

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

INQUIRY INTO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

PUBLIC HEARING 30 July 2020

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Debt Repayments

Question reference number: IQ20-000097

Member: Rex Patrick

Type of question: Hansard pages: 63-64

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 13 August 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator PATRICK: I'm just trying to understand how someone who has opted in to the court case is affected at this point, in terms of repayment. You're saying there's no effect?

Ms Campbell: They are separate processes. We are going to, tomorrow, try and answer as many questions as we can about this matter. We are very keen to be transparent. But we are also very conscious of the fact that there is legal action underway. So if we say in answer that they are separate matters, is that enough?

Senator PATRICK: Just to be clear, you are saying that they are treated separately—

Ms Campbell: They're treated separately.

Senator PATRICK: if they are opt in or opt out?

Ms Campbell: Yes.

Senator PATRICK: Okay. Just in relation to that, when my office—and I thank you for the service you provide parliamentarians in being able to get access to people, to deal with constituent issues—staff ring Services Australia, they find they can't get even basic details for the people who we are working for and have authority to work for; if someone is involved in the class action, they can't even get very basic facts, such as the amount of the debt that is owing on the books. So I just wonder whether that's something we're encountering that we shouldn't be encountering or if there's some reason for that. I'm not necessarily asking for outcomes but just very fundamental questions of fact that shouldn't be in dispute before a court.

Ms Campbell: I think the officers will take that on notice. Thank you for raising that matter. We'll look into it.

Answer:

As a result of the commencement of the class action, it was necessary for Services Australia (the Agency) to issue instructions to its staff to ensure that communications with class action members were appropriate in light of the court proceedings. Services Australia staff were instructed to direct enquiries about the class action to Gordon Legal.

Following the Government announcement on 29 May 2020 that refunds would be made for eligible debts, Services Australia took immediate action to expedite implementation of the refunds process. This required the Agency to issue further guidance to ensure that staff could provide information about debts and refunds, while ensuring they did not discuss the class action and that they appropriately referred people who had questions about the class action to Gordon Legal.

The further guidance provides that where class action members or their representatives have questions about income compliance debts or refunds, staff can provide factual information about the person's income compliance debt and tell the person whether their debt has been identified as being eligible for a refund.

A dedicated telephone line (1800 171 846) is available for people to speak to specialist compliance staff with regard to refund enquiries.

Customers can also request a Statement of Debt via their Centrelink online account. This will allow a customer to access information on all their debts over a five year period, going back to 1998.

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PUBLIC HEARING 30 July 2020

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Jobseeker and Youth Allowance – Processing Times

Question reference number: IQ20-000098

Member: Rachel Siewert

Type of question: Hansard page: 65

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 13 August 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: At this stage, let's just do the jobseeker and youth allowance data.

Ms Lees: I've got the data for—

Ms Skinner: At 30 June, we had 32,116 combined jobseeker claims on hand. We're into July, and it keeps bubbling up and down around that 30,000 mark. We're holding about 30,000 claims on hand in that space.

Senator SIEWERT: What is the time for resolution of the claims?

Ms Skinner: The average processing time?

Senator SIEWERT: Yes.

Ms Lees: The average processing times in terms of the—I've got the data for the financial year as at 30 June. I don't have—

Ms Skinner: We can take that on notice. By the time we got to 30 June, we were processing most of the claims within 10 days. We were able to manage a range of the claims we'd had on hand for a bit, and we got ourselves into a position of a good couple of weeks and we had most claims through.

Answer:

So far this financial year (2020–21), as at 24 July 2020:

- the average days to process JobSeeker Payment claims is 5 days; and
- the average days to process Youth Allowance claims is just over 9 days.