

Independent Review of the APS
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
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To whom it may concern

Personal submission on increasing Australian Public Service employee welfare through leave banks

Current provisions for personal leave in many Australian Public Service (APS) Enterprise Agreements could be seen to offer enviable conditions when compared with the private sector. The annual provision of 15-20 days personal leave¹, and the opportunity to accrue unused leave, is beneficial for career public servants, many of whom have hundreds of days of personal leave at the time of retirement. Newer staff, younger staff, and those that have experienced career gaps do not, of course, have this benefit.

The APS workforce is ageing², retirement ages are increasing, and it is likely that larger numbers of employees will experience chronic illnesses during their working lives. It is desirable to bring new staff with new ideas into the APS, from other sectors of the Australian economy, including the private sector³. These employees will not have as much accrued personal leave as colleagues of the same age who have longer careers in the APS.

These factors increase the possibility that larger numbers of employees will experience serious chronic conditions, life-limiting illnesses or have carer responsibilities without sufficient leave to provide financial support for them and their families. This particularly discriminates against new employees, younger employees and people (generally women) who have had career breaks due to family responsibilities.

We understand that many, if not all, APS Enterprise Agreements offer the Secretary, Chief Executive Officers or their delegates the power to grant miscellaneous leave to staff in these circumstances at their discretion, and after a somewhat onerous and often distressing process. Several of us have faced life-limiting or chronic illnesses and have considered, or been granted miscellaneous leave. Our experiences show that the uncertainty associated with such an application and the lack of clarity about how miscellaneous leave would be agreed have caused extra anxiety in a very stressful time. This stress is not conducive to a fast and successful recovery process.

The concept of 'leave banks' has been implemented successfully in many organisations worldwide, including the civil service⁴ and academia⁵ in the United States of America and local councils in New Zealand⁶. The purpose is to mitigate the difficulties faced by catastrophic illness or injury to employees, whilst offsetting the overall impact on agencies.

¹ ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/archive/18Dec15-ALJP-Driving_a_soft_bargain.pdf

² www.apsc.gov.au/shape-aps

³ www.apsc.gov.au/e-opening-aps

⁴ www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/leave-administration/fact-sheets/voluntary-leave-bank-program/

⁵ E.g. www.hr.virginia.edu/hr-for-you/university-staff/university-staff-benefits/university-staff-leave-plan/

⁶ E.g. <http://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2017/11/would-you-donate-to-a-sick-leave-bank.html>

Employees are able to donate leave to a pool which is managed centrally, usually by human resources staff. Rules govern how much leave may be donated in a particular period and require that donors maintain a minimum amount of leave. Staff apply to access additional leave held in the pool once their personal leave is exhausted. Typically, a board or committee determines whether applicants' circumstances meet stated criteria for accessing donated leave.

There may be limited financial benefits to APS employers if personal leave was able to be donated to a central pool, because Enterprise Agreements do not allow personal leave to be 'cashed out', and personal leave becomes void if an individual ceases employment. It may be more viable for the APS if recreational leave could be donated to a central 'leave bank' pool.

A leave bank pool would impose minimal costs upon the APS, particularly after the initial set up, but provides enormous benefits. These benefits align with the stated APS values, particularly impartiality, accountability, respect and ethics. This scheme provides considerable benefits to both donor and receiver. Complex illness does not only impact upon individuals and their families. Work colleagues often experience considerable distress due to co-workers illness and feel powerless to help. This positive initiative allows the opportunity for them to provide real assistance.

The leave bank initiative will offer substantial benefits to the APS, particularly to the well-being, including mental health, of unwell employees and their colleagues, and also has the potential to reduce the recreational leave liabilities within APS agencies.

If an initiative such as this one was implemented into the APS, it would demonstrate clearly the commitment the APS has towards its personnel in times of hardship. It would also be a standard that the private sector could use as a benchmark to introduce to their working standards. This is an opportunity to actively model APS values, and to show leadership in supporting employee well-being.

Yours sincerely



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