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Mr Elton Humphery
Committee Secretary
Australian Senate
Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Mr Humphery

Social Security Legislation Amendment (Improved Support for Carers) Bill 2009

Thank you for your letter dated 25 March 2009 regarding the above. I am pleased to provide the following comments.

It is noted that provisions for changes to Carer Payment (child) were made in the 2008-09 budget, with an implementation date of 1 July 2009. The proposed Bill appears to adequately address most of the recommendations of the 2007 report of the Carer Payment (child) Review Taskforce.

It is pleasing to learn that a new assessment tool has been developed and that following the Bill's successful passage through Parliament, some 19,000 more carers of young children with a disability or severe medical condition will have access to the Carer Payment. This is a substantial increase on the number of 3,570 recipients of Carer Payment (child) at June 2007. The automatic access of recipients of Carer Payment (child), under the new provisions to Carer Allowance, is also welcome and together the proposed changes should help to ease financial hardships for many carers.

Of particular interest are the provisions for much greater flexibility to take account of the varying circumstances of both children who require care and their carers. These provisions include shared care by separated and divorced parents and care provided in hospital for an unlimited number of days per year for a child.

The provision to base qualification for payment on the level of care required rather than rigid medical criteria is positive. In this regard, it is assumed that the proposed tool has undergone thorough testing to guard against any unintended consequences and to take adequate account of cultural factors. The ability of a range of health professionals, including physiotherapists, registered nurses and Aboriginal health workers in remote areas to provide assessments, is welcome and should enable more ready access.

While the provisions to enable care for short periods and episodic care are positive, there is some concern that the minimum period of three months may be a little restrictive. One can envisage that there may be circumstances where high levels of care are required to be provided for a substantial period, that is less than three months – for instance, eight weeks.

The Disability Services Commission undertakes a range of activities and initiatives to support the vital work undertaken by carers on a daily basis. We are aware that many carers experience extreme financial hardship. Measures to introduce greater flexibility into assessment processes and open Carer Payment (child) to a greater number of recipients, are therefore most welcome.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important Bill.

Yours sincerely



Dr Ron Chalmers
DIRECTOR GENERAL
DISABILITY SERVICES COMMISSION

15 April 2009