

Reference No: E109/171/97; **Date:** 10/12/97

Circular 35/1997:- Employee Assistance Service

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1. I am directed by the Minister for Finance to refer to the Employee Assistance Service (EAS), a work-based service which has been provided in the Civil Service since 1974 (General Council Reports 624 and 1081 refer). A small number of Government Departments had already provided a welfare service prior to that date.
2. The purpose of this Circular is to raise awareness of the service and to provide some information about it. Details of the service, drafted in a question and answer format, are attached as Appendix A to this Circular.
3. To further increase awareness of the EAS, it has been decided to circulate to all staff, annually, a report prepared by the Employee Assistance Officers of their activities in the previous year. The Report would include such issues as statistical information on usage of the service, the group training undertaken and aspects of the future development of the service. The Report relating to 1996 will be distributed shortly.

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J McGovern

Assistant Secretary

Appendix A to Circular 35/97

THE CIVIL SERVICE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICE

1 What is the Employee Assistance Service?

The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) is a work based support service, designed to assist employees manage personal difficulties, which, if left unattended, may adversely affect their work performance and/or attendance and their quality of life. The service provides confidential assistance and a wide range of supports to staff and management in relation to personal or job-related problems. All Employee Assistance Officers (EAOs) are highly skilled and trained in counselling techniques, so that they can deal confidently and appropriately with staff who avail of the Service. It is not intended that the EAS should replace existing professional medical or psychological services. Where an EAO considers that a problem could best be dealt with by referral for further help, s/he has extensive information about the range of professional services available and can assist in arranging onward referral, should the client so wish. The EAS also provides a valuable resource to managers who have staff responsibilities, in that it complements the responsibility which managers have for the Welfare of their staff.

2 Is the EAS Confidential?

Yes, the Service is Confidential. Any discussion between a self referred client and an EAO is confidential. Third parties will not be involved without the prior knowledge and consent of the client, except in life threatening situations or where the EAO becomes aware of a breach of criminal law, or in some other similar serious situation where the concealment of information would compromise the EAO. Clients will be made aware of this obligation should the occasion arise.

Where an employee has been referred to the EAO by his/her manager or by Personnel, any proposed feedback or report will be discussed with the client in advance. The maintenance of a relationship of trust between EAOs and their clients is critical to the credibility and success of

the EAS in any Department.

3 How does it differ from a Welfare Service?

A Welfare Service primarily reacts to problems. An EAS plays a proactive role, in addition to the more traditional reactive role.

4 In what way is the EAS proactive?

The traditional welfare approach largely responded to symptoms of problems as presented by staff as well as offering compassionate support. While an important element of EAS work will always be reactive in nature, the EAS places a greater emphasis on a proactive role, which is preventive in nature.

To provide a proactive service, the EAOs

- encourage staff to make approach to an EAO at an early stage if they have a concern about a personal issue or about another member of staff; as a general rule, a potential problem is dealt with more successfully the sooner it is addressed

- are involved in activities which promote the EAS as a resource by participating in presentations to interested groups/persons about the EAS and by providing information on welfare related matters.

the aim is that, by promoting the service, crises will be minimised by making employees aware of a source of information which may help them to make informed decisions, and by encouraging them to seek appropriate help if and when required.

5 Why is an EAS provided?

The provision of a service of this nature arises from a recognition that staff are a valued resource, whose continued well being contributes to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the Civil Service.

6 How many EAOs are there?

There are currently twenty-one EAOs, four of whom are job sharing. They cover all the Government Departments and Offices. Smaller Departments/Offices share the services of an EAO with another Department/Office.

7 What is the role of the Department Finance in relation to the EAS?

While EAOs are employed by individual Departments or Offices, the Department of Finance coordinates the recruitment and training of EAOs and is responsible for the central policy in regard to the development of the EAS.

8 How are EAOs selected?

EAOs are selected by means of a competition run by the Civil Service Commission. The post is graded as Higher Executive Officer. All serving civil servants, who have a minimum of ten years' experience in an established capacity in the Civil Service may apply, regardless of grade. Candidates are assessed by reference to their maturity of outlook, their concern for the well-being of others, their aptitude for communicating effectively (in particular their aptitude for developing relationships of trust and confidence), their judgement, their listening skills, their ability to take an objective and non-directive approach to dealing with other people's problems and their ability to display initiative and efficiency in setting priorities and balancing demands. While not essential, in practice most appointees would have relevant qualifications and/or relevant experience prior to appointment (eg active involvement with voluntary charitable or support organisations).

9 How are EAOs trained?

EAOs are given extensive training, as appropriate to the individual officer. The training takes the form of formal courses, on-the-job training (including ongoing group training), peer support and professional supervision. Supervision in this context means access to professional guidance to discuss cases (without use of names) and to get a critical analysis of the handling of the case. This facility gives EAOs the opportunity to reappraise their counselling skills and their approach to casework. EAOs are entitled to additional hours of supervision in their first

year of appointment. Each EAO chooses his/her supervisor, who must be a counsellor or psychologist from outside the Civil Service, who is fully qualified to act as a professional supervisor. EAOs are also encouraged and facilitated in participating in further relevant training during the course of their work. Most of the EAOs currently serving have or are availing of that facility. In addition to individual training, numerous group training sessions are held throughout the year, to update on skills and information. Three EAOs are selected by the group each year to assess the group's training needs and arrange suitable seminars and workshops in consultation with the Department of Finance. All the EAOs are members of the Association of Welfare and Employee Assistance Counsellors (AWEAC), the national association of employee assistance officers working in the public and private sectors.

10 What is the difference between an EAO and a HEO in Personnel Section?

An EAO is not a line division officer. Although EAOs are, in general, part of the Personnel Division in a Department/Office, their role is quite separate from that of other HEOs. As outlined in paragraph 8, EAOs compete for selection on the basis of particular qualities and skills. They have a specific job description, which is distinct from standard personnel functions and they are given training specific to their duties. It is vital to the client/EAO relationship that there is a clear perception of that distinction. As stated in paragraph 2, even where an employee has been referred to the EAO by Personnel, a report back to Personnel will not be made prior to discussing it with the client. For an EAS to be effective, it must be seen to be independent as well as confidential.

11 What are the duties of an EAO?

The duties of an EAO are to provide a confidential support and referral service to staff and management on a wide variety of problems and difficulties arising both within and outside the workplace. This includes assisting staff in evaluating and assessing personal difficulties and problems, supporting them in the planning and structuring of ways to resolve such difficulties and following up with contact and support. In addition, EAOs are to promote, co-ordinate and

disseminate practical advice and information to staff and management on a wide range of issues relating to health and welfare. In order to discharge their duties effectively EAOs develop contact with a range of welfare agencies and specialist services outside their Department and also maintain effective liaison with line management and staff on a wide range of issues relating to health and welfare.

12 Who can use the Service?

The EAS is available to all serving and retired civil servants, and, where appropriate, their families. In the majority of cases, officers contact an EAO directly themselves, on their own behalf. However, in some instances, initial contact may be made by a concerned friend or colleague, or by a member of the officer's family, or by a staff representative on behalf of a union member. Local managers or Personnel section may also contact the EAO if they are concerned about an individual employee. Early contact is encouraged as this is often the key to the resolution of difficulties.

13 What does the Service offer?

EAOs offer clients:

- * access to comprehensive information on a broad range of welfare related issues, including citizen rights and entitlement, names, addresses, facilities and services provided by voluntary and statutory organisations
- * an in-house non directive counselling service, which centres on
 - an opportunity to explore and assess personal difficulties /concerns
 - a planned structured approach in helping the client resolve his/her concerns
 - information necessary to make informed decisions
- * When appropriate, arrangements for referral to external services, counsellors etc
- * follow up contact and support

14 What type of issues can be discussed with an EAO?

Any issue that is of concern to an individual.

EAOs encounter a wide range of concerns in the course of their work. The following is a representative sample:

- * work-related issues (issues relating to human aspects of work, eg interpersonal difficulties, harassment, balancing work with domestic responsibilities, general dissatisfaction)

- * stress

- * health issues (physical, emotional psychiatric and psychological)

- * family and marital issues (domestic violence, separation, relationships, secondary family issues)

- * financial problems (debts, budgeting)

- * addiction (alcohol, gambling, drugs)

- * bereavement (how to cope with loss/grief, practical information on probate).

The nature of the support/assistance given will depend on the nature and gravity or otherwise of the problem presented. However, even if further outside assistance is ultimately required, the EAS is a good place to start to help clarify the problem and consider how best to address it.

15 Is there a charge for using the service?

No, the service is provided free of charge. Visits to EAOs are permitted during working hours.

16 Who are the EAOs?

A full list of the current EAOs, together with their official addresses and telephone numbers, showing the Department(s) and/or Office(s) for which they have responsibility will be circulated to all staff later in December 1997 or January 1998 in a format which can be readily updated. EAOs can be contacted by phone, either for

a telephone consultation, or to arrange an appointment to meet the EAO in his/her office, or in some other mutually convenient location.

Department Of Finance, December 1997