

Committee

Public Hearing – 29 March 2021
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Community Affairs References Committee - Inquiry into Centrelink's Compliance Program

Question reference number: IQ21-000041

Senator: Deborah O'Neill

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 30 April 2021

Question:

Senator O'NEILL: Thanks for coming forward, Ms Musolino. I'll ask some general questions, and I suspect you may well be able to assist with the detail of the period of time. Who, at the department and Services Australia, has overseen the robodebt settlement and the process to refund victims' money that was unlawfully taken under the scheme?

Ms Musolino: Ms Lees can answer that. She's on the line.

Senator O'NEILL: Great. Who was involved in that, Ms Lees?

Ms Lees: In terms of the refund process and the drafting of the settlement distribution scheme, that would be the role that I am currently in: Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Payments and Integrity Group.

Senator O'NEILL: Okay. It was a big job, so I'm sure there were quite a few people involved. Was Secretary Campbell involved in that process in any way?

Ms Lees: In terms of working through the refund process?

Senator O'NEILL: Yes. It's one of the biggest things that would have happened in her role in that period of time. I'd be very surprised if she didn't have some oversight of it, at the very least.

Ms Skinner: Mr Flavel might comment. The policy decision that there would be a refund program had been made, and, in that context, the preparation and delivery of what that refund program would look like was mainly a matter for the agency. Of course, because we are an agency in that portfolio, we would keep the secretary and relevant policy deputies advised. Mr Flavel and his predecessors would have been the main engagement point as we did that. But mostly, by the time the policy decision was taken, it was about preparing a system and processes and preparing the letters and how we would do it, which Ms Lees can talk to.

Senator O'NEILL: Can you clarify for me what you understand the level of engagement oversight from Secretary Campbell to have been?

Mr Flavel: Are you asking me or Ms Lees?

Senator O'NEILL: Ms Lees and then Mr Flavel.

Ms Lees: I will pass over to Mr Flavel. It was a period of time that predated me moving into this role, so the refund process was well and truly underway by the time I took up this role. So I don't have awareness of that level of involvement.

Senator O'NEILL: Mr Flavel, can you assist?

Mr Flavel: I really can't add much more to the answer that Ms Skinner gave.

Senator O'NEILL: Because you weren't there either, were you?

Mr Flavel: It's not so much that. It's because I think Ms Skinner has pretty clearly articulated the way in which Services Australia and DSS would have engaged in that issue. If you want specifics in terms of the secretary's role, I'm very happy, of course, to take that on notice.

Answer:

As Social Services Portfolio Secretary, Secretary Campbell receives regular updates on the progress of the *Prygodicz & Ors v Commonwealth* class action and the management of the refund process.

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Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Community Affairs References Committee - Inquiry into Centrelink's Compliance Program

Question reference number: IQ21-000042

Senator: Rachel Siewert

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 30 April 2021

Question:

CHAIR: I've got one more small set of questions. In terms of deciding whether to appeal: how many debt issues has the department appealed—I hope I haven't already asked this—since the government announced the new approach? Sorry: I don't want to go back to the court case. What I want to know is, since the government made the announcement last year on its new approach to how it's handling the income compliance program, how many appeals has the department made on AAT decisions?

Mr Flavel: I think we'd have to take that on notice, for the period you're talking about. I'm happy to do that.

Answer:

Since the announcement by the Government on 29 May 2020 that Services Australia would refund debts raised wholly or partially using income averaging of Australian Taxation Office data, the department has made no appeals on Administrative Appeals Tribunal decisions relating to debts raised under the Income Compliance Program (as at 14 April 2021).