



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**SOCIAL SECURITY AND FAMILY
ASSISTANCE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
(WEEKLY PAYMENTS) BILL 2010**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 10 February 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 10 February 2010
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Questioner
Speaker Macklin, Jenny, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga—Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) (9.58 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This bill implements another key reform set out in the Australian government's white paper *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*, which was released in December 2008.

In the white paper, the Australian government committed to halve homelessness and offer accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it.

The government has provided an additional \$1.1 billion to boost services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

In addition to this, we are adding 80,000 social and affordable homes to the national housing stock by 2012—through the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan and our National Rental Affordability Scheme. This is the single biggest investment in housing ever made.

While housing is critical, fixing homelessness is not always just about providing a roof and four walls. Many people have a number of challenges they need to overcome to get housed and stay housed.

The Australian government's white paper on homelessness emphasises the need to address these challenges as well as the undersupply of social housing. That is why we are working hard to prevent homelessness, providing people with the support they need to sustain their housing and linking our new housing with intensive, specialist support to break the cycle of homelessness.

Centrelink has a critical role to play in reducing and preventing homelessness. We know that Centrelink provides income support payments to 6.5 million people, many whom are disadvantaged, vulnerable and socially excluded.

As a key 'first to know' agency, Centrelink is well placed to identify people who are at risk of homelessness and assist them to stabilise their housing situation.

Centrelink has already introduced an 'indicator' in its systems to identify clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This 'indicator' will let Centrelink staff know that the client needs active follow up, from a Centrelink social worker, to make sure they are receiving the support they need to stay housed. The 'indicator' allows Centrelink to improve and tailor its service to the people who are most vulnerable to homelessness.

In October last year, Centrelink also began to establish its network of Centrelink Community Engagement Officers. This program now has 90 specialist staff, located across all capital cities and many regional centres, supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

Community engagement officers are working with non-government organisations like drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, mental health services, hostels, boarding houses, refuges and drop-in centres to provide homeless Australians and people who are at risk of homelessness with better access to income support and the many other services available through Centrelink.

This bill now provides another reform being implemented by Centrelink under the Australian government's white paper on homelessness.

As part of the Australian government's efforts to prevent homelessness, we are introducing weekly payments of income support payments for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

We know that some Australians have difficulty budgeting and spend their fortnightly welfare payments too quickly. This can mean they are left with no money to pay for rent, food or essential services.

Vulnerable customers, who are being supported by Centrelink staff, will be able to choose to receive their income support payments weekly instead of fortnightly. While the payment amount will stay the same, weekly payments will allow the most disadvantaged welfare payment customers to budget more easily. It will also give these vulnerable Australians an opportunity to stabilise and improve their circumstances.

Currently the social security law is unclear on the extent of the Secretary's discretion to determine that more than one payment can be made in respect of an instalment period. This bill clarifies that a social security payment may be paid on a weekly basis in respect of a 14-day instalment period to individuals in a declared class. This bill provides for weekly payments under the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 to come into effect on the commencement of the legislative instrument defining 'vulnerable customers'.

The bill also enables changes to the family assistance law. Those vulnerable customers who receive family tax benefit as well as income support will be able to elect to receive income support weekly, and at this stage it is expected that this will be sufficient to improve their money management. The government's intention for the moment is to limit weekly payments to income support payments, and retain family assistance payments on a fortnightly basis. However to enable the government to respond to changing circumstances, the bill will also amend the family assistance law to allow for the introduction of weekly payments for family tax benefit and baby bonus as required.

This measure is intended to alleviate some of the financial hardships faced by those Australians who are most disadvantaged and, in doing so, it is intended to prevent these people becoming homeless. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Billson**) adjourned.