

## **UPDATE ON THE DISABILITY SUPPORT PENSION**

Campaigning efforts to prevent the Federal Government's proposed changes to the Disability Support Pension (DSP) have not yet achieved much government response. Numerous letters sent to Members of Parliament have only resulted in a reply from the Democrats leader which offers little encouragement. The Bill has not yet been passed and we are hopeful for at least some adjustments to the proposal.

The Howard Liberal government plans to tighten the eligibility criteria for the DSP from 30 to 15 hours per week. This would have the effect of moving people with disabilities who work more than 15 hours a week off the DSP and onto the Newstart allowance. This means that many workers with disabilities would have their benefit reduced by about \$15 per week and would have to spend their reduced payments chasing work to comply with the Job Search criteria. If workers with disabilities fail to comply with the Job Search criteria they risk having their benefit suspended or removed altogether.

Another issue of concern which many consumers will be familiar with is the design of the Centrelink application form for the disability support pension. Many consumers have reported that there is a bias in the form towards physical disability with inadequate consideration of disability resulting from mental illness.

Another key issue facing consumers are the recent alterations to conditions of payment of the disability support pension. Changes to reporting processes and the current rigid structure of reporting irregular earnings are of concern, particularly to those who have a disability due to mental illness. Whilst the 'Working Credit' system will allow unemployed people to keep more of their income when taking up part-time or casual work and ease job transition, the detail of implementation could cause difficulties for some groups. Furthermore, recent welfare changes will mean some people may face fines of up to \$1800 if they breach new mutual obligation reporting requirements.

In an effort to address some of these concerns, we are pleased to report that the National Audit Office of Australia have recently been commissioned by the Federal Government to audit Centrelink performance in the area of client interaction. They have approached MHCC and we referred them to a number of suitable organisations to be part of the review process. They are also planning to work with the Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) and through the National Consumer and Carer Forum to seek a customer satisfaction review and evaluate customer service. The aim is to ascertain the effectiveness of client interactions and assessment processes and review the qualifications and training requirements of Centrelink assessors.