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Carers amongst thousands missing out on government assistance

Thousands of Australians, including carers and the recently bereaved, are missing out on assistance worth \$623 million because the government does not actively promote awareness of such entitlements.

A new analysis by The Australia Institute, *Missing out: Unclaimed government assistance and concession benefits*, reveals that across just four Centrelink payments – Parenting Payment, Carer Allowance, Disability Support Pension and Bereavement Allowance – more than 168,000 Australians are likely to be missing out on government assistance they are entitled to.

The main reason for this is a lack of awareness of available support and knowing how to access such help. Unlike the Tax Office which will pursue unpaid tax, or Centrelink seeking to recover any money that may have been incorrectly paid because of a change in personal circumstances, there is no obligation on Centrelink to pursue people who are eligible for payments but may not be aware. Centrelink's guide to payments states:

'It is your responsibility to decide if you wish to apply for a payment and to make the application, having regard to your particular circumstances.'

Complex paperwork and eligibility criteria are also identified as factors in missing out on support, while one-in-four concession card holders said they avoid using their cards due to feelings of stigmatisation.

"While we regularly hear about the scourge of welfare fraud and the government cracking down on 'cheats', we seldom hear about what it is doing to find those people missing out on assistance they are entitled to," said Research Fellow David Baker.

"The current level of complexity in understanding and applying for support means that those most likely to benefit will be amongst those missing out.

"In 2004 the government reported that approximately 1.3 million Australians, the equivalent of one-in-twenty, were missing out on some form of government support. Yet, in the six years since this estimate was published there have been no significant policies announced or implemented to systematically identify these people," said Mr Baker.

The paper recommends: establishing an Entitlements Commission; simplifying benefits and reporting; outsourcing the task of matching people with Centrelink; and, applying Centrelink's existing data-matching ability to identify those who are eligible but missing out.

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