

Red Tape

SSRV Newsletter



A recent SSRV case got some coverage in local media in the LaTrobe Valley. Here's a truncated version of the story.

Moe Man gets \$10,000 in rare Centrelink Compensation win

A Moe man with multiple injuries and who suffers from psychotic depression has been awarded \$10,839.65 from the Department of Finance after Centrelink lost his documents.

The 31 year old scored an extremely rare payout for 'Compensation for Detriment caused by Defective Administration' because Centrelink lost his claim for a Disability Support Pension in 2003.

The man who has severe frequent anxiety attacks and experiences auditory hallucinations and paranoia just assumed his claim had been turned down. He remained on Newstart despite multiple medical and psychological reports indicating he was not well enough to work.

The man applied for the DSP again in 2007 on his Doctor's advice and was found to be eligible. When he made further inquiries, he discovered Centrelink had lost his original claim and had actually never turned down his original application.

Social Security Rights Victoria then represented the man to get back-paid the difference in entitlements. After close to 18 months of advocating for their client, the Department of Finance paid him his DSP from when he first lodged the claim. (Continued on Page 2)

Also in this issue:

'Secure and Civil Society : A reflection'Page 2

Federal Ministry changes that affect social security – Page 4

Red Tape Alert – Page 4

Contact us – Page 4

Packing a 'Punch'

Another article by SSRV's president Antony McMullen (with some help from the SSRV staff) on the low rate of Newstart Allowance was published on the website 'the Punch' and scored a very significant number of comments. Not all of them were complimentary! (Not so much about the article as the whole idea). If you missed it, you can read more of it here:

<http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/la-dole-cheque-vita-is-not-so-sweet-on-16-a-day/>

(or just go to [thepunch.com.au](http://www.thepunch.com.au) and search for 'Newstart Allowance')

('Moe Man' continued): "Documents often get lost in the Centrelink vortex" said Peter Horbury Coordinator of Social Security Rights Victoria, "That's why it's important to always double check, question them, appeal decisions and come to us for advice".

The various forms of the article are here if you have on-line access:

<http://finance.ninemsn.com.au/newsbusiness/8418654/victorian-man-wins-10k-over-lost-centrelink-form>

<http://www.latrobevalleyexpress.com.au/news/local/news/general/payout-for-lost-form/2452818.aspx>

as well as the SSRV coordinator being quoted in a local radio news broadcast (yes they still do exist!).



Secure and Civil Society: A reflection

SSRV's President Antony McMullen wrote this article in the wake of SSRV's symposium last year. Antony works as a social justice officer for the Uniting Church in Victoria and this article was published in their newspaper 'Crosslight'.

Professor Howe opened our recent symposium with a statement full of moral clarity: "The concept of social security rights suggests a citizenship theme that recognises that it is important for the wellbeing of our society that we set out to eliminate poverty and disadvantage because they are corrosive of our overall wellbeing. A good society is not one that excludes people from full participation."

My work at the Uniting Church and with SSRV is concerned with the overall good of society. Social security is not just about having a basic income; I believe that our wellbeing comes from inclusion, contribution and participation in dignified work where able, in civil society.

We live in relationship to each other; poverty and inequality impacts us all. Often discussion about social security solely focuses on income – and community wellbeing is forgotten. Our recent symposium attempted to broaden the terms of debate in this area.

Why am I involved with SSRV? SSRV helps Victorians who face difficulty with Centrelink, which makes thousands of mistakes each year; catastrophic for someone living on as little as \$34 a day.

I was 'on the dole' when the '90s Opposition 'Fightback!' policy was to cut social security payments off after nine months. I remember the stigma of being unemployed; in and out of dead-end jobs. Luckily, in the dying days of the Keating Government, I enrolled in a community services traineeship – higher pay, training and work experience in a job I loved. This was hope– and I've never looked back.

People like to blame job-seekers for their situation, but there are simply not enough jobs in Victoria to meet the demand for work. Not everyone can, or should, move to work in a mine. Also, as the ACTU has recently pointed out, lots of entry level jobs are insecure and irregular. Rather than name-calling and blame, people need hope, dignity and choice.

When we think of poverty we often think of those in extreme poverty in other countries or the plight of some Indigenous Australian communities.

Early philanthropists in the first years of boom capitalism put their money into public institutions like libraries to try to bring people together from various income levels that were becoming increasingly disparate. Their intuitions were correct. In wealthier countries, income per head matters less than in very poor countries; and how we are placed in relationship to others matters a lot.

This is the topic of the book *The Spirit Level*, which has been lauded by both sides of politics in the UK. The book's main contention is that in western societies more income equality strongly correlates with far fewer social problems (from violent crime to obesity).

It may not be just a case of simply enlarging the welfare state. We could achieve this by following the lead of countries like Japan, and regions like New Hampshire (in the US), and achieve similar income equality to the Scandinavian countries through better income distribution before tax and benefits (as well as redistribution).

We also need to think about communities. In Australia, where income inequality is high, we find concentrated 'postcodes of disadvantage'; as academic Tony Vinson has been saying for years. Conservative UK think-tanker Phillip Blond argues that although the social security system provides a much-needed safety net, it may also negatively impact on community bonds and relationships.

I'd like us to move from vertical 'mutual obligation' between isolated individuals and the powerful state towards building horizontal community bonds and economic opportunity – old-fashioned mutuality.

Things aren't all bad. Peter Whiteford at UNSW rightly says that Australia redistributes more to the poorest fifth of the population than virtually any other OECD country. We target well, but we also need to raise the dole. Think about it – \$34 a day. We also need to think about providing social security in a way that promotes community involvement and cohesion.

[An on-line version of this can be found at:

<http://crosslight.org.au/2011/12/03/secure-and-civil-society/>]



Casework trends

For readers with an interest in SSRV's casework trends we've noticed this year a number of changes:

- People affected by the changes to residency for long-term overseas residents (this particularly affects people on *Disability Support Pension*)
- A growth in *Family Tax Benefit* debts mainly due to the non-submission of tax returns for previous years (even for people whose returns are for years such as 2009-10).
- Issues to do with gambling winnings and income.

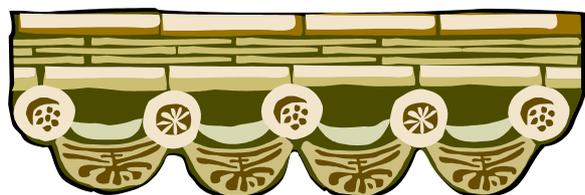
Bits and pieces:

Federal Parliamentary Ministers with responsibilities for social security related portfolios.

In the wake of the recent reshuffle, the following ministers now have responsibility for social security related portfolios. Note that the only major change is that:

- Senator Kim Carr takes over the 'Human Services' portfolio (this is a major change).
- The Honourable Brendan O'Connor is the new Minister for homelessness.
- The Honourable Mark Butler remains the Minister for Social Inclusion.
- The Honourable Jenny Macklin continues as the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (and Disability Reform).

All these ministers can be contacted by writing to them at the Ministerial Wing, Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600 or contacted via aph.gov.au



Contact Us

SSRV can be contacted in any of the following ways:

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Red Tape Alert

SSRV is launching a new monthly on-line only publication called Red Tape Alert –specifically for workers in the community sector. In the first instance it will be distributed to people on SSRV's electronic mailing list and those we have had electronic communication with . The first issue is due at the end of March so watch your in-boxes! We are grateful to the Legal Services Board for supporting the generation of this publication. If you are not on SSRV's email list (or wish to get this email specifically) please email us at the address on the left.



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Red Tape wishes to remind readers who are on social security payments about the law in relation to telephone calls. Many clients indicate to SSRV that they have been called by Centrelink and asked to go somewhere or do something. It is important to reiterate that whilst clients are able to do such things (presuming it really is Centrelink ringing up and not a friend pranking) there is no legal requirement to do so. If Centrelink wants someone to go somewhere or produce some sort of document they need to issue that request in writing. Centrelink clients are not legally required to answer their phone or respond to telephone calls. If it is a notice in writing that's one thing, if it's not , it's irrelevant.

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