

UK: Official guidelines to deal with suicide by the jobless

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18 May 2011

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has issued official guidance on how to deal with a claimant who threatens suicide.

The guidelines were issued last month and obtained by the *Guardian* newspaper from a senior Jobcentre employee. The need for such a six-point plan graphically indicates the impact of the government's austerity measures on the most vulnerable.

The "new policy for all DWP businesses to help them manage suicide and self-harm declarations from customers" states:

"Some customers may say they intend to self-harm or kill themselves as a threat or a tactic to 'persuade', others will mean it. It is very hard to distinguish between the two ... For this reason, all declarations must be taken seriously."

Such ghoulish advice is being given out in anticipation of the human suffering and despair due to the Conservative-Liberals government's £100 billion cuts in public spending. Millions of people's lives will be devastated.

The number officially unemployed in Britain now stands at 2.48 million. Young people account for a substantial section of the total, with 963,000 aged below 25 out of work. Nearly one in four young people (224,000) are long-term unemployed, having been out of work for more than 12 months.

Among the over-50s jobless, 46 percent have also been out of work for more than 12 months.

The suicide guidance information, along with a covering letter, was received by the *Guardian* together with a letter from the anonymous employee that read, "Absolutely nobody has ever seen this guidance before, leading staff to believe it has been put together ahead of the incapacity benefit and disability living allowance cuts.

"We were a bit shocked. Are we preparing ourselves to be like the Samaritans? The fact that we've dealt with the public for so many years without such guidance has made people feel a bit fearful about what's coming.

"We've suddenly got this new aspect to our job. The bigger picture is people here are wondering how savage these cuts are going to be. And we're the frontline staff having to deal with the fallout from these changes."

The increase in the unemployment rolls takes place as the right to basic social security benefits is being curtailed. Hundreds of thousands of people are to be removed from benefits, including Incapacity Benefit. This is due to legislation first introduced by the previous Labour government and set to be extended in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Welfare Reform Bill. Last Wednesday, thousands of disabled people demonstrated in central London against these proposed changes and others.

Those currently receiving Incapacity Benefit are to be retested, as the benefit is to be replaced by the Employment Support Allowance (ESA). The government intends to transfer all claimants, some 2.4 million people, to the new system by 2015. Over a million people are threatened with re-testing. Five hundred doctors will carry out up to 10,000 assessments each week over the next five years. Hundreds of thousands of claimants will be driven off sickness benefit.

The DWP expect 50 percent of claimants who appeal to be found fit for work. They are then moved onto Jobseekers' Allowance, a benefit dependent on the claimant actively seeking work and accepting any work that is offered. Many will lose up to £1,600 a year as well as the medical support they receive.

Hundreds of thousands of recipients of Housing

Benefits will be made homeless as a result of the government's proposals to cut the amount it spends on accommodation in the private rented sector. This will have the greatest impact in London, where more than a quarter of a million people could be forced out of their homes.

There is growing evidence that the occurrence and risk of suicide is growing, particularly among young people, in the face of the intolerable economic and social conditions they confront.

In March 2010, Vicky Harrison, a 21-year-old, took her life with a massive overdose of drugs. The young woman from Darwen in Lancashire had applied for around 200 jobs, and spent much of her time approaching supermarkets and local businesses as well as looking in papers, job centres and on the Internet to find work.

The day before she took her own life, Vicky had received yet another letter of rejection from a nursery school where she had applied for work as a teaching assistant. She committed suicide the day before she was due to sign on to claim her £51-a-week pittance Jobseekers' Allowance.

The *Guardian* cited Julie Tipping, an appeals officer for Disability Solutions, a group that assists benefit claimants trying to overturn decisions made following "work capability assessment tests" that found them fit for work. In the last year, two of her clients have made "real attempts" at suicide. Both were taken to hospital and subsequently sectioned under mental health legislation. Tipping commented, "It's real and true. A lot of people think these people are crying wolf to get their money, but that's not the case. They are suffering from real problems and can't face it any more."

In February, the *Guardian* reported on a protest against the disability benefits cuts. A man there explained that his uncle, who had severe mental health problems, committed suicide after work capability assessment tests gave him zero points and found him fit to work. After appealing the decision and winning his case, he was called in for another assessment. Again he scored zero points and was told he did not qualify for disability benefits. He committed suicide a few days before another tribunal date was set to hear yet another appeal.

The leak of claimant suicide guidance by the DWP follows the news last month that Jobcentre Plus

employees had been instructed to trick claimants into losing welfare entitlements. A member of staff revealed to the *Guardian* that workers at his jobcentre were given targets of three people a week to refer for sanctions, through which benefits are removed for up to six months.

After first denying the report, the DWP was forced to acknowledge this was taking place, but claimed that the government's "message to be clearer about conditionality had been misinterpreted by a small number of Jobcentre Plus offices".

In reality, in some Jobcentre Plus offices staff had been threatened with sanctions by management if they did not reach the targets. One DWP employee who joined in July 2009 said, "The first thing that happened is they took us to a presentation where we were shown a big league table of statistics, including sanctions. They pointed out the offices that were doing well—it's like it's a big competition.

"I was threatened by management for asking too many questions. I felt what we were doing in some cases was unlawful."

The worker believed DWP offices had "their own take" on social security law in terms of the strictness with which they were sanctioning people. He added, "Management, and the culture of [Jobcentre Plus]—with only a few exceptions—viewed claimants with contempt."



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