

2015.11.03

3.2 Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the impact of Income Support cuts upon the mental health of vulnerable residents:

Can the Minister advise whether the mental health of some of Jersey's most vulnerable residents has been exacerbated by the realisation that their income support is being cut, and if so, what steps, if any, does the Minister propose to take to alleviate this?

Senator A.K.F. Green (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

At the present time I am not aware of any adverse impact on mental health of people using our mental health services following the proposed changes to income support.

3.2.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I can certainly vouch for the fact that people who are already in a vulnerable position for whatever reason facing challenges, whether that is Anne from St. Helier, Fiona from St. Lawrence, or Leslie from St. Martin - who was in the media the other day - who already does suffer from mental health issues, has had his problem and those have had their mental health issues exacerbated by the stress and the unclarity that has been caused by the letters that have gone out from the Social Security Department. So I would ask the Minister, given the fact that we can only expect that such people do exist and that their problems will be particularly felt at this time, to ask what mechanisms and what support he can offer to those individuals who may have particular issues caused by this particular government's austerity project.

The Bailiff:

And the question, Deputy?

Deputy M. Tadier:

I think I asked the question. Sorry, it may have been lost in the ... is to ask what support mechanisms the Minister could roll out for them.

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The names the Deputy reeled off, if they are known to the service, or if they are not known to the service, if they have got concerns I suggest that they make contact with us and we will help them. I think it is forgotten what these changes are about. It is not about austerity. This is about investing, allowing the investment, particularly in health, but in mental health. We have got £1.1 million gone into Talking Therapies. Because of the changes, £2.4 million next year going into delivering additional community-based mental health services and a further £2.1 million the year after. This is what this investment is about.

3.2.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister said that he was not aware, which is very convenient, the question must be: has he asked whether? Has he asked and if not will he ask the practitioners at the chalk face, at the frontline, whether they have noticed an increase in anxiety and worries from those with mental health over the cuts to their benefits adding to the difficulties in leading a decent life?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

Does the Member think that I would come to this Assembly to answer that question without first asking the people on the coalface that very question; yes, I have asked.

3.2.3 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I think it goes further than asking the people on the coalface. What consultation has been done with the Social Security Department when they are coldly sending out these letters, and I do not mean in the word "coldly". They are just randomly sending them out. An issue of mental health, is it being discussed with the department? What scale on the mental health scale are they? Some of these letters could be sending people over the edge. Is there any discussion between the Minister for Health and Social Services and the Minister for Social Security?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

There are no discussions on a named basis, because the exchange of names would not be allowed under the data protection. But I am aware that some people, and a very small number, are seeing some change. Change is stressful. But what we are trying to do is support people in the community to allow them to be able to live in the community, to be supported by the new services that we are going to be providing. I will be taking Members through the Mental Health Strategy on Friday. Rather than just doling out money, we will be supporting people and helping them to recover.

3.2.4 Senator Z.A. Cameron:

I would like to also ask the Minister for Health and Social Services to discuss with frontline staff the impact of the changes. The link between poverty and mental health problems are well known and it is interesting to note a significant increase in the number of people needing to claim income support and long-term incapacity, and perhaps if he could guarantee that there was some further investigation into this. Certainly, as a frontline G.P. (general practitioner) working over there, I can vouch that in the last 2 or 3 years there has been a significant increase in distress caused in this way.

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The original question was: were the changes in social security causing more mental stress for some people? Change does cause stress in some people. I accept that. I am always prepared to go back and ask again, but the whole emphasis of the changes that we are making, not just in social security but throughout the States, is to allow the investment of £40 million a year by 2019 in health services. Much of that is to improve mental health services.

3.2.5 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

The Minister will be well aware that a lobby group in the U.K. made a lot of noise yesterday about increased services in mental health in the U.K. and the U.K. Government has pledged £3.5 billion into mental health, which is a sizeable part of the N.H.S. (National Health Service) budget. Is he satisfied that what is being proposed in the budgets going forward in Jersey is adequate enough, understanding fully more now the needs of the mental health requirements of Jersey and perhaps other jurisdictions? Is he satisfied that it is enough now and would he be looking to put more into this area when it is possible in the future?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

We have a mental health strategy that we are launching on Friday and Members are able to come along and take part in that discussion. But proportionately, if you look at the new investment that we have already planned for, proportionately it is very similar to that in the U.K. So I am satisfied we are moving in the right direction. Absolutely satisfied. £3.5 billion in the U.K. is roughly equivalent to £3.5 million over here.

3.2.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think it was in response to a question from Deputy Martin, the Minister referred to this as affecting a small number of people. Could he give an indication to the Assembly exactly what he thinks the number of people there are out there with mental health problems, who will be facing cuts to their support?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I am afraid I do not have that information.

3.2.7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Therefore, how can he say it is a small number of people?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

Based on the information I have from Social Security, not about named individuals, a particular set of circumstances have to occur for this change in this particular area and I am told that is a small number.

3.2.8 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

Would the Minister consider changing the system slightly so that there was a single point of contact, a named person within the Income Support Department that people could discuss their details with when they are going through changes like this or anything of income support? As I believe there is some evidence that having to share confidential and sensitive information with lots of different people within the department can be quite distressing and affect mental health.

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I understand where the Member is coming from and I am certainly happy to discuss that with the Minister for Social Security, but it would be under her remit. But certainly happy to do that.

3.2.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

I think the question has to be: does the Minister for Health and Social Services recognise not just the human cost that is being inflicted on thousands of individuals across the Island - who are receiving these letters being informed of a material cut in their income every month - but also the economic cost to us; because when people's mental health and other health deteriorates that becomes a false economy; and I say it is much better to make sure people do not have mental health issues in the first place - in this case caused directly by government policy - than to use some of their money to build a mental health service for them so that they can receive services for a problem that the Government has created. Does the Minister not agree with that point?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I agree with much of what the Member has said. It is right to invest in mental health services to prevent the problem becoming a major problem in the first place. That is why we invested £1.6 million in Talking Therapies, for example. When you get in there early, you can sometimes prevent a problem. All these changes are about investing in the economy, about investing in health and about investing in education. If we carry on doing the same thing you always get the same outcome.

Deputy M. Tadier:

On the back of the poor.