THE SENATE

FAMILY ASSISTANCE, SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS’ AFFAIRS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2005 BUDGET AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2006

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 29 March 2006

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
As I expressed in the Australian Greens and the Australian Democrats minority report into this bill – I am very concerned by schedule 6 - which proposes to change the backdating provisions for carers’ allowance.

If passed - schedule 6 will substantially reduce the maximum backdating period for carers of both children and adults – from 52 weeks for children and 26 weeks for adults – down to a flat 12 weeks.

The Community Affairs legislation committee report into the bill does acknowledge that the changes proposed will not be reasonable in all circumstances. The report provides a recommendation that discretion should be applied during the assessment of the application for carers allowance to determine if the applicant should be entitled to the full back pay provision.

While I am encouraged by the committees’ recommendation– I do not believe that it goes far enough to protect carers and I am proposing an amendment to delete schedule six for the bill.

The Australian Greens believe carers are the backbone of our nation. They provide loving care to the most vulnerable people in our community. A recent report by Access Economics concluded that carer’s annually contribute $30.5 billion dollars of care to the community.

They do this at their own expense. Often having to give up full paid employment or drop to part-time hours so they can be available to provide care when it is needed.

So not only are carers providing their services at no cost they are also foregoing the opportunity to earn a well paid living in their own right.

And our government’s response to this sacrifice – limitations on the amount of back pay a carer can claim. The departments stated reason for this legislative change –

“The measure will standardise the backdating period available....” and

“The measure will rationalise.....”

The Government is proposing to standardise and rationalise payments at the expense of carers who provide so much selfless support and care in our community.

The department estimates that these measures will save the government $107.6 million over 4 years – hardly significant compared to the $30.5 billion they currently save when family members provide the necessary care to their loved one.

And this is not the first time they have tried to implement this change – the government first announced an intention to reduce the backdating payment provision for carers allowance in the 1996-97 budget and it had a second attempt in 1997-98 budget. A 10 year campaign to reduce the backdating provisions for carers’ allowance shows how doggedly determine the government is when it comes to implementing its social security policy agenda.

The back pay carers receive is used to support the person needing care. It provides for the costs of diagnosis, transport, pharmaceuticals, nappies and the necessary modifications to their home. Medical care is expensive and trying to provide for someone with high care needs without a full time wage is a real struggle in Australia today.

Carers’ organisations have condemned schedule 6 and believe it should be withdrawn. There are many reasons why carers need generous backdating provisions.

These include:

- A person providing care does not always identify themselves as a carer. Initially they don’t see that they are doing something other than what is required of them - so often they do not look into financial provisions which may be available - until they are facing a financial obstacle they can not over come themselves.
They are focused on addressing the crisis at hand. Often a person needing care requires it very quickly and without the necessary planning that may go into other decisions people make affecting their life. A carer usually just gets on with the immediate job at hand and looks after seconding things such as, financial provisions, when the person in need of care has reached a place beyond the initial crisis.

It takes time for people to come to terms with the changing circumstances in their life. Often so much has happened in such a short period of time that both the person providing care and the person in need of care - need time to fully assess the changed circumstances of their life. It can take a while for people to admit to themselves that they need additional assistance.

The information provided for carers is not easy to understand or access. Carers need to be aware that the allowance is available to them. Often they do not find out the types of benefits available until well after they have begun caring for a family member. It again takes time to access networks and support organisations that provide information to carers.

They are often just overwhelmed by the demands of on going care provision. It is all they can do each day just to meet the needs of the people they care for – they do not need the added burden of government imposed timeframes placed on the assistance available to them.

There can often be delays in diagnosing the needs of the person in care. The full extent of their needs can take time to be revealed and even then it is not always clear just how much or how little they will be able to do for themselves. It can take a long time to access medical specialists - especially in the public hospital system. Carers should not be penalised for the time taken by the medical profession to complete the documentation necessary for the assessment of eligibility for a carers’ allowance. Nor should the medical profession be placed under additional pressure by placing specific timeframes on the turn around of information.

Carers also have great personal strength and commitment. They often do not seek outside assistance at all. Only turning to alternative means of support as a last resort and when there personal financial circumstances have reached crisis point.

This government has prided itself on promoting public policy that encourages citizens to help themselves before asking the government for assistance – well here is the model example of people doing just that! – Why further penalise them when they have already done everything they can to help themselves and there family.

Carers Australia highlight in there submission that the proposed changes will

“...further disadvantage and marginalise carers. The 2003 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers indicates that carers are over-represented in the lower household income quintiles. These carers are identified as being at particular risk of low wellbeing in the Australian Wellbeing Index Survey 2005”

The majority committee report’s recommendation for departmental discretion is not good enough – carers should have certainty in the backdating provision. As Vision Australian presented in their submission

“Standardising backdating periods should not mean reducing time periods in such a way that individuals and families facing massive emotional and physical challenges are also then deprived of their rightful financial assistance. We propose that if standardisation is the purpose of these changes then the carer allowance backdating provisions be standardised to 52 weeks.”

The Australian Greens amendment proposes the deletion of schedule 6 all together and that the current backdating provisions stand. We also encourage the department to look at streamlining access to carers’ allowance – particularly for people under increased stress.

I further believe that the issues raised during the committee hearing in relation to Schedule 5 – Reducing the allocation of childcare places be followed up.

I am concerned about childcare particularly in regional areas. I do not believe the department of Family and Children’s services (FaCS) have a true assessment of the needs of regional communities - that accurately determines the number of child care places needed. Nor do they have a robust method for acquiring this information.

I encourage FaCS to develop an assessment process which allows them to model the future needs of regional communities demand for child care places. And that FaCS looks at designing a forward planning process to address the identified future needs of child care in regional areas.