

From:
To:
Cc: [Community Affairs Committee \(SEN\)](#);
Subject: RE: Senate Community Affairs References Committee - Questions on notice for CPSU - Centrelink's compliance program
Date: Monday, 28 October 2019 5:39:04 PM

Dear Kathleen,

I write in response to the letter from Committee Secretary Jeanette Radcliffe, in relation to questions on notice from the recent Community Affairs References Committee hearing for the inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program in Canberra on 3 October 2019. This letter was communicated to the CPSU by email on 22 October 2019.

Please find our response below.

Yours sincerely
Alistair

I can advise that organisers have spoken to CPSU delegates about examples. Delegates advise that, in call centres, staff feel worried to report incidents of aggression on the phone in some cases. This is because staff are anxious about reporting the incidents because it is seen as a tick and flick process. Further, filing a report during working hours means that the call centre operator may be out of adherence for call tracking, the performance metrics DHS applies to its own staff. Delegates reported that some staff say they have been told that they should report incidents in their own time, such as on a break or after hours. Delegates report that staff have a clear message that reports of abuse or threats directed at staff and their families are not taken seriously.

*The examples of the verbal abuse that wears staff members down is when they receive multiple abusive comments in one day or when manipulative language is used against at operator, e.g. you live in a nice house you p***k and you want my kids to starve. Most attacks are personal abuse and foul language attacks. An urgent payment denial by a call centre officer often creates problems. For example, a customer is denied a payment consistent with DHS policy and delegates report that on occasions the person threatens the officer, the officers family or threaten to harm themselves.*

Staff members have told us that when they do make a report generally all that happens is the staff member is given 5 minutes off the phone. No further action is apparent in cases where threats are directed at the officer or the officer's family. Where a client threatens self-harm, a social worker's follow up is flagged. The reporting of the abuse has a mental and physical impact on staff members as it means the operator has to relive the experience and then get straight back on the phone after 5 minutes and often get abused again.

Another example provided is of a staff member who was on the phone with a customer who was aggrieved from being on hold for a considerable period. The call was about a review of a debt that was raised for a single mum who worked and studied. The single mum was stressed out because she had been waiting for a result on the review of her debt for months and she had no money. The staff member was being told words to the

effect of - it's not the single mums fault the government can't get it right, they need to drop the f@#\$ing debt, just fix it or f@#% off and expect to hear from a lawyer. The staff member was concerned and tried to find someone who can do the review urgently. However, no floor walker was available for support and the staff member was left feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. The staff member didn't and wouldn't report it as they were Labor Hire and were scared they would lose their job if they report too much.

Alistair Waters | National President | CPSU
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