

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the Senate Enquiry into the Design, scope, cost-benefit analysis, contracts awarded and implementation associated with the Better Management of the Social Welfare System initiative

Dear Sir or Madam,

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this Senate Enquiry, which I hope will result in long overdue improvements in the services provided by the government via Centrelink to the Australian public.

I was not subject to a debt collection, but I wish to comment under term of reference C, regarding the capacity of Centrelink to deal with the demand for their services while the automated debt recovery scheme was in operation.

My experience since September 2016 as a client of Centrelink has been one of repeated frustration, and resultant ill-feeling towards a government that sees fit to treat a section of the Australian public with arrogant disdain.

I have been trying to initiate and troubleshoot new Youth Allowance Claims for my two University student children, and health care cards for all members of the family.

The online Mygov/Centrelink claim system crashed repeatedly, and was unusable for some claims.

There is no acknowledgement of the status of a claim that is submitted to MyGov/Centrelink by uploading pdf copies of paper forms (because online claim system didn't work). A simple text or email would have avoided the need for me to call to find out what had happened to the claim after many weeks passed with no action.

I have had to call repeatedly to dispute rejection of claims and consideration of changes in financial circumstances. I have had to upload the same documents multiple times because a Centrelink person on the phone claims they have not received them, or that they can't see them because they reside on a part of the IT system they don't have authority to access.

The phone lines are simply unusable due to excessive wait times on hold. Every time I have rung Centrelink the wait time on hold has been 60 - 90 min. I do not believe the Department's claim of average on-hold wait times of 16 min and I would like to see an audit of that claim and the methodology used to classify a call as "answered".

The last time I called (last week of January 2017) I was unable to make contact (fail to connect) repeatedly for an entire half day. I eventually rang a complaint line found on the Dept of Human Services website where after a further 1-hr wait I was advised that it wasn't a complaint line(!). They were able to advise, however, that our claims were in the system, but the person was not able to advise how long it would take to process the claims as she couldn't access that information.

I can only assume that phone lines and back-office remain woefully understaffed, despite repeated assurances by the government that long wait times are being addressed. I pity the poor public service staff who have to answer these calls with customers made irate by long on-hold times.

I spent some of my waiting time on hold perusing the internet and found media reports where I learned that the scale of the problem is huge, the government is regularly informed of the problem by public service reports, and the then Minister (Robert) claimed to be addressing it by employing more than 1500 front-line staff. See this from January 2016:
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-14/centrelink-customers-complain-of-long-waiting-time/7087770>

It is clear to me and anyone I know using Centrelink services that they are understaffed to carry out the job they are required to do in a timely manner. The IT systems are clunky and prone to faults. I hope that one outcome of this review is that the Government will increase the staffing levels of Centrelink and modernise the IT systems to allow staff to do their job effectively.

Yours sincerely,

NAME SUPPLIED BUT WITHHELD
Adelaide February 13, 2017