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BROTHERHOOD OF ST. LAURENCE  
67 BRUNSWICK STREET, HILZROY  
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Welfare Rights: whats happening?

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As many legal centre (and other) workers will be only too aware the operations of the Department of Social Security have a tendency to be somewhat less than perfect.

Bureaucratic procedures, inexperienced staff, complex and constantly changing guidelines, inadequate resources, an apparant fear of communication, low levels of payment for pensions and benefits, and an excess of discretion all conspire to create traps for the unwary claimant of a pension or benefit.

All too often, of course, claimants are people who have reached a low point in terms of their reserves of energy, cash, or support. To have to do battle with a fiendish, confusing, large and powerful bureaucracy is often beyond the means of some; whilst for others it is inconceivable that an individual has any rights at all when engaged in a confrontation with a government department.

It is not surprising, then, to observe the growth in recent years of the welfare rights movement in Australia, where the term "welfare rights" has come to be focussed on income security issues rather than on the rights of the individual to more general support. It is perhaps true to say that in our society an income is often dependent on the availability to that person of the income security system.

Welfare Rights centres have been operating in Sydney and Canberra for some time, and in Brisbane for the last year. In Perth, the Trades and Labour Council has funded welfare rights work for some time, whilst a specialist welfare rights worker is funded in Adelaide. Yet in Melbourne, specialist welfare rights centres or workers have so far failed to materialise.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has long been interested in the area and in fact funded an Unemployment Rights Service as a pilot scheme between 1979 and 1985. The experience of this led BSL to fund a research project in 1985, the Welfare Rights Model Project, with a brief to examine the area and to propose a detailed model suitable for use in Victoria.

The project, which published its report in December 1985, undertook a range of consultations as well as literature reviews and so forth, and closely examined the workings of the DSS as well as existing community responses to DSS - related problems.

The report of the project was prepared with the close support of an advisory group composed of representatives of the self-help movement, legal centres, general community organisations and agencies, and D.S.S.

There are two main strands to the recommendations of the report. Firstly, a number of proposals are made regarding the operations of the department, especially at the Regional Office level, where re-organisation of work-flow, the provision of verbal information, and contact between the public and the department are seen as important areas.

In a more macro sense it is of fundamental importance that the information needs of the consumers of DSS services be adequately met. The report proposes a range of approaches to enhance this, which is seen as a clear responsibility of D.S.S. It is clear that DSS has, in the past, used a lack of information as a de facto rationing system, a sorry state of affairs!

The operations of the review and appeal system are also examined and some suggestions made as to mechanisms for improving this system as well as using it to enhance the quality of primary decision making, which is currently of very dubious quality.

The second strand of the report deals with community based responses, for which independence of government is seen as fundamental.

The proposal contained in the report is for the establishment of a welfare rights support unit which would be primarily involved in providing a range of support services to those organisations which, in Victoria (unlike other states) have tended to provide support to DSS consumers. These services range from basic training and resource kits to secondary casework support and co-ordination of

resources, expertise and group advocacy, as well as research and policy analysis.

It is not intended to provide a centralised welfare rights centre, but rather to enhance the development, region by region, of a welfare rights network, utilising organisations that operate at a local level, are trusted by consumers, and in some cases, may be controlled by consumers.

The process of initiating this network have already begun, with a forum sponsored by VCOSS in December 1985 endorsing the proposals in principle and electing a working group to implement the community based strand.

This group includes representatives of VCOSS, legal centres, the C.A.B. movement, the self-help movement, and other community organisations and interests, and hopes to apply for funding in the near future.

In the meantime, DSS has indicated its interest in proposals and pilot projects incorporating recommendations are envisaged. The support of the Minister in this respect has been most encouraging.

Input into any of these processes is most welcome. Interested people should contact the writer on 419 7055. Copies of the report are also available (gratis!).

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# Welfare Rights

As many legal centre workers will be only too aware the operations of the Department of Social Security have a tendency to be somewhat less than perfect.

Bureaucratic procedures, inexperienced staff, complex and constantly changing guidelines, inadequate resources, an apparent fear of communication, low levels of payment for pensions and benefits, and an excess of discretion all conspire to create traps for the unwary claimant of a pension or benefit.

All too often, of course, claimants are people who have reached a low point in terms of their reserves of energy, cash, or support. To have to do battle with a fiendish, confusing, large and powerful bureaucracy is often beyond the means of some; whilst for others it is inconceivable that an individual has any rights at all when engaged in a confrontation with a government department.

It is not surprising, then, to observe the growth in recent years of the **welfare rights movement in Australia**, where the term "welfare rights" has come to be focussed on income security issues rather than on the rights of the individual to more general support.

Welfare Rights Centres have been operating in Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide for

the past year or so. Yet in Melbourne, specialist welfare rights centres or workers have so far failed to materialise.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has long been interested in the area and in fact funded an Unemployment Rights Service as a pilot scheme between 1979 and 1985. This led to the Welfare Rights Model Research Project, which examined the issue and drew up a proposal for a suitable model for use in Victoria.

The final report was published in December 1985. The report was prepared with the close support of an advisory group composed of representatives of the self-help movement, legal centres, general community organisations and Dept of Social Security.

There are two major recommendations of the report. Firstly, a number of proposals are made regarding the operations of the Dept of Social Security itself, especially at the regional office level, so that the information needs of consumers can be met.

Secondly, the report deals with community based responses to help them become independent from the government.

The proposal is for the establishment of a Welfare Rights Support Unit, which would be primarily involved in providing a range of support services to those

organisations which, in Victoria (unlike other states) have tended to provide support to DSS consumers.

It is not intended to provide a centralised welfare rights centre, but rather to enhance the development, region by region, of a welfare rights network, utilising organisations that operate at a local level, are trusted by consumers, and in some cases, may be controlled by consumers.

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This group included representatives of VCOSS, legal centres, CAB's, self-help groups, and other community groups. They hope to apply for funding in the near future.

In the meantime, DSS has indicated its interest in proposals and pilot projects in the recommendations of the report. The support of the Minister in this respect has been most encouraging.

Input into any of these processes is most welcome. Interested people should contact me on 419-7055. Copies of the report are also available free.

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INFORMATION IS POWER!



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