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Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry  
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Commissioner - The Honourable Justice Catherine Holmes

Dear Commissioner,

I submit this submission based on my experiences as a Financial Counsellor working with flood victims. I was employed by a local agency who received short term funding (three months) from the Federal Government to specifically work with people affected by the January 2011 floods.

Financial counsellors help their clients with budgeting, advocacy with creditors, advocacy with ombudsmen and identifying options to overcome their financial difficulty.

As a worker it was disappointing that funding was only for three months as it placed a limit on how deeply I was able to engage and help people as I knew that I could only offer short term assistance to the clients I assisted. Although I was able to assist over 30 people in the time the funding was available, more people could have been helped if the unused funding had been rolled over for another three or four months.

Much has been reported in the media, at the Commission hearings and in submissions received by the Commission about the lack of response by insurance companies, poor communication by insurers and fine print loopholes in insurance policies.

A number of the clients I assisted were treated rudely by their insurer to the point where their insurers refused to return phone calls or else put them on hold for twenty or thirty minutes and the phone call terminated while they waited. None of my clients were aware of Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS) and although they were in dispute with their insurer, their insurer never told them about FOS. The companies included the big insurers Suncorp, IAG and QBE. Interestingly once my clients said they were going to FOS most of the companies suddenly found the time to speak with my clients.

Another disappointing aspect of my work was accessing Application Forms for the Premier's Disaster Fund. Some of my clients lived in isolated rural communities and when they rang up to obtain an application form they were told to download it from the web. Given that we are talking about people who had a flood go through their house (or in some cases over the roof), how could they access the internet when their phone/internet service had been disconnected? When they said that they were not living in their house and or did not have internet they were then told to go to their local state government department to get the application form. For some there was no state government department in their town and for others, even in a town the size of Bundaberg, state government departments apart from Department of Communities

did not have the forms. In the last week of April 2011, I approached a number of state government departments in Bundaberg and I was told it was “not our job” or “don’t know what you are talking about”.

I rang the hotline number for the Premier’s Disaster Fund to let them know that call centre staff were causing distress amongst flood victims. My observations were not welcomed by the person I spoke to. When I asked to be transferred to someone more senior I was told that there was no one but at my insistence they took my details and said they would pass them on and someone would call me back within 48 hours. Five months later I am still waiting for that call back.

In conclusion my submission highlights the following points:

1. Government assistance to help flood victims in some cases was too short term.
2. Insurers did not inform their customers about FOS.
3. Premier’s Disaster Fund Application Forms were not accessible to all flood victims.
4. State government agencies and departments in rural and regional centres did not know about the Premier’s Disaster Fund.
5. Call centre handling calls regarding Premier’s Disaster Fund was causing distress to some flood victims.
6. State government did not have a process in place to accept complaints about state government service delivery to flood victims or to ensure services being delivered in rural and regional centres were effective or available.

Yours Sincerely,

David Lawson  
Financial Counsellor