



Amanda Rishworth MP

Member for Kingston

Speech to Federal Parliament

13 May 2009

Social Security Legislation Amendment (Improved Support for Carers) Bill 2009

(Kingston) (11:48 AM) —I rise today to speak in favour of the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Improved Support for Carers) Bill 2009. I do so—and I concur with some of the comments of the member for Gilmore—because I have immense respect for the men and women across Australia who dedicate so much of their lives to caring for their loved ones. In my electorate of Kingston I have met many carers and they have sat down with me and told me about their experiences. They have had some hard experiences but they have also reported to me some very rewarding experiences that caring for their loved ones has provided them. They have talked to me often about the patience they have learned and the love they feel for their loved ones, which transcends what they previously experienced. I have heard some wonderful stories but of course, as we heard from previous speakers, carers also experience difficulties. This bill, appropriately, recognises and supports the contribution that carers make to our society.

The bill before us today recognises the difficult position that many carers find themselves in. The Rudd government made it very clear that they were committed to responding to the Carer Payment (child) Review Taskforce recommendations and, indeed, that is what this bill does. A particularly striking quote from the review, which reinforces the importance of carers in our society today, reads:

The Taskforce has accepted that the payment of Carer Payment (child) is recognition that caring for a 'profoundly disabled child' is a full-time, multiskilled and very demanding job that leaves little or no time for other activities. It is ... unquestionably a role of immense social and economic value. The care provided often means the difference between life and death for the care receiver.

That is certainly how it has been described to me by many of my constituents, especially those who are caring for children. The bill before us will see many of the recommendations which have arisen from the

review, commissioned by the previous government, implemented in time for the new financial year.

I want to take this opportunity to talk a little about the experience of one of my constituents, Wendy. She spoke to me about the carer payment as it applied before these amendments. She was not eligible for it because her six-year-old son, who suffers from a permanent disability, did not meet the specified criteria. Instead, she and her husband relied on the carer allowance. She complained to me about the incredible strictness of the eligibility for the carer payment, and she told me about how difficult it had been. She had welcomed the carer allowance when she was encouraged to apply for it, and when she originally applied she thought that she would be able to put it away for the expensive therapy that her son needed. She set up a bank account for the allowance to go into but, unfortunately, that bank balance has never been in the black. She has been spending huge amounts of money—not only to support her going to work, because of the full-time care that her son needs, but also to pay the extra costs incurred from the provision of intensive therapy. However, Wendy did say to me that she did not regret spending one cent on her child for that therapy; whilst they had had to make a lot of sacrifices, they would do it all again. She also said that while the carer allowance was welcome she is hoping that the changes will ensure that she and her son are eligible for the carer payment (child).

I also talked to Wendy about issues that were a little bit broader than just the carer payment. I think the things we spoke about are very true of many other mums and dads in my electorate that have children with a disability. She told me that she has found a good network of special needs mums, as she put it, who stick together and have become very good advocates for their children. They try to get together and lobby for extra SSOs or greater funding, and I have seen that in my own electorate in providing support to mums and dads who advocate for their children that are in need. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Wendy and the other mums for the great advocacy and caring work that they do.

These measures are much needed. The previous method of assessment for eligibility for the carer payment created a situation that precluded many people—who had to forgo full-time employment to care for their loved ones—from receiving support from the rest of society. As the task force review clearly states, that type of assessment does not identify the actual level of care required or the level of care provided. Rather, it assumes that a particular condition or circumstance implies a level of care and need that is being met by the applicant. I and this government do not consider such an assessment scheme to be appropriate, effective or fair. Put simply, the results of such an assessment scheme are incredibly inequitable to both the carers and the cared for. Such a scheme does not consider any qualitative assessment of the real needs of the child being cared for.

The bill before us today changes that and delivers a new, fairer set of criteria that are much more similar to the carer payment (adult) criteria. They are based on the care required and reflect the functional ability of the care receiver rather than rigid medical standards. In addition to introducing flexibility and fairness to the assessment method, this bill provides for access to the carer payment for short-term or episodic needs—a key recommendation of the task force review.

Currently, both carer payment (child) and carer allowance (child) provide for situations where it is anticipated that the need for care will be ongoing. Neither is designed to meet a sudden need for financial assistance to cope with emergencies. This bill changes that. I know that this will be widely welcomed by constituents who may not have experienced this but may experience it in the future and benefit from it. Similarly, there will now be more generous arrangements for carers who have children in hospital, and the qualification rules for the tragic situation of a person caring for a child with a terminal illness will also be relaxed.

The implementation of the task force review recommendations represents just one part of this government's commitment to supporting carers. In 2008 the Rudd government delivered a \$1,000 carer payment recipient bonus, and carer allowance recipients also received \$600 for each person in their care. This was followed by the Economic Security Strategy, which recognised the role of carers and provided \$1,400 of support for carer payment recipients and \$1,000 for carer allowance recipients for each person in their care. In the budget that was announced last night, once again we have seen financial payments to further help those who are caring in our community. The government realises that supporting carers means providing infrastructure support for Australians with different needs, and so it has also set aside \$100 million for supported accommodation facilities.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Autism SA, which has recently opened a respite service in my electorate for children with autism. Autism is a growing issue that parents come to talk to me about, and the respite facility will be a very welcome addition to respite services in the area. I was very pleased to see that, and I know that a lot of parents in my electorate were also pleased to see that.

The facilities to which the government will be contributing will be available to people whose ageing parents can no longer care for them at home. This point is very important, because a lot of parents have come to me and said that they are concerned that they are ageing and they are not sure what is going to happen to their children once they are no longer there to care for them. Hopefully, this will give parents some sense of security that their children will be cared for when they are no longer able to care for them.

All of the measures that I have mentioned represent the Rudd government's commitment to supporting carers and their families. The \$273 million of measures included in the bill before the House today are just one part of the government's plan, but they are a very important part. By changing the eligibility criteria for the carer payment, this government is clearly saying that support for carers must be realistic, flexible and fair. In providing short-term access to the carer payment, we are saying that we understand the real-world situation that parents can find themselves in. By considering the needs of parents with special needs children in hospital or those with terminally ill children, we are displaying the quintessential Australian value of compassion for those who are doing it tough but are still holding their heads up high. I commend the bill to the House.