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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**SOCIAL SECURITY LEGISLATION  
AMENDMENT (IMPROVED  
SUPPORT FOR CARERS) BILL 2009**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 13 May 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Georganas, Steve, MP

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**Mr GEORGANAS** (Hindmarsh) (12.13 pm)—I am very pleased to rise today to speak on the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Improved Support for Carers) Bill 2009. This bill is to implement the government's commitment, following the report of the task force, to reviewing the carer payment. The review task force was established in March 2007 to examine the eligibility criteria for the carer payment. It considered the effectiveness of the payment in providing a safety net for children with a profound disability or severe medical condition.

Carer payment is an income support payment for people who, because of the demands of their caring role, are unable to support themselves through substantial participation in the workforce. For example, in the electorate that I represent, Hindmarsh in Adelaide's western suburbs, there are about 12,500 carers of people with a disability. I have met many of them when they have come to see me with issues that need attention. From my discussion with them I must say that they have an enormously hard job in caring for disabled members of their families.

Carers shoulder an enormous responsibility for their loved ones and they deserve every single bit of support government can provide. In fact, it is our duty to provide them with every bit of support that we possibly can. The Australian government recognises this and it values their incredible devotion and the incredible hard work that they do. Australia as a whole has about 2.6 million carers and nearly 500,000 of them are primary carers—in other words, those who provide the majority of the care required by another person.

Caring responsibilities can include many things: bathing, toileting, administering medication, providing nutrition and meals, dressing wounds and managing many other things. Emotional support is also important and a very significant part of caring work. According to Carers Australia, currently 79 per cent of assistance required by Australians due to disability or illness is provided by family carers—that is, someone within the family household.

Every year carers provide over 1.2 billion hours of care. At some stage in our lives all of us will receive care and we will all probably provide care in one form or another. It may not only involve caring for aged parents; it may, for example, be because of sheer twists of fate, such as finding yourself in the situation of having a child born with a disability or having a loved one who acquires a disability later on in life through an accident or some other means. You can imagine how the world would suddenly be turned upside down.

In 2007 the review into the effectiveness of carer payment found that the overly restrictive and complex eligibility requirements meant that thousands and thousands of parents who were providing intensive care for their children were ineligible for the payment. At the time of the review, only 3,500 carers received that particular payment. With the introduction of this legislation, it is estimated that up to 19,000 carers will now be eligible for carer payment from 1 July this year. Following the passage of this legislation, the eligibility for the payment will depend on the level of care required rather than on a narrow set of medical and behavioural criteria. The bill will introduce a much fairer assessment process based on the level of care required by the child and provided by the carer rather than a strict medical definition of 'profound disability'.

The government is also cutting red tape—and we have seen so much red tape in this area previously—so that parents who qualify for carer payment will automatically qualify for carer allowance. That will remove the requirement for more forms and medical examinations. Believe me, those of us in this place who deal with parents of children with profound disabilities have seen the enormous onus on the parents to be constantly producing paperwork to qualify for carer allowance. While carer payment is an income support payment that is paid at pension rates, carer allowance is a supplementary payment of \$98.50 each fortnight, which is described as being paid in recognition of the caring role.

The changes will also allow a range of health professionals—including physiotherapists, registered nurses and Aboriginal health workers in remote areas—to provide assessments, not just doctors and specialists. There will also be support available for parents at those times when their child needs intensive care—for example, when a child is undergoing treatment for a condition such as cancer or for trauma.

The response to the Carer Payment (child) Review Taskforce was overwhelming. It received over 4,000 submissions, and over 25 focus groups were held with stakeholders and self-selected carers over an eight-week period. The task force recognised the vitally important role of carers, and it also acknowledged that the willingness and ability of carers to provide care are integral components of the broader care system. Their contribution, as I said, is essential to sustain the current system of community based person-centred care. The evidence available to the task force established that carers faced particular challenges in the form of financial hardship and severely reduced educational and employment prospects. As we said, their primary task is looking after their loved one who is profoundly disabled. Carers have lower levels of health and wellbeing, chronic grief, and limited opportunities to participate in community life and build and maintain the social networks that all of us take for granted.

The amendments in this bill will deliver a new, fairer set of qualification criteria for carer payments in respect of a child based on the level of care required rather than on the rigid medical criteria that is currently being used to assess qualification for the payment. I will give you a very brief example of a phone call I received in the office a couple of years ago from the family of a very profoundly disabled child. The child was not going to get better, yet the red tape and the requirements placed on these people to qualify for the payment were enormous, to the point where my office had to ask the then minister in the former government to intervene and ensure that the family did receive this payment, which was so important to them. Seeing the family go through that process was extremely disheartening. This was all information that Centrelink actually had. This child was born with a profound disability, and the information was with them. Every so often the family would face more red tape and get more forms to fill in. I am glad that we were able to assist them. I am sure this particular bill will deliver a new and fairer set of qualification criteria for the carer payment. Administration of claims will also be improved, with better claims processing and capacity for more complex claims to be handled by a dedicated complex claims assessment team.

The recent report of the inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs also recommended that this bill be passed. The committee recognised that these arrangements will ensure that more carers who are unable to support themselves because of the demands of caring for children with a disability or a medical condition will receive the financial support that they require to ensure that they can carry on supporting themselves.

The government is very aware that we need to address the needs of those who care for others within our society. I have met, as many have in this place, with many carers in my electorate and have seen the significant work that they undertake. This government has an absolute commitment to assist those in need and to support them in their very important role of caring. We need to simplify access to government support without making carers jump through hoops to access support. As I said, there was the example of that particular family in my electorate who were made to jump through hoops constantly to ensure that they received their carer payments. It was so disheartening and depressing to see this family, who for years have been continuously looking after a child with a profound disability, on top of all the stresses of having a disabled child facing the burden of getting calls from Centrelink, getting forms to fill in and being told that they had to go through more hoops before they could actually give the support that was much needed. It is very important that we support this bill. We certainly need to simplify this process so that carers are not made to jump through hoops. I commend this bill to the House.