



25 October 2022

Tēnā koe

On 23 September 2022, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *I understand the Ministry for Social Development has recently issued a directive that the Steps to Freedom benefit, for people who have been released from prison, will no longer be provided through preloaded cards on release from prison, and that clients will instead have to go in person to MSD offices, which are only open during business hours.*
- *Could you please provide the current advice for how the policy will be implemented, the rationale for changing this policy, and the evidence that this decision was based on?*
- *In particular, I would like any information you hold regarding the following:*
 - *considerations given to inmates who are released after MSD offices close*
 - *considerations for how clients, including disabled clients, will get to MSD offices when they have no access to funds*
 - *considerations for how this policy will affect clients who are trespassed from MSD offices.*

There has been no policy change to the Steps to Freedom Special Needs Grant. There has been an operational change following the removal of the COVID-19 traffic light systems. The Ministry is now reverting to the pre-COVID-19 Steps to Freedom payment process.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry introduced an interim Steps to Freedom payment process where preloaded Westpac debit cards were sent to prison facilities. This was so Corrections Officers were able to issue a preloaded Westpac debit card to a person who had an unscheduled release from prison if they met the qualifications to receive Steps to Freedom.

I will first address the Steps to Freedom process for scheduled and unscheduled releases, before addressing considerations for clients who are unable to enter a Work and Income site.

Implementation

Scheduled releases

When a person is scheduled to be released from prison, the Department of Corrections will notify the Ministry prior to release. A Ministry staff member, usually a Prison Reintegration Case Manager, will determine whether they are entitled to receive a Steps to Freedom payment.

The staff member will organise a Steps to Freedom Westpac debit card to be provided upon release. In addition to providing this card, the staff member will determine whether any other Ministry support is available, or whether the person can be connected to other support services. The Ministry provides tailored wrap-around support to eligible people before and after they are released from prison, which might include a main benefit (such as Jobseeker Support) and help to secure and sustain employment. In addition, anyone requiring additional assistance with an unexpected or emergency cost might be eligible for one off assistance.

Unscheduled releases

A person with an unscheduled release that is assessed as being entitled to Steps to Freedom was still able to receive the same assistance that a person with a scheduled release receives.

If a person's release is unscheduled, they or their agent must present to a Work and Income site. A Ministry staff member will then determine whether there is entitled to receive a Steps to Freedom payment. This payment can be made by either loading a Westpac debit card, or by direct credit to their bank account.

There is a Work and Income Office within an hour's driving distance from all New Zealand prisons.

Considerations for clients

The Ministry provides phone-based services, as well as face-to-face. If a client is unable to access a Work and Income site for reasons such as illness or being in isolation, they can contact Ministry staff over the phone. If the client has sufficient identification and verification to determine entitlement, the Ministry will work with the client over the phone. If the client has a bank account, the Ministry can issue the Steps to Freedom payment through direct credit.

However, if the client has insufficient identification to determine their eligibility, they will need to go to a Work and Income site with their identification documents. Additionally, if the client is needing to apply for a

main benefit upon their release, they will need to attend a face to face appointment in a Service Centre, with identification documents.

The Work and Income general enquiries line is open Monday to Friday from 7am to 6pm, and from 8am to 1pm on Saturdays. The general enquiries line can be contacted on 0800 559 009.

Clients can nominate an agent to act on their behalf to access services or assistance from the Ministry. This includes clients who have been trespassed from Ministry premises. You can find more information about the appointment of an agent on the following link: www.workandincome.govt.nz/map/income-support/core-policy/agents/index.html.

The principles and purposes of the Official Information Act 1982 under which you made your request are:

- to create greater openness and transparency about the plans, work and activities of the Government,
- to increase the ability of the public to participate in the making and administration of our laws and policies and
- to lead to greater accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

This Ministry fully supports those principles and purposes. The Ministry therefore intends to make the information contained in this letter and any attached documents available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this letter on the Ministry's website. Your personal details will be deleted, and the Ministry will not publish any information that would identify you as the person who requested the information.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, please feel free to contact OIA_Requests@msd.govt.nz.

If you are not satisfied with this response, you have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or 0800 802 602.

Ngā mihi nui



Karl Oliveira
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Client Service Delivery