

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES – 26 FEBRUARY 2015 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Online services – timeliness of electronic letters and messages

Question reference number: HS 4

Senator: Siewert

Type of question: Hansard pages 17-18

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 17 April 2015

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Again, I have had a complaint, but this is a generic question. You have gone to sending a lot of the administration online. I have an example here—and I actually have a copy of the letter so it is not just hearsay—of someone who would have had to report next in December from March. She then thought that things must have changed and she must have been doing everything right. Sometime later she then got a letter in her inbox saying that she should report on 27 January. She got that e-mail on 3 February. Obviously it changed what she was told, but she was also told that she should have reported in January. But she was told in February.

Ms Campbell: We are happy to take personal circumstance—

Senator SIEWERT: I will give you this. My question is: how many of these examples do you have where this is happening?

Ms Campbell: Sometimes there can be individual circumstances where something else may happen which triggers those types of activities. We generally look at these on a case-by-case basis. If we saw something systemic, then we would look to see whether we had an IT problem.

Senator SIEWERT: You're right, there may have been something to trigger it, but to send a letter after the fact that you have to report in January. She could very well end up getting breached under the new regime because she had missed a reporting date when she did not even know she had one. And she had actually been told that she did not have to report until March.

Ms Campbell: We are happy to take that individual case and look at it to see whether it is a systemic issue. Clearly it is hard to report on 27 January when you are told on 3 February. But if we can look at that and see whether there are any other cases. I do not think we have seen a systemic issue.

Answer:

A person in receipt of an activity tested income support payment is required to report on a regular basis (generally fortnightly). This regular reporting includes notification of any earnings, changes in any circumstances (such as change of address or partnered status) and confirmation the person has undertaken the activities that they agreed to undertake in return for their income support payment.

Some recipients may report in an extended reporting cycle of up to 12 weeks. However, when a person's circumstances change this may trigger a change in the frequency of their reporting requirements. For example, a person may revert back to fortnightly reporting. This can happen mid-way through an extended reporting cycle and the department will notify the person of the changed requirements.

Unfortunately in some very limited instances, depending on the timing of a person's change in circumstance and its interaction with their reporting cycle, a notice may be received by a customer with a past reporting due date.

There are no penalties for the customer as the job seeker compliance framework does not apply to these reporting cycles.

The department is exploring potential changes to the existing ICT legacy system to address this issue. However, due to the complexity of the system, any potential changes will need careful consideration to ensure there are no unintended consequences.

Ahead of any potential ICT changes, variable reporting in any case will cease for the majority of recipients from 1 July 2015. These 1 July 2015 changes will significantly reduce the numbers of recipients who are reporting other than fortnightly, which will even further minimise the potential for confusion that has occurred in these limited circumstances.

The recent changes to the job seeker compliance framework introduce new rules to ensure more job seekers on income support attend their compulsory appointments with their employment providers. This is separate to the reporting requirements mentioned above.

In relation to the specific customer circumstances provided to the department, departmental staff contacted the customer on 24 February 2015 and provided an explanation of their reporting requirements. The department also apologised for any confusion the letters and their timing may have caused. The customer's payment was not delayed as a result of the letters and payment was received on the scheduled date.