

Opening Statement

Good evening.

I would like to take a few moments to outline the contribution my department has made towards two major natural disasters that have recently affected Australians; bushfires in Tasmania and flooding in Townsville.

The bushfires started before Christmas and houses have been lost along with wide-spread damage to land and property.

To support the Tasmania State Government bushfire response, the department's National Emergency Call Centre which is operated by the department was activated.

Activation of Disaster Recovery Allowance commenced for Tasmanians on 3 February 2019, covering 4 Local Government Areas.

Between 26 January and 7 February 2019 parts of Townsville recorded more than 1200mm of rainfall, exceeding the yearly average, with some locations recording more than 2000mm.

An area approximately the size of Victoria has been flooded.

Over the course of the event, the Government declared an emergency in 13 Local Government Areas.

The geographic spread reached from Cooktown in the north, to Winton in the south, and from the east coast right through to the Northern Territory border.

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment and Disaster Recovery Allowance were activated on 4 February 2019 and made available to impacted residents of all declared areas.

More than 3000 staff across our national network were trained to take calls and process emergency claims. This allowed us to effectively respond and manage the demand virtually, even as many of our Townsville-based staff were personally impacted by the floods.

- In the first 3 days we answered over 20,000 calls for assistance, and demand remained high in the week following.
- The department has also maintained a strong presence of 24 staff and 4 social workers at 6 recovery centres and 2 defence force barracks.
- Additional social workers across our national network also supported customers over the telephone.

- Our Mobile Service Centre is currently in the regional area west of Townsville providing service to the farmers impacted.

We have now answered over 92,000 calls and processed more than 72,000 claims, with over \$84 million in payments made to Australians in need.

Even in adversity, innovation continues. A new payment platform was used allowing many customers receiving payment within an hour of a claim being granted. *(Note: the functionality is currently only available through some banks such as the big four).*

The vast majority of Disaster Recovery Payment claims are being finalised over the phone when a customer calls, and financial assistance is in their bank account within a few hours.

Despite the significant call numbers, the wait times for customers has remained very low with many calls being answered within seconds.

To give you an understanding of the scale, in the last two weeks the department has:

- Answered 42,165 calls from Students during what we would describe as a peak period.
- In this same period we have answered more than 83,000 calls for emergencies.

This response has been an incredible example of collaboration with everyone working across borders to deliver immediate support to affected Australians while still answering calls and processing claims for other customers.

My committed staff have also been working late into the night, and on weekends, to ensure we don't dramatically change the quality of our service for our other customers while we are responding to the emergencies.

I also note that some 145 of our 650 staff in Townsville were also impacted – many seriously by the floods, yet the majority still came to work to help others.

Telephony

We continue to work hard to improve the services we are delivering to customers through our call centres. Our efforts can be seen through the reduction in busy signals, the reduction in average speed of answer, a reduction in transfers, alongside increased call volumes.

We continue to improve customer service levels with the addition of our service delivery partners and the transformation of our telephony platform and services.

- Call wait times across the main Centrelink lines have fallen compared to the same period last year.
 - The average wait time for the Employment line is down 11 minutes, and the Families line wait times have fallen by 4 minutes.
- Call transfers have dropped by 28% across all lines. Transfers on the Youth and Students line are down by 82%.
- Busy signals have decreased by 43% or 13.5 million compared to the previous financial year, and some lines now experience days without busy signals.
- Post call survey results show 80% of customers surveyed have their queries resolved during the call.

More improvements are planned, including the use of voice authentication for customers to more quickly confirm their identity, and the ability for our customers to schedule a call at their own convenience.

Processing

We are also committed to improving the customer experience by processing claims as quickly as possible. Most claim types are now achieving a median processing time of less than four weeks.

As at 31 January 2019, we have processed over 2 million new claims this financial year. We have finalised:

- over 50,000 more Age Pension Claims – an increase of 73% when compared to the same time in the previous year;
- over 17,000 more Paid Parental Leave Claims – an increase of more than 10% when compared to the same time in the previous year; and
- over 18,000 more Youth Allowance Student Claims - an increase of more than 24% when compared to the same time in the previous year.

CLOSING: I am extremely proud of my staff and their commitment to improving the experience for our customers. We are not done yet. But I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you some of the advances we have made in modernising our services using emerging technology, all whilst managing delivering payments and services to Australians, particularly in times of disaster.

