

# **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

## **INQUIRY INTO WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2007**

### **SESSION THREE**

#### **Members**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)**

**Mr S.R. Hill**

**Ms K. Hodson-Thomas**

**Mrs J. Hughes**

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**Hearing commenced at 11.58 am**

**DEAN, MR KIMBERLEY JOHN**  
**Acting Manager, Emergency Services Unit,**  
**Department for Community Development, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for coming. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

**Mr Dean:** Yes, I have.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Dean:** Yes, I did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee this morning?

**Mr Dean:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We have received your submission. Do you wish to propose any amendments to it?

**Mr Dean:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you wish to make an opening statement in addition to your submission?

**Mr Dean:** No.

[12:00 noon]

**The CHAIRMAN:** The administration of WANDRA relies on a number of different state government agencies. Could you give us an idea, or an overview, of your department's role in WANDRA?

**Mr Dean:** The Department for Community Development is responsible for the provision of personal hardship and distress relief payments. That covers four potential categories of assistance. Category 1 is emergency assistance. That will cover things like emergency accommodation, food, essential clothing, personal items, medical and pharmaceutical items and document replacement, for example. That is normally given out within the first 48 hours around a disaster. As a department, we do not need a disaster to be declared before we can give that assistance out.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It does not have to reach a minimum of \$240 000?

**Mr Dean:** Not for category 1, no. We have that provision because sometimes it can take a couple of days for a disaster to be declared, and we deal with people in the immediate sense, for example, those who might have been evacuated. We assist them with those needs, and if it is not a declared event, that is something the department does not consider, immediate assistance can always be provided.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does that apply across the board? If there is a house fire in Perth, or wherever, can the department come in and provide that sort of relief straightaway?

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**Mr Dean:** As a department, we provide several types of assistance. Our department has what we call emergency financial assistance that we can give to the general public - people who have suffered an unforeseen crisis. When it comes to a disaster situation, we use the same mechanisms, but different types of assistance can be provided. The other way we can assist in a disaster is what we call category 2, which is temporary living expenses. That is to assist people who may not be able to inhabit their homes to find alternative accommodation in the short term. It would pay maybe for a motel room or a hostel or some sort of supported or self-contained accommodation. We can also pay to assist if they need to go to the laundromat, for example, and some of those basic running expenses if they need to be accommodated in the short term. That normally operates for around two to three weeks maximum. The other assistance we provide under WANDRA is when it is a declared event, which is essential household contents assistance, when people have had essential goods in their homes destroyed or damaged. That is means-tested and comes into play once a disaster is declared.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Just to clarify, the first category you mentioned does not need to have a declared event, but does the second category need a declared event?

**Mr Dean:** The second one does not need to be declared either.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is there an income or assets assessment on those first two categories?

**Mr Dean:** Not the first two, no.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So it is just straight out, if something has happened?

**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is the third category when the income assessment comes in?

**Mr Dean:** That is right; an income and assets assessment comes into play at that point. There are issues around whether people are insured or underinsured, or waiting for insurance. The final category is repairs to houses. If people have suffered some structural damage to their houses in a declared event, we may be in a position to assist with some of those repairs.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that regardless of insurance?

**Mr Dean:** That again depends on whether people are insured or possibly underinsured. Again, there is an income and assets test.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Can I just clarify “insured” or “not insured”? You do not help people who are insured?

**Mr Dean:** It depends on their level of insurance. Generally, from what I understand, the benchmark is that, if people are insured, we ask them to look to their insurance company in the first instance. We quite often find that people are underinsured. In those circumstances we are able to look at assisting those people.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** With emergency assistance in the first category, you talked about documentation assistance, under which you assist people to re-establish such things as birth certificates. Is there a very long waiting time before those documents are able to be issued?

**Mr Dean:** I am not really able to comment on that. I do not have that information.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** You just put that into play, do you?

**Mr Dean:** That is right, yes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Do people then have to wait for documents to arrive?

**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** But you do not have a time frame for that?

**Mr Dean:** I could not put a time scale on that.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you provide for the cost of those documents, such as passports?

**Mr Dean:** It might be passports, birth certificates and drivers' licences, for example.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So it could cost a couple of hundred dollars up to a couple of thousand dollars, if necessary, to get all those documents back. Some people might send overseas for those types of things as well.

**Mr Dean:** At the moment, under our guidelines, the assistance in that regard is limited. It is around \$40, so it is not a huge amount. It is just a contribution to assist with that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you tell us how closely government agencies work together following a natural disaster and how well the various agencies work together to administer WANDRA?

**Mr Dean:** To set the context, I have been in the managing role only since December last year. The person who was right across this has unfortunately left our department, so I can only really talk about my experience in that time.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We have had enough disasters since that time!

**Mr Dean:** We certainly have, taking into account things like Esperance, Dwellingup and the Porongurup events recently. The sense I have had is that agencies work particularly well together. I have worked across a number of roles within my department, and I would say that the emergency services area is one where people drop the barriers and tend to work quite well. They are very good at sharing information, working together and networking. My experience has been that they work particularly well. We have a particularly close relationship with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. Whenever there is any hint of a disaster, I immediately have contact with the people in FESA with whom I liaise and, if it looks like being a declared event, I am always kept in the loop.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So you are pretty happy with those arrangements?

**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Does DCD also work with non-profit organisations?

**Mr Dean:** At the state level DCD has a state welfare emergency management committee. That is made up of a number of government and non-government organisations. On that committee we will have people from the police, FESA, the Department of Education and Training, Centrelink and a range of non-government organisations, such as the Salvation Army, the St John Ambulance Association, the Red Cross and the Country Women's Association. Whilst we have responsibility for a number of welfare responses, for our department to manage a large disaster would be quite overwhelming, so we rely on a lot of those other organisations to assist us. Some of them also have their own roles. The police have a role in emergency situations; the Department of Education and Training may have a role; and Centrelink would certainly have a role at the commonwealth level. It is really about networking and liaising with them. For us, that also goes down to a local level. In our districts we have local welfare committees, and in many ways they replicate the state committee. It is really to assist us to provide an adequate response at a local level.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** In the initial response, \$100 per person is allocated, but this, I am sure, would not fit the bill in a lot of circumstances. Would you then liaise with other charitable groups that may have funds? Would you channel people through to them for further assistance?

**Mr Dean:** We possibly could. Each disaster tends to have different issues. Quite often we will provide accommodation, so we might open up an evacuation centre. That might be running for a day or two, up to three days. Sometimes we do not have to provide accommodation. At other times the Salvation Army will come in and assist with food for people, so that we do not have to pay out for food. Each situation is different. We are fairly flexible in that we are able to respond to each situation as needed.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** You just mentioned accommodation. I will ask you a specific question on that matter. The storms of May 2005 impacted on some of Perth's southern suburbs. A submission received by the committee related to one particular family's experience. The family home was destroyed, but the family was unable to access temporary accommodation through DCD because it did not qualify under the department's means test. That this measure is not actually means-tested suggests an error or misunderstanding and perhaps highlights the importance of staff refresher training. How are front-line staff kept up to date with WANDRA and departmental processes?

[12.10 pm]

**Mr Dean:** I do not know the specifics of that particular case so I cannot comment on it too much. It would be ideal if the opportunity existed for us to obtain further information about that case - without identifying those concerned - because it would serve as a training tool. We have developed a set of guidelines around WANDRA and those guidelines have gone into our departmental field worker manual. Each of our district offices has a financial assistance officer, and that manual has been sent to them so that they know, in the event of a disaster, what assistance they can provide and how they can provide it. We also send that information directly to those people when there is a disaster. We target specific people; namely, our financial assistance officers and our team leaders. As a way of tracking expenditure, when staff fill in forms and input information on the computer, they use specific codes that can be tracked later if we need to recoup costs. We have a practice development officer around financial assistance, and part of his role is specifically looking at WANDRA and how we as a department can administer it. When a disaster occurs we send information out to people as a refresher and we talk them through it. The practice development officer is in a position to talk to them over the phone if they are in the country or to work alongside them on the ground. The development officer, for example, has been working closely with the project officer that we put in place in Dwellingup. He attended a community information day a couple of Fridays ago at which he gave people advice about financial assistance and assessed their needs. It is very much modelling behaviour, skills sets, and training people on the job. We are able to send people to a declared event. For example, I sent two of my staff to Esperance and they were able to assist the local office with financial assistance arrangements. Another way that we are looking to train staff is that in the metropolitan area we have early-response teams. Those teams comprise 10 people whom we can call at any point in time. One of those team members is specifically a financial assistance officer, and we have given them specific training in WANDRA and what it can provide. If an event occurs in the metropolitan area, we can send those people to work alongside the district staff to administer relief.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** The feedback we have received suggests that there is poor community awareness about what assistance is available under WANDRA and how it can be accessed. You mentioned that you send people to assist at the time of a disaster. Does DCD disseminate information when things are quiet, especially to disaster areas that experience repetitive events?

**Mr Dean:** The provision of information has developed over time. We undertake local advertising. For example, an advertisement was placed in the local paper in Esperance. I can provide a copy of that. It is about achieving a balance between advertising what is available and trying not to raise people's expectations. We are working our way through that. Certainly the event in Esperance was the beginning of getting clearer information out to people. I understand that some advertisements went into the Dwellingup local paper and that some were placed on various community noticeboards. A community information day was held in Dwellingup so that people could talk to our staff to find out what assistance was available.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Was that information day well attended by the community?

**chai:** From the television reports I saw, the information day at Dwellingup was well attended.

**Mr Dean:** The Dwellingup information day was particularly well set up. It was successful in part because it is a small town and people know each other. The information day was scheduled from

10.00 am to 3.00 pm. However, we did not get out of there until about 4.30 or 5.00 pm because there was such a steady stream of people. It was fantastic. People talked to representatives from our department to discuss their financial needs. They were also able to tap into emotional and psychological support. Representatives from other agencies, such as the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department of Local Government and Regional Development, also attended so that people could link into other departments.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It has been highlighted to the committee that the bureaucracy involved in times of disaster can be excessive and that requirements such as filling out forms and providing identification and proof of hardship to access assistance can add to an already difficult situation. Would you like to comment on that?

**Mr Dean:** We try to make assistance in category 1 and 2 events as expedient as possible. We can assist those who do not have identification in some situations. That is not means-tested. We try to make that assistance as expedient as possible with as little drama as possible. In a category 3 or 4 event it is about achieving balance. It is about being able to assist people where appropriate while on the other hand ensuring that government money is spent appropriately and that it goes to the right people. Certainly we welcome any moves to minimise bureaucracy while still making sure that money is accounted for appropriately.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Do you work closely with Centrelink?

**Mr Dean:** We work very closely with Centrelink. There is a Centrelink representative on our State Welfare Emergency Management Committee. That person is at the state level. In my experience with the Esperance, Dwellingup and Porongurup disasters, we worked very closely with Centrelink at the local level. Centrelink sent two people to Esperance and they have liaised closely with our people on the ground. It is conducting joint visits with our project officer in Dwellingup. I understand from discussions that I had yesterday with our person in Albany that he is conducting joint visits with Centrelink.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Are communities finding the Centrelink bureaucracy a difficult process?

**Mr Dean:** I cannot comment too much on that. I certainly have not received any negative feedback around that. It seems to be working fairly well.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Despite all the various disaster assistance measures that are in place, there are always examples of people who fall through the gap, which is what occurred in Bunbury following the storms of 2005. Some individuals had to rely on private donations to meet costs that were not otherwise covered. Is there any scope or should there be additional flexibility within the personal hardship and distress component of WANDRA to accommodate exceptional circumstances?

[12.20 pm]

**Mr Dean:** I strongly believe there should be. The example I can give is Dwellingup. When we as a department administer WANDRA, particularly providing category 1 event assistance, we use a scale up to a certain amount for accommodation, food and documents. It is a rough guide. Some of the issues that arose in Dwellingup, which had not arisen in other places, included people who stayed in their homes but who had power issues. They either bought generators, or they might already have had generators, but had spent their weekly income on fuel. The DCD was able to reimburse them by giving them extra money for food. A degree of flexibility certainly would have helped us in that regard. Another issue some people had is that they were not connected to the mains water supply and had to cart in water because it had been quite dry. We came across some people who had emptied their water tanks when defending their property and who had to pay \$300 or \$400 to refill their tanks. Again, we were able to assist those people by providing them with money for food and so forth. However, a degree of flexibility, within reason, to account for those types of things would have been good. Each disaster tends to raise different problems that we are unable to predict.

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**Mrs J. HUGHES:** In your submission, you refer to the disposable income, as opposed to gross income, and allowable deductions regarding calculating rent and mortgage payments. Can you comment further on those issues?

**Mr Dean:** I would love to, but I am not qualified to do so. I did not write the submission or have a lot to do with its input. To be honest, the issue of income and assets testing is something I am working through.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Some people appear to have large outgoings and their incomes appear to be outside the income testing; however, their outgoings leave them in a very vulnerable position. Therefore, there must be a reassessment on how that is calculated.

**Mr Dean:** I agree with that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In December 2006 the federal government announced that the NDRA would be enhanced to provide, among other things, community recovery funding and recovery grants for small businesses and primary producers. These changes helped to plug some of the gaps. In your opinion, are there any other obvious omissions under the existing WANDRA arrangements that must be addressed? Are there any glaringly obvious omissions that should be there?

**Mr Dean:** Not that I can think of. The key point for the department is the matter of flexibility. It would be desirable to have limits within which some professional judgments can be made. In some extenuating circumstances, there could be an ability to provide expenses that are above the set limits. Obviously the need to do that would have to be justified. That is the key point for me.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In your submission to the inquiry, you referred to a joint cabinet submission being prepared with FESA concerning revised limits for personal hardship and distress measures. Can you give the committee an update on how that is progressing?

**Mr Dean:** I spoke to a person from FESA yesterday, who assures me that all he must do is provide a covering memo, which should be up within the next fortnight.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is the intention of that, from your point of view?

**Mr Dean:** The intention is to have some clearly defined limits. The DCD has been working with some limits currently that have been signed off by our respective ministers regarding personal hardship and distress payments. We want those limits to be ratified. A key matter for the DCD is to index those limits.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Not to the CPI?

**Mr Dean:** There must be some sort of indexation. Again, that is not my area of expertise. We want those limits indexed so that they keep in line with real costs on an annual basis to avoid the need for another process to increase them five years down the track.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Would you want that component to be flexible?

**Mr Dean:** Yes. There is reference in the submission regarding whether the same sorts of opportunities under WANDRA should be covered for non-natural disasters. There are various views on that matter. My personal view is that I would like to see the funding extended to non-natural disasters, mainly because it would expedite matters for the department. We know that it would kick in and we could deal with it later. Currently it is a grey area.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What types of disasters are you referring to?

**Mr Dean:** It could be, for example, a chemical explosion or a terrorist attack. It is my view that people who are affected by those types of disasters should have the same access to the type of support that other people are getting.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that not currently being provided because those types of disasters have not occurred here?

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**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We are starting to plan for those types of disasters.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** A while ago a proponent referred to the Bali bombings. Would that type of disaster be covered under an extension of the funding?

**Mr Dean:** Possibly. I am not sure how the Bali incident fits into WANDRA. Certainly we provided a welfare response.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The DCD provided a very big response.

**Mr Dean:** That is right. The commonwealth component came into play because the commonwealth government helped bring back people from Bali to Australia.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The DCD, particularly in Kingsley, dealt with the victims and their families and helped provide counselling?

**Mr Dean:** That is right.

**The CHAIRMAN:** At the time, the place was just about flooded with counsellors and other people who made themselves available.

**Mr Dean:** That is right. That is the type of response that we would provide as a matter of course.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Are you referring to disasters that might occur on our own soil?

**Mr Dean:** The key point for the DCD is that although it provides a welfare response across the board, that is not its core business. The DCD might have to go to Treasury at the end of the year to recoup costs. If WANDRA applied to non-natural disasters or some offshore events for which the DCD provided a response in Western Australia, it would make it easier for us -

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** To get that response and do it adequately?

**Mr Dean:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** When you conducted the WANDRA-administered type relief and the department expended \$50 000, how was that money recouped? Is it already provided for in the DCD's budget, or does it comprise additional funds from Treasury that come from WANDRA?

**Mr Dean:** We make a submission after we have calculated our costs, and that submission goes to FESA, which works it through the system and we end up recouping the costs. About two months ago, for example, we recouped money for the costs associated with our response to the events in Lebanon.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** When the department works in liaison with local governments and others - obviously they have their own community development areas and assistance - is there a provision by which the local government is assisted with funding to provide extra staffing, and are assistance measures in place, or is that a burden that is carried by the local government?

**Mr Dean:** That is not something we assist them with. I understand that it is carried by local government. Under the Emergency Management Act, local government picks up more responsibility with regard to responding to disaster situations.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** And welfare assistance?

**Mr Dean:** DCD has responsibility for specific welfare assistance. This is often provided in collaboration with local government.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you again for coming in - both times! I thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Can you please make those corrections and return the transcript within 10 days of receipt. If the transcript is not returned within that time, we will deem it to be correct.

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**Hearing concluded at 12.30 pm**

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