

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES – 26 FEBRUARY 2015 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Telephone “queue surfing”

Question reference number: HS 28

Senator: Cameron

Type of question: Written

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Question:

The Ombudsman’s report 1/2014 into service delivery complaints about Centrelink included the following two recommendations:

- 1 (c) In consultation with the Department of Social Services and other stakeholders, develop performance standards for speed to answer calls on each of Centrelink customer enquiry lines; and
- 1 (d) Publicise and regularly report Centrelink’s performance against the performance standards developed under recommendation 1(c).

I refer to the answer provided in the table to HS 46 (f) from Supplementary Estimates showing the department’s response to the Ombudsman’s recommendation 1(d) which was:

The department will regularly report on performance to the Ombudsman’s Office. The department does not support publicising performance more broadly because of the risk of customers ‘queue surfing’ resulting in adverse outcomes for customers.

- a) Please explain what this phenomenon of “queue surfing” is, and provide details of the evidence that it is a pervasive practice?
- b) What are the “risks” involved from clients “queue surfing”?
- c) What is the basis of the department's assertion that people wanting a problem solved, or wanting access to timely services, will engage in the practice of “queue surfing” if data on performance is published and made more transparent that is currently the case?
- d) Why can't KPI performance information be presented in real time or some other regular periodic way on the DHS website?

Answer:

- a) The department runs a number of phone lines targeted at different customer groups. The service officers who respond to calls to these lines are appropriately skilled to handle calls for these programmes. Average speed of answer differs on individual lines for a number of reasons. If wait times by queue were published externally people, who face longer wait times on a particular line may be more inclined to try other lines that have a shorter reported average speed of answer. This is known as “queue surfing”.

The department collects data on call transfers but does not collect data on customers who have deliberately called an incorrect line.

- b) The consequence of “queue surfing” is that people will ring lines to enquire about matters that staff members are not appropriately skilled to handle and staff will be required to transfer the call to the correct business line. This is not only poor customer service for the individual as they may ultimately wait longer, it also will lengthen the wait times for customers who have rung the correct line.
- c) Anecdotal evidence suggests that “queue surfing” already occurs and this is confirmed through conversations with customers. It is the department’s view that publishing wait times by business line is likely to only increase this practice.
- d) See response to questions (a), (b) and (c).