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PRESS RELEASE

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Benefit tests failing the sick

A local advice charity has seen a worrying increase in the number of sick people finding their benefits cut following work capability assessments.

South Derbyshire Citizens Advice Bureau report that the assessments, an essential part of the process of proving eligibility for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), are failing to properly consider the impact of health problems.

“We are particularly worried that people with mental health problems are being wrongly assessed” said Jackie Spencer, Chief Executive of the Church Gresley-based charity.

“Mental health problems are not necessarily obvious, and people suffering from them can struggle to put into words the impact on their daily life. In some cases, people take medication to help them get through the stress of the assessment, and this can then mask their usual symptoms”.

New statistics published by the Ministry of Justice show that 40% of people who appeal a decision to remove their ESA win at tribunal. “This is higher than for any other benefit” said Jackie Spencer, “and leads us to believe that initial decisions are not being handled as well as they should be”. Although people may ultimately win their case, it can take months for an appeal to be heard. The delay can cause a descent into debt and leads to a great deal of stress, worsening health problems.

The bureau are also concerned that proposed changes to ESA in the Welfare Reform Bill, currently before the House of Lords, will mean that people who become sick after working and paying national insurance contributions will only be able to claim contributory ESA for 12 months, after which their benefit will be means tested according to their household income. “This may well mean that people whose partners are working in low paid jobs will receive no ESA after 12 months, and the whole family will see their entitlement to help with housing costs and council tax cut”, said Jackie Spencer.

If you have been refused ESA and would like help making an appeal or advice on what to do next, you can contact the bureau on 01283 210 107 if you live in South Derbyshire, or 08444 111 444 if you live in East Staffordshire.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. The statistics quoted come from "Social Security and Child Support Statistics: 1 April 2011 to 31 August 2011, Statistical Notice", page 8, published by The Ministry of Justice and HM Courts Service,
<http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/statistics-and-data/mojstats/sscs-stats-notice-aug2011.pdf>
2. The Citizens Advice service helps people resolve their legal, money and other problems by providing information and advice, and by influencing policy makers.
3. The advice provided by the Citizens Advice is free, independent, confidential and impartial, and available to everyone regardless of race, sex, disability, sexuality or nationality.
4. Most Citizens Advice service staff are trained volunteers, working at nearly 3,400 service outlets across England and Wales.
5. Advice and information www.adviceguide.org.uk. Volunteer hotline 08541 264 264.
6. For more information please contact Lynsey Hornsby, 01283 210108, lhornsby@southderbyshirecab.org.uk.