



ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy

22 May 2006

[Ms GRIERSON](#) (Newcastle) (9.20 p.m.)—I rise to draw the attention of the parliament and the Australian people to ongoing concerns about the delivery of Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) services to refugee families in the Newcastle and Hunter region. This is the fourth time since September 2005 that I have raised this matter. IHSS services were specifically designed to provide intensive assistance to refugee and humanitarian entrants for the first three to six months after their arrival.

Last September, I criticised the tender process for excluding regional communities and organisations from bidding in their own right for the delivery of local IHSS services. In November, I highlighted distressing examples of the failure of the successful tenderer, ACL, to satisfactorily fulfil its contractual obligations. Earlier this year, I alerted the parliament to further examples of the disappointing way in which the IHSS program was being administered in my electorate of Newcastle. All of the cases I have put before this parliament go to the issue of inadequate service delivery and highlight an extraordinary lack of preparedness, delivery systems and accountability.

Despite ACL's protests that all allegations were without factual basis, I note that their so-called independent Fiora report of the Inquiry into the Management by ACL of the IHSS vindicated the issues I have raised. Banki Haddock Fiora provides legal services to ACL and as such have a prior commercial relationship. Although the Fiora report argues that ACL has conducted and managed its IHSS program in accordance with the service principles, its recommendations and findings highlight the very same problems that have been raised. For example, the Fiora report noted that, if income support payments are delayed beyond the first week, the standard initial food package and food vouchers or cash are insufficient, that the provision of a single standard initial food package does not cater for all different family compositions or meet all cultural and religious needs and that feminine hygiene products were not included in initial food packages. It noted that the standard tenancy agreement used by ACL was too difficult for new arrivals to understand, that telephones were not provided in all rental properties, that the basic furniture package given to new arrivals was inadequate for large families and that adequate written and visual

communication was not provided to refugees for the purpose of orientation to their accommodation.

The Fiora report also noted insufficient staff training in Newcastle in 2005. It also noted that ACL did not have in place adequate specific written policies and procedures that ACL needed to improve its record-keeping procedures and that ACL had failed to engage sufficiently with experienced volunteers and established volunteer networks, in particular in Newcastle, at the beginning of the service provision period.

These findings go to the heart of the issues that I and others in my electorate have been raising for the last eight months, and ACL must continue to work with all stakeholders to achieve satisfactory resolutions. I look forward to ongoing, constructive dialogue with ACL, DIMA and the minister to ensure the provision of better IHSS services for refugee families in Newcastle.

But I wish to place on the record new allegations that have been brought to my attention. It is alleged that ACL staff have arranged for or assisted IHSS clients to apply to Centrelink for a \$500 advance payment to cover food and other basic living costs within the initial weeks of their arrival. I am advised that in at least one instance this \$500 Centrelink loan was taken out prior to the commencement of regular income support payments. No matter how well intentioned this may have been, it contravenes Centrelink policy.

If it is true that these loans are being used to cover essential items like food, prior to the receipt of any regular Centrelink payment, then this practice would appear to be in breach of the Commonwealth's agreement with the ACL-IHSS consortium, which clearly states that ACL will provide food until such time as Centrelink assistance is available. Moreover, there exists doubt that these applications for a \$500 loan have been made with the free, prior and informed consent of the IHSS client. Given that Centrelink recovers the \$500 advance payment by withholding approximately \$40 per fortnight from the client's fortnightly payment for a period of six months, I am concerned that this practice will put refugees into an endless cycle of debt. Is this really what the minister and DIMA envisaged for refugees under the IHSS program? I hope not. Any practice that allows ACL to shift responsibility and costs to Centrelink, community welfare organisations or charities must be stopped. I call on the minister to investigate this issue as a matter of urgency. If the government intends to continue to rationalise and centralise tenders for service delivery across its portfolios then it should make sure that it builds in some better accountability and some quality assurance of desired outcomes.
(Time expired)