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BEREAVED FAMILIES FACE INQUEST TRAUMA DESPITE GOVERNMENT REFORMS

Bereaved families are being forced to attend inquests without legal help because the majority cannot obtain legal aid, lawyers warned today.

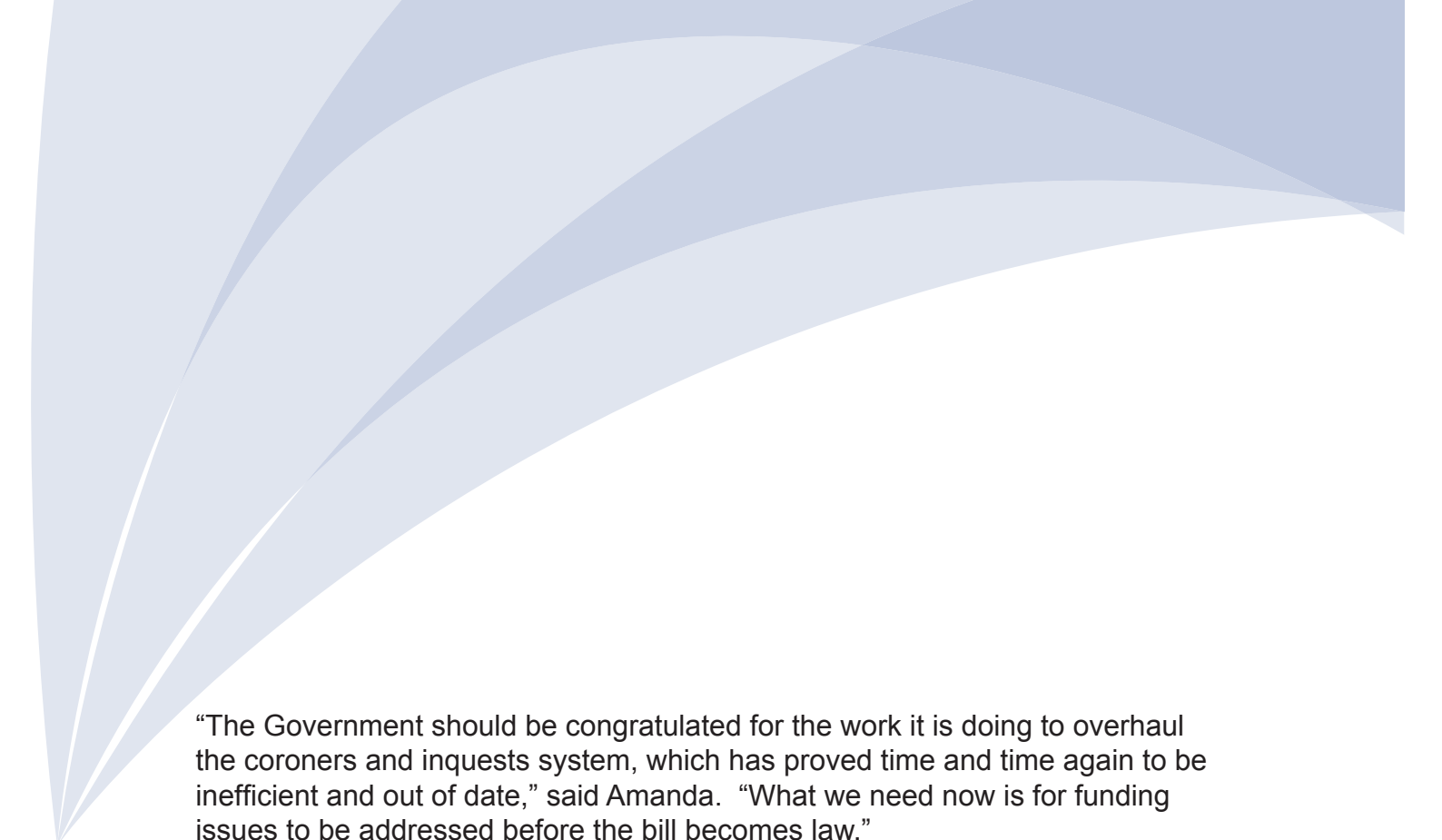
Government reforms to overhaul the coroners and inquests system have so far failed to address the fact that only 21 per cent* of families who applied for funding help were successful. Concerns have also been raised that many bereaved families may not even be aware that they have a right to legal representation when they attend an inquest, even though witnesses attending to explain the cause of death will have an insurance company's paid legal team there to help.

Amanda Stevens, president of the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) said the Government's 'charter for bereaved people' – its latest move to update the system – must make it clear that bereaved families can seek legal advice for an inquest.

"Families are faced with a catch 22 situation," said Amanda. "There are many who are not aware that they have a right to legal representation when they attend the inquest, and then there are those are aware and do seek legal help, but are often turned down when they ask for assistance with funding.

"The Government's new charter is a prime opportunity to make sure families rights' are flagged up and, while all these discussions and consultations about the coroners and inquests system are still underway, it is crucial that funding issues are also addressed," she said.

The Coroners and Death Certification Bill, under which all reforms are being made, is expected to make it onto the statute books in the next parliamentary session, having failed to do so last year despite being included in the Queen's Speech.



“The Government should be congratulated for the work it is doing to overhaul the coroners and inquests system, which has proved time and time again to be inefficient and out of date,” said Amanda. “What we need now is for funding issues to be addressed before the bill becomes law.”

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Note to editors:

- * Figures taken from Legal Services Commission website, which states success rate for obtaining legal aid for legal representation at inquests for 2005/6 (most recent year for which statistics are available)
- Consultation on the Ministry of Justice paper “Draft charter for bereaved people who come into contact with a reformed coroner system” closes today, 10 September, 2008
- APIL (Association of Personal Injury Lawyers) was established in 1990 by a group of lawyers working on behalf of personal injury victims and now has more than 4,500 members. APIL campaigns for improvements in the law to help people who are injured or become ill through no fault of their own. More information available at www.apil.org.uk

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