictive environment. In most cases, this is within the community and with family support. The Government has an obligation to adequately support these families, where necessary, to fulfil this ethos.

‘...Mental Illness is responsible for the greatest level of disability or impairment in the Australian community – over twice that associated with either cardiovascular or musculoskeletal disorders;

For income support recipients, the level of common mental disorder is much higher (in fact 66% more prevalent) than the adult population generally, at around 31% compared with 18%. The level of mental illness is as high as 34%...’

‘...In relation to social Security recipients what is required are strategies that take account of and are sensitive to, the higher prevalence of mental health problems among this population. A one shoe fits all approach does not work...’

**‘Mental Illness and Social Security’, Quarterly Newsletter, *Welfare Rights Centre*, vol. 25, no. 1, March 2007, p. 15.**

The group understand that Government attitude and policies have a large role to play in removing discrimination and improving the way Centrelink and other agencies provide their services to disadvantaged people, families and carers. The Government needs to be careful that their policies do not contribute to further discrimination by improving the way Centrelink and other Government agencies provide their services.

We understand the Government has worked to provide adequate Legislation around inclusion for people with a disability but it is not working for people suffering mental illness who need to communicate with Centrelink. We are requesting that your enquiry look at how to make it work and identify why it is not working for people with a mental illness disability or for their families and carers.

## **Suggested improvements in procedures for people dealing with Centrelink for–client enquiries, responding to Centrelink reporting obligations and requests for information / documents**

Some people are well enough to walk into a Centrelink office to make appointments and they will be attended to by the staff. However, there are exceptional circumstances when people are so unwell, they are unable to even contemplate the idea, there alone achieve it. Centrelink does not anticipate, consider or recognise that some people are unable to ‘Walk in’ and present personally.

When a person is this unwell, it is their carer who prompts and motivates their loved one. Often the carer themselves are traumatised; they have times where they struggle to attend to everyday activities. At these times, even shopping for groceries is an effort. When a person is mentally unwell, they need their carer to make every decision and to help them to think and support them in every day living. Accessing Centrelink should be easy and not harder on these individuals.

Other people cannot cope with face-to-face interaction because they find it is too stressful. Mental illness is a devastating condition and mentally ill people and their carers are very vulnerable people. There needs to be opportunities, for people in need, to deal with Centrelink issues via the phone. Another alternative to meet people’s needs should be to provide more outreach workers who will attend home visits or travel to isolated people.

### **Centrelink’s Customer Service Charter**

This charter tells you the standard of service you can expect from Centrelink and what to do if you are unhappy with the service you received. It also tells you about your responsibilities as a Centrelink customer.

‘...What you can expect from us

1. You can expect us to make it easy for you to use our services.

We will do this by:

- making it as convenient as possible for you to contact us or do business with us in person, over the phone or through agents and access points in rural and remote Australia
- providing offices where you can feel safe and your personal privacy is assured, and...’

**‘ What you can expect from Centrelink’, Centrelink’s Customer Service Charter,  
August 2006**

Centrelink need education initiatives in place, so all staff possess an understanding and a compassion for people with mental illness. (Contact is not always by a trained disability worker). They need to understand:-

- the interaction difficulties of people with panic disorders, depression, anxiety and psychosis;
- reduced memory and concentration ability;
- fear and low self-esteem;
- the inability to cope with being around many people in an enclosed setting;
- the physical aspect, loss of energy and motivation;

The reality is people with a disability who are unwell are incapable of coming to their local Centrelink office to make an appointment and they need to avoid further pressure being placed on them at this stressful time and to feel safe and not feel threatened and fearful of losing their pension and entitlements by Centrelink.

Centrelink needs to provide support through other alternatives, for example telephone access or outreach services. The group also believes Centrelink should revert back to accepting telephone appointment requests as it was previously available. This will assist people who are not able to attend face-to-face interviews because they struggle with waiting and being around people in a confined space for long periods.

**Availability of the Authority to enquire form.**

An authority to enquire form should be readily available for people with a disability and their carers. This will prevent further stress on the carer who is forced to drag their loved one into the Centrelink office.

The group want an expansion of Centrelink’s current services by providing an adequate number of social workers to meet the existing and growing needs.

Please find attached five personal accounts in support of our submission. The personal details have been deleted to ensure privacy. Upon request we will provide these details with consent from our carers and consumers.

We understand the attached case notes we have provided highlight difficulties the

mentally ill, families / carers are dealing with when addressing Centrelink staff. We believe Centrelink staff are required to work under strict government policy and procedure framework with no flexibility to adequately work to assist people with a mental illness and their families / carers.

### **Recommendations**

- We recommend that Centrelink consult with disability / mental health groups and individuals before making changes that impact adversely on their lives.
- Government review all Centrelink policies and procedures to insure they are in line with the National Mental Health Policy.
- We recommend review forms and processes be designed to meet the needs of people with a mental illness.
- More outreach workers to visit isolated people who are unable to attend there nearest Centrelink office. (Due to illness or geographic isolation).
- Authority to enquire forms made available and explained at first interview to both client and carer.
- Staff educated and trained to meet the needs of people with a mental illness and their families / carers.
- Provide opportunities, for people, to deal with Centrelink via the phone.

To whom it may concern

I have been receiving the Carer Payment and Allowance since 2000. I have in recent times had to reply to requests from Centrelink for information. I also have authority to act for the person for whom I care behalf. I find the new procedures for requests to see staff in person to be at times inappropriate and stressful.

The first time I found that you could no longer phone for an appointment was at a time when the person I care for was unwell. I phoned the call centre to obtain an appointment at my local office only to be informed that I would have to attend the local office in person to make an appointment. Despite explaining our situation I was still forced to attend in person to obtain an appointment. This placed great strain on us at this time.

Now you are unable to make appointments at all. You have to attend wait in a queue then be placed onto a list to be seen by an officer, no exceptions. With this procedure I have spent, on more than one occasion, over 2 ½ hours at the local office. I fear what would happen to my loved one if something happened to me because they would not, in all probabilities, be able to do this.

I would like to see more flexibility when it comes to dealing with Centrelink. Circumstances should be taken into account when establishing these policies. This situation is both disempowering and counterproductive for some members of our community.

I would also like to raise the issue of the DSP and Carer Payment/Allowance forms and reviews. I find this process very mental health unfriendly.

While there is a small part that refers to mental illness the majority of requested information is geared around physical and intellectual disability. There are times when people with mental illness need assistance with personal care needs but more often than not it is a support role

Review forms are a particular issue. In our case the person I care for finds them very confusing, particularly the section on employment. These questions are all pointed at someone going back to work and do not take into consideration if they are able to.

I feel the episodic nature of mental illness needs to be taken into account when assessing someone and while some people may only experience one episode, they are in the minority, and most people will have ongoing issues with periods of relative wellness interspersed with periods of illness.

Throughout our journey the services we have encountered on the most part have been compassionate and sensitive to our circumstances including Centerlink until recently with Centerlink now being the notable exception.

Author details known but withheld.

4 May 2007

To Whom It May Concern:

**Re Centrelink Ineffective systems and non friendly usability**

I recently was made administrator and guardian for a woman and have had to deal once again with Centrelink and have found that it is still not accessible for anyone with a mental illness or disability.

I rang and tried to make an appointment, due to the unusual circumstances with this case, and was bluntly told to just line up and wait like everyone has to. I did get the forms from the social worker at the hospital to fill in. A lot of the questions did not fit the case so I could not answer them without advice.

I attended the Albury office and was met by the Liaison officer who greeted me and took my name and initial inquiry, said to take a seat and she would call me when it was my turn.

I waited one hour fifteen minutes and approached her again and asked her why others, whom she had spoken to on a first name basis had gone ahead of me she said they had gone to a different section, so she offered to go and see if she could "speed" things up a bit. I waited a further twenty five minutes and was escorted to the same desk that the people she had spoken to on the first name basis, when I queried her how come this is the same desk she refused to answer me.

I was introduced to the gentleman who was to help?? Me.

He was obviously overwhelmed by the complexity of the case and went off several times to have things "checked" he then proceeded to photo copy documents, one page at a time walking back and forth to the copier each time. After explaining several times, the court appointed guardianship and administration order. He expected me to take the paper work and have it signed by the person I was there for. I was then told the paper work had to be sent on to the Orange office. Another hour and 10 minutes or more had passed by this time. I had asked to see if a supervisor would be appropriate but he told me I did not need one.

I left the office over two and a half hours later totally disgusted with the whole process as this case did not fit the parameters that the worker could follow and his denial to allow someone else to handle it.

The Orange office then contacted me and asked me to forward more documentation, that I had already given to Albury, I expressed my reservations about returning there and my dismay that they had already misplaced the copies they had taken. Orange office sent me an express envelope and I had less hassles dealing with them.

I then received notification that the person whom I represented and had applied for a disability pension had been placed on Newstart and all the reporting requirements that went with it. I was also asked to bring her to the office for assessment. The person this applied to was still an inpatient in High Care at this time.

I rang the Orange office to have explained that the Newstart was an interim payment and there would be no reporting required for several months and by that time the pension payment would have taken effect. Albury office should have explained all of this, but nothing was mentioned.

Albury Office contacted me looking for the reporting documentation I then rang Orange office once again and they had to sort it out for me which they did.

I was told I did not have to provide any further documentation.

I then received a letter demanding the birth certificate be produced to Albury within 14 days. I rang Albury and asked why this was needed now and they said it was a requirement or the pension would be stopped I then told them I would have to apply through the court for the certificate and it would take longer than 14 days. This was going to be noted on the system.



By this time, the person that the pension had come through for had been admitted to an Aged High Care Facility and was reliant on the pension to keep her there. Alas her pension was suspended as I had not provided the certificate within 14 days. I received it a few days later and took it to Albury the person who receipted it said, Oh her age is correct, she seemed too young to go to an Aged Care Facility. I don't feel we should be made justify ourselves over such issues.

Appointments should be available to these cases with special needs and Centrelink needs to be more flexible as not everyone can front up to an office for many reasons and when they have an appointed person to do the documenting for them with relevant medical assessments and certificates these should be accepted.

Albury office has a terrible reputation and the staff, don't seem to care or have an indifferent attitude. It is amazing to have to sit there and observe the goings on; also it is very hard to identify staff from clients.

Yours truly

6 July 2007

To Whom It May Concern

I have a daughter with O.C.D. and find it very hard when we have to go over to Centrelink for different things.

I am in my 70's and I have to stand in the queue for sometime as she feels she's going to faint as she is on a lot of Medication and quite often it's so long I have to go and shift the car.

It would be a big help if we could go straight to someone for help.

Yours

"A Carer"

To Whom It May Concern,

The following is an account of an episode my son and myself experienced which brought much stress and inconvenience to us.

My son who suffers from a mental illness received the 2 yearly reassessment form for eligibility for the Disability Support Pension.

Unbeknown to me, my son took the medical form to a doctor who was unfamiliar with my sons illness and deemed him fit to undertake employment.

My son received a letter from Centerlink stating he was fit for work and therefore cancelled his DSP and commenced him on newstart.

My son at the time was mentally unstable and highly distressed at this decision, and unable to look for work.

I contacted Centerlink and explained the situation. They agreed it should not have happened and gave me another medical form which had to be taken to Wangaratta, (I live in Wodonga), to be completed by his former psychiatrist, who was, familiar with his condition and returned to Centerlink.

My son was reinstated on to the DSP and deemed unfit for work.

If the reassessment form was more relevant to people with a mental illness, we would not have had to endure what we went through.

Because this happened, I have requested that a copy of all correspondence from Centerlink, regarding my son, be sent to me to avoid this occurring again.

Author known, details withheld.

To whom it may concern.

I suffer from major depression and a generalised anxiety disorder, the nature of the illness makes it difficult to be around crowds of people for any length of time. I also become very forgetful and vague.

Having to travel from Wodonga to Albury is near impossible for me to do on my own. My husband has to do this for me. He is the one who queues up for hours to make appointments, he also helps explain the forms so that they can be filled in correctly. I find accepting his help at times very hard as I have always looked after these things myself.

If there was someone qualified in the area of mental health that I could talk to over the phone, would take the burden off him and give me some well needed sense of achievement.

Author details known but withheld.

To Whom It May Concern:

Some months ago I was forced once again to join the Centrelink Newstart Queue while recovering from a much too close encounter with death. Due to the unrealistic and demanding time constraints placed upon me with my usual Market Research job I had been in two hospitals facing near stroke levels of high blood pressure.

Emotionally and physically I was extremely vulnerable and as a result of constant negative comments and attitudes shown me by the women in the Centrelink office I began to suffer months of severe anxiety attacks.

Despite regular acupuncture, meditation and a lot of positive self talk on the day before I was due to join those queues once again I couldn't thwart the onslaught of the crippling attacks. On one particular occasion I was so bad I could hardly dress or walk to face these soul-less women. However, that day I was shown consideration and compassion so unlike the others where I do dress up at least. I am always mindful of ways for me to be in order to keep my own Black Dog at bay.

Due to these relentless episodes I sought the help of my doctor as I didn't think I could keep on facing both the constant anxiety attacks and the queues and the Centrelink staff. His reply was for me to find "strategies to help deal with the queues, I was a tough person and had survived until now and that perhaps as a last resort I could buy an I Pod". His reply left me speechless as unless you have been subject to the scrutiny of Centrelink you have no understanding of the helpless and hopeless state you are left with. This doctor who I had sought help from instead refused to empathise or be helpful or try to understand what I was going through. Stronger medication for blood pressure, walks before and after Centrelink, meditation before and after Centrelink and acupuncture before Centrelink are the ways of dealing with my visits.

I do consider myself a strong person as I have raised five children as a divorced woman and since then have found my own employment whenever I can. I have been on those queues often over the last 20 years as the work I have found has been of a sporadic nature and therefore not enough to keep me from facing Centrelink occasionally.

As time goes by and my age increases I look forward to the time when I can become an Age Pension recipient and when I do find work I can phone them and not have the constant fear and harassment of the women who it would appear hand out the government monies.