



## Inequality reporting

# Jobseeker endured 11 weeks without Centrelink payments but was still forced to attend job agency appointments

**Advocates say government failing to meet 'basic obligation' to process claims quickly after Tim McCabe spent weeks with 'no income'**

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A New South Wales jobseeker says he was forced to complete welfare mutual obligations - including a 50km round trip for job agency appointments and enrolling in training courses - despite receiving no welfare payments for 11 weeks.

Tim McCabe, 60, said he had applied for the jobseeker payment on 1 November after moving off a carer's payment when his mother died.

Under the mutual obligations system, jobseekers are required to complete activities including applying for jobs or attending training to receive welfare payments.

But McCabe is one of two jobseekers Guardian Australia has spoken to who said they have been required to complete these activities for several weeks while not actually receiving any welfare payments from [Centrelink](#).

McCabe said he didn't mind looking for work as he wanted a job, but having to attend the appointments with his employment services provider, Employment Plus, was costly because he lives in Salt Ash in regional NSW and had to drive a 40-minute round trip into Nelson Bay.

"We're on a little property sort of in the middle of nowhere," he said. "It's like a 50km round trip to get to the office and back."

McCabe was also enrolled in a five-day course, aimed at helping those over 45 to get back into the workforce, which he was due to start next week.

"I have no money at all," McCabe said. "I have no income at all. Luckily, my uncle shares the house with me. But he's only on the age pension, he's 75 years old.

"He's paying the two weeks rent plus a car payment. So that leaves us with just over \$100 to live on for the fortnight."

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After Guardian Australia spoke to Services Australia about his case, the agency called McCabe and his payments were started. He received his first instalment on Wednesday.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, which sets the mutual obligation policy on behalf of the government, said jobseekers were required to attend an initial appointment and connect to a job provider while their claim was being processed.

"Most clients are required to be connected to Workforce Australia while their claim is being assessed," the department's spokesperson said. "Clients are connected immediately with an employment services provider so they can access support as quickly as possible to get them into sustained employment and to meet their requirement to commence payment.

"Providers do not have the ability to apply a pause to mutual obligations."

Services Australia's spokesperson, Hank Jongen, said he had apologised to McCabe for the wait.

"I'm sorry Mr McCabe has been waiting longer than he should have for his payment to be processed," Jongen said. "In most cases, when people apply for jobseeker

payment, we connect them immediately with an employment services provider so they can access job search support as quickly as possible.”

McCabe’s case comes as the Albanese government faces scrutiny over blowouts in the waiting times for payment claims and calls to Services Australia. Centrelink last year **experienced a significant blowout** in wait times for claims in the middle of last year, though between September and December the average wait for jobseeker was reduced from 31 days to 24 days, data from Services Australia shows. But the payment is meant to have a “timeless standard” of 16 days.

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Another jobseeker, who did not want to be named, said he had been waiting more than 60 days for his jobseeker payment to be processed.

In that time he had been required to attend a job agency appointment. “I’ve just had about enough of them not holding up their end of the deal,” the man, who has since found casual work, said.

Jongen said Centrelink was onboarding 3,000 new staff to help clear the backlog.

“We understand everyone’s circumstances are different, so we encourage people to talk to us about their situation,” Jongen said. “In some cases, we can give them a temporary exemption from mutual obligations.”

The Australian Unemployed Workers’ Union welfare advocate, Jeremy Poxon, said forcing jobseekers to carry out mutual obligations while they waited for payments “exposes the sham” of the system.

“The government is forcing people into burdensome activities without first guaranteeing them the financial support they need to survive,” he said.

Poxon said the government was failing its “basic obligation” to process claims in a timely manner.

“Meanwhile, poor people are jumping through every eligibility hoop, making every appointment, and completing a barrage of tasks, training programs and work for the

dole activities. None of this is remotely mutual or fair, but the product of a system that prioritises punishment above support.”

In 2021 researchers found mutual obligations could actually make it harder to become re-employed, with people spending less time in employment than those who did not have to complete the tasks. It also found that when jobseekers did secure work, it was of a “lower quality”.

In late November a damning review of the Workforce Australia system said the decades-long full privatisation of Australia’s employment services system had failed. But the committee shied away from abolishing mutual obligations.

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