

AUSTRALIAN HELLENIC COUNCIL (AHC) MEETS WITH FaHCSIA AND CENTRELINK

Members of the Australian Hellenic Council (AHC) met in Melbourne with officials from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Centrelink on 27 May 2010, to discuss the progress and issues that have arisen with the implementation of the Social Security Agreement between Australia and Greece.

AHC delegates were George Vellis Coordinator NSW, Patricia Drivas National Coordinator, Dean Tsubakos National Secretary, Bill Papastergiadis President Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne & Victoria and participation by telephone conference were Harry Dannelis President Greek Community NSW and Mr. Costas Vertzayias Honorary AHC member.

Ms. Michalina Stawyskyj PSM, International Branch Manager represented Minister Macklin, Centre-

link International was represented by Mr. Pat Phillips and Mr. Peter Hutchinson.

Mr. Phillips stated that overall there have been over 16,000 claims for a Greek pension from Australia since the start of the Agreement in October 2008. Greece has advised Centrelink that under the agreement 800 Greek pensions have been granted, however how many have in fact received payment is not know. The large back log on claims is mainly due to the manual processing in Greece as their records are not automated as is the case in Australia.

Also, over 5500 claims have been received for an Australian Age Pension, 60% have been processed with 2400 new Australian pensions paid in Greece, the remainder is expected to be finalised within the next three months.

The delegation expressed the communities concerns that Centrelink on the basis that a claim has been granted moved toward reducing pensioner's payments. However, in most cases no payment has been forthcoming thus causing considerable hardship to some individuals. Upon complaining to Centrelink, staff response has been "take it up with the Greek Government". In this case a request was made for

the department's assistance in facilitating this process as our elderly members are left in limbo with nowhere to go.

Centrelink advised that under Australian social security law when advice has been received that a pension is granted then the department is obliged to reassess a person's Australian pension. Under the income test only 20% of recipients had their Australian pension rate reduced.

In response it was agreed that Centrelink would, upon request liaise with the Greek pension funds on behalf of individuals in the event that payments are interrupted or granted and not received within the normal timeframe.

Also in the event that the Australian pension reduction causes difficulties for individuals due to the delay between grant and payment Centrelink can help.

Centrelink's International Services informed of a specifically dedicated Greek agreement team available for assistance in the Greek language.

The number to call from Australia is - 131673

The Australian Hellenic Council discussed raising delays in the processing of the Greek Pension applications with the Greek Embassy.



Bill Papastergiadis President Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne & Victoria



Harry Dannelis President Greek Community NSW



Mr. Costas Vertzayias Honorary AHC member.

NSW GOVERNMENT STRENGTHENS COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY HARMONY

Laws introduced into NSW Parliament this week will strengthen the role of the Community Relations Commission in cultivating community harmony.

Minister for Citizenship John Hatzistergos said the amendments follow a review of the Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000 which established the Commission.

"These amendments are about reaffirming the NSW Government's commitment to promoting social cohesion," Mr Hatzistergos said.

"They strengthen our commitment to shared values within our democratic society and underline the importance of a unifying commitment to Australia by all citizens in New South Wales.

"These reforms are not about imposing new requirements on people merely by virtue of the fact that they come from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds."

"They instead articulate that the strongest guarantee of diversity and harmony is a clear commitment to the democracy and rule of law on which our great nation is based."

The review was conducted by Ms Irene Moss AO former Commissioner of the Independent Commission Against Corruption. One of her key recommendations was a strengthening of the Principles of Multiculturalism as defined by the Act.

The proposed principles will state that multiculturalism is founded on the following:

- The people of NSW are of different linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds who are free to profess and practice their heritage;



- All individuals irrespective of their linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds should demonstrate a unified commitment to Australia, its interests and future and should recognise the importance of shared values governed by the rule of law within a democratic framework;
- All individuals should have the greatest possible opportunity to contribute to, and participate in, all aspects of public life;
- All individuals and institutions should respect and make provision for the culture, language and religion of others within an Australian legal

and institutional framework where English is the common language;

- All individuals should have the greatest possible opportunity to make use of and participate in activities and programmes run by the NSW Government;
- All institutions of NSW should recognise the linguistic and cultural assets in the population of NSW as a resource and promote this resource to maximise the development of the State.

Other amendments include the creation of a clearer leadership role for the Commission in co-ordinating whole-of-government responses to emerging community issues and referral powers to the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW.

"Ours is a great State because of the commitment shown by people of diverse cultural backgrounds to our public life, our economy and our social fabric," said Mr Hatzistergos.

"The NSW Government is proud of that social cohesion, and the new amendments to better facilitate the work of the Community Relations Commission demonstrate our ongoing commitment to the rich cultural diversity of NSW."

The Community Relations Commission is the peak independent body that provides advice to government on multiculturalism policy, supports community activities, and offers translation services.

*Hon. John Hatzistergos MLC
Attorney General
Minister for Citizenship
Minister for Regulatory Reform*