

23 October 2019

Committee Secretariat
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

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**Inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program
Response to Questions on Notice**

We would like to thank the Committee for giving us the opportunity to provide further information in response to questions taken on notice from the recent hearing for the inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program on 3 October 2019.

On reflection, we wish to advise the Committee that the data held by our member centres does not represent a good match for the kind of quantitative data sought through the questions taken on notice. The reasons for this are:

1. Limited access to assistance from our centres due to inadequate funding to meet the demand for legal assistance – Our centres prioritise the most serious cases and therefore the data held does not represent the scale of the problem or the people needing help with Robodebts
2. Data collection systems are not set up to collect and easily access the types of data that the committee requested and would require manual extraction of data which most of our member centres do not have the staff capacity to undertake

The value that our centres are best placed to contribute to the Committee's understanding of the impact of Robodebt is qualitative – the stories of the people who have been through the compliance process and how it has affected their lives.

We would suggest that the best source for the Committee to obtain a full set of statistics regarding the scale and effects of the Robodebt program is from the Department. However, we have provided any information that we have been able to access from our members in response to the specific questions on notice, bearing in mind the constraints outlined above. We are aware that there is huge unmet demand for legal assistance in this area, and therefore the data collected by our member centres is only a small percentage of the issues being faced by individuals subjected to the Robodebt program.

1. The number of people contacting centres about Robodebt issues each week

For the 2018-19 financial year, the average number of people contacting about Robodebt per week was 3 for the Welfare Rights Centre in Sydney and 7 for Uniting Communities Law Centre in South Australia.

Other member centres were unable to provide this figure.

2. The total number of people that have contacted your centre with Robodebt issues

Welfare Rights Centre (NSW)

2016-17: 41

2017-18: 29

2018-19: 147

2019-present: 21

Freemantle Community Legal Centre (WA)

2016-17: 10

2017-18: 17

2018-19: 20

2019-present: 15

Sussex Street Community Law Service (WA)

2016-17: 26

2017-18: 16

2018-19: 16

Uniting Communities Law Centre (SA)

2017-18: 290

2018-19: 340

Other member centres were unable to provide these figures.

3. The number of people with Robodebt issues that centres are unable to provide assistance to

This number is unknown as our member centres do not keep track of people who are turned away due to restrictions on capacity, or the number of people who attempt to contact the centre but fail to get through due to capacity restrictions in responding to phone calls or online inquiries.

4. The number of people contacting your centre who have had their tax returns garnished

Our member centres are unable to access this data due to capacity restrictions, and there being no method of discerning this information without reviewing each individual case file separately. For the purposes of our legal advice to clients it is the legitimacy of debt itself that we are primarily concerned with, rather the method by which Centrelink is seeking to recover it.

5. Any demographic data you have on people contacting your centre about Robodebt issues.

Our member centres are unable to access this data without reviewing each individual case file separately. Given capacity constraints, we are unable to do so at this time.

6. Any data you have on the number or percentage of people contacting your centre who are being pursued by private debt collector agencies.

Our member centres do not intentionally collect this data. In advising clients about the legality and accuracy of their debt, whether or not Centrelink has referred a debt to a debt collector is irrelevant.

7. Timeline of the case study concerning a bank attempting to charge an individual to access his historical bank statements

The specific intervention in question took place in 2017, however we are aware that many clients still face barriers in accessing historical financial records from banking institutions – including the charging of fees for statements.

Kind Regards,

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