

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 17 May 2011, Page 2802

ANTI-POVERTY SERVICES

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (15:16): I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the minister representing the Minister for Families and Communities questions about the transfer of financial services currently offered by the Anti-Poverty Services unit to the non-government sector.

Leave granted.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: As you may recall, on 26 October 2010 I detailed in this place my concerns about the government's proposal to disband the Families SA Anti-Poverty Services unit and transfer the provision of emergency financial assistance payments it offered to the non-government sector. Specifically, I questioned the minister on whether non-government organisations would be provided with additional funding to deliver Families SA emergency financial assistance programs, or whether they would be expected to do so out of their existing budget.

The response I received from the minister on 9 March this year typically failed to answer the question, and instead spoke in generic terms of community consultation, identifying partner organisations' implementation issues and working with the non-government sector to build capacity.

Recently, several non-government organisations—including the peak body, SACOSS—have likewise expressed their concern that the financial services, particularly financial counselling, previously offered by the Anti-Poverty Services unit will no longer be available to vulnerable South Australians experiencing financial hardship if such funding is not made available. SACOSS has specifically called for 30 financial counselling positions to be funded to replace the 44 lost at Families SA.

In addition to delivering emergency payments, the 44 financial counsellors assisted clients to assess debt legally owed, to take control of their finances through budgeting and as mediators with debtors. This was a valuable free social service offered by Families SA and, given that vulnerable South Australians already have disproportionately limited access to financial counsellors in the non-government sector compared with their interstate counterparts, it was a necessity.

However, the minister seemingly believed that the delivery of the emergency payments was the sole value of these financial counsellors. Responding to SACOSS Executive Director Ross Womersley's concerns at the loss of 44 positions at Families SA and calls for the funding of 30 financial counsellors, the minister insisted that the government was simply transferring the provision of the emergency financial assistance payments to the non-government sector and that, as such, South Australians would not be disadvantaged. According to SACOSS, 7,000 people will now be limited or excluded from access to the financial counselling services because of these cuts. My questions to the minister are:

1. Does the minister concede that, if the non-government sector is not funded to provide a corresponding number of financial counsellors, then vulnerable South Australians will indeed be disadvantaged by the loss of Families SA's 44 financial counsellors?

2. Does the minister confirm that Families SA financial counsellors, in addition to assisting clients to take control of their finances have been, until now, responsible for the provision of emergency financial assistance payments?
3. If so, does the minister have the same expectation that the non-government sector will deliver emergency financial assistance payments through financial counsellors?
4. If so, does the minister expect non-government organisations to deliver this service without additional funding?
5. If not, will the minister commit to funding 30 additional financial counsellors in the non-government community sector to deliver the emergency financial systems payments previously provided by Families SA, as called for by SACOSS?
6. Did the minister, at any time, attempt to identify the impact these changes will have on both the non-government sector and recipients of financial counselling services in this state?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Public Sector Management, Minister for the Status of Women, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Government Enterprises, Minister for Gambling) (15:21): I thank the honourable member for her most important questions and will refer those to the Minister for Families and Communities in another place and bring back a response.

Just in very general terms, I have been advised that Families and Communities will continue to provide financial counselling services to their own clients and that they are entering into negotiations with the NGOs in relation to those financial counselling services that are needed by them to meet their needs, and to provide those very important services to people who are in need.

I have been advised that the intent of this was to, in fact, attempt to reduce the duplication, replication and overlap that existed between Families SA and NGOs and an attempt to streamline and make more efficient and effective services. That is the very general advice that I have received. As I said, the minister is committed to ensuring that these valuable services do continue to be provided to those in need, but for detailed answers I will need to refer those questions to the minister in another place and bring back a response.

The PRESIDENT: The Hon. Ms Bressington has a supplementary.

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 17 May 2011, Page 2803

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The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (15:23): Can the minister please explain to the council why her advice and the advice to SACOSS are completely different?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Public Sector Management, Minister for the Status of Women, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Government Enterprises, Minister for Gambling) (15:23): Mr President, I can only detail the very general advice that I have received, and I have given that information in this place.