

2.6 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding changes to Disability Transport Allowance:

Everyone is due their 15 minutes of fame, are they not? In the light of changes to benefits scheduled to take place in October 2008, will the Minister inform Members what credence recipients of D.T.A. (Disability Transport Allowance) can give to the statement: "This allowance has been awarded for life", contained in a letter - D.T.A. 55 - from his department that many may have received?

Senator P.F. Routier (The Minister for Social Security):

Members no doubt recall the 3 major debates we had on the subject of D.T.A. and I am sure that Members will be aware that the Disabled Transport Allowance Law has now been rescinded and replaced by the Income Support Law. The changes to benefits planned for October are an up-rate of the value in income support component levels, together with the planned reduction in the protected transitional arrangement payments for households with incomes above the appropriate income support level. The letter which the Deputy refers to - D.T.A. 55 - was superseded at the end of 2004 by a new letter, F304. Both letters indicate that the medical condition giving rise to the benefit was unlikely to improve in the lifetime of the beneficiary and the department would not review the medical status of the individual in their lifetime. However, if the financial circumstances of the recipient of the disability transport allowance changed and the individual acquired an income in excess of the income limit, the allowance would have been reviewed because the individual no longer satisfied the income conditions for the benefit. There will be individuals who received either letter, who have now transferred to the Income Support Scheme. If the individual qualifies for income support on financial grounds, then the previous agreement that no medical review would be required is transferred to the Income Support Scheme and the individual will receive the mobility component for the rest of their life, as long as they still are eligible for income support.

2.6.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What interpretation should recipients of D.T.A., who receive this letter, which says, clearly: "If the date of the stop date mentioned above reads 2098 - and this one reads February 2098 - or similar, then this allowance has been awarded for life." What interpretation are recipients of this letter to take on the phrasing: "This allowance has been awarded for life"? Is that the case or is it not the case? Is that wording correct or incorrect? Is that wording justified or not?

Senator P.F. Routier:

What the Deputy fails to go on to comment on is that in bold letters at the bottom of the letter there is a line which says: "Please read the notes on the back of this letter as they may affect your entitlement." Then the notes which are attached to the letter... and it is on both of the letters which have gone out, both D.T.A 55 and the F304. Both of them comment along similar lines that it is a letter which is sent out which is after the medical assessment and they refer to if your medical condition improves, you will have a review and if your income increases significantly. So, the Deputy is not concluding with the remainder of the letter so that the people can get a true picture of what is being said.

2.6.2 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

I would like to say to the Minister that I have heard from somebody whose medical condition has not been proved and I would like to ask the Minister whether he accepts that this letter, that was received by probably a lot of people that need this money, that, really, this letter was not worth the paper it was written on? Thank you.

Senator P.F. Routier:

If people have come to the conclusion that the award would be for life from the way that the letter was written, that may well be the case and I apologise for that but the circumstances in both letters

do recognise that if somebody's financial circumstances are different, that they would no longer be able to have the allowance and, as we know, the States have debated, several times, the failings of the D.T.A. system and have required us to change the D.T.A. benefit. Income support was brought in to achieve that. We must remember that benefits are now paid because of people's financial circumstances and, secondly, the medical element.

2.6.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is it not the case that the Minister's answer is incorrect because, in many cases, the medical circumstances have not changed? These people are reliant on transport and their financial circumstances have not changed. They are on exactly the same level of income or savings as they previously were when they were eligible and were guaranteed this benefit, this allowance, for life. The fact is, without any change in their circumstances, they have either had this allowance reduced by half or reduced to zero. These are people in dire need of transport to live a reasonable life. Is that not the case?

Senator P.F. Routier:

The Deputy makes a statement as if people are in financial need.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I did not say they were in financial need, I said, clearly, their finances have not changed. The Minister said if those finances have changed, that is not correct.

Senator P.F. Routier:

Members are aware that the debate around income support has been solely regarding the redirection of particularly D.T.A., which people were criticising for a number of years, that it was being paid to people whose finances did not really mean that they needed the financial resource. The States approved the Income Support Law which rescinded the D.T.A. Law. We all went into that with our eyes wide open and understood what was happening. It was a requirement of the States and the public, to a certain extent, who were saying that disabled transport was being paid to those people who were not in financial need and the States made that decision to go along that route.

2.6.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not accept that he has vastly reduced the quality of life of a number of seriously disabled people by his measures?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I would say that if anybody who is a disabled person who is in financial need, the income support system is there for them to apply to. There is no need for them to be in financial need because income support is there for them.