



NEWS

SA Public Trustee treats clients as 'inconveniences', inquiry hears

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A FORMER supervisor in the Office of the Public Trustee has blown the whistle on an "appalling" culture of maladministration.

John Oliver, who joined the Public Trustee in 1998 after more than 20 years with Westpac, revealed during a parliamentary committee hearing today "significant errors" in managing people's money.

The Public Trustee administers more than \$1 billion annually.

"I was appalled by the lack of accountability and the lack of checking of work being undertaken," Mr Oliver told the hearing at Parliament House.

"I became the target of abuse and bullying because I attempted to manage the work of my employees and their performance by ensuring the tasks set were carried out and the reports and audits were completed correctly.

"These people saw the clients as inconveniences."

Mr Oliver, a team leader in the personal estates branch and then a project officer until 2006, said the management "culture" was to accept documents from staff at "face value".

"It was considered totally inappropriate to question anything presented by a subordinate for your signature," Mr Oliver said.

"I became more and more concerned at the significant errors that I was finding, which put both the client at risk of financial disadvantage and Public Trustee at risk of liability for imprudent management of those funds."

Among cases of concern he outlined to the committee were:

AN elderly man who missed out on 15 months of an age pension because the Trustee did not forward his birth certificate to Centrelink.

WARNINGS of financial abuse by family members of clients were ignored.

THE son of an elderly client continued to drain a bank account of money for four months after the Public Trustee was supposed to redirect pension payments.

A CLIENT in Whyalla needed \$3000 in home maintenance, which was denied except for urgent repairs, but two months later the Trustee approved \$7000 for a car to be driven by her designated driver, who lived in Salisbury.

SEVERAL officers regularly "binned" their daily correspondence about their clients' estates and personal affairs.

AFTER four years, one client awarded \$280,000 had just \$80,000 and a \$7000 used car to his name.

Mr Oliver is currently employed by Housing SA, where he said he comes across Public Trustee clients still experiencing similar problems.

The inquiry into allegations of financial mismanagement and workplace bullying in the Office of the Public Trustee was approved by the Upper House of State Parliament in March.

Mr Oliver's evidence to the committee comes as an Attorney-General's Department investigation last week found a senior public servant "liable to disciplinary action" for years of workplace bullying in the Office of the Public Trustee.

