

Centrelink services

Centrelink services for people with mental health problems or mental illness

Centrelink determines eligibility for income support payments for people in the community on behalf of the Australian Government. Many people who claim income support have mental health problems or mental illness.

To ensure that Centrelink and its staff respond appropriately to people with mental health problems or mental illness, Centrelink:

- works in partnership with many community and mental health services in relation to suicide prevention strategies;
- liaises locally with mental health services to coordinate service provision;
- conducts training for internal staff and external services in relation to identifying and assisting people with mental health problems or mental illness to access government income support benefits; and
- has developed service guidelines to ensure appropriate income support services are provided to people with mental health problems or mental illness.

Centrelink disability officers

Centrelink disability officers (CDOs) assist customers with illnesses, injuries or disabilities to overcome barriers and develop a pathway to social and economic participation. They also provide an internal consultancy and training service to other staff who provide assistance to people with disabilities.

Social work services

Centrelink's social work services play a key role in establishing and maintaining links with mental health and other relevant services. Centrelink's 500 social workers conduct assessments of customers with mental health problems or mental illness, particularly in relation to suicide prevention, and make referrals to appropriate local services. In addition to face-to-face services, Centrelink also has a national social work call centre line for the provision of counselling and support to customers over the telephone. This is particularly important in rural and regional locations and where mental health problems or mental illness prevent someone from leaving their home.

In 2004, Centrelink's social workers assisted 12,316 people with a mental health problem or mental illness and another 2031 people who were potentially at risk of suicide. Over the course of 2004, social workers assisted 9211 people with issues related to their role as carers.

Psychology services

Centrelink's 250 psychologists provide a national service, including travelling to rural

and remote locations. They target early identification in relation to mental health problems or mental illness for people on income support payments. This includes referring customers to appropriate services for assistance and promotion of mental health literacy to help with better understanding and management of their condition. Centrelink psychologists take an active role in providing formal and informal training for Centrelink staff so they become familiar with medical and psychological terminology and with how mental health problems or mental illness impact on capacity for employment.

Early intervention and engagement pilot

The aim of the pilot is to test arrangements to streamline and improve the timeliness of assessments and subsequent referral of job seekers to appropriate interventions that address their identified participation barriers. The pilot, being conducted by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations in partnership with Centrelink and contracted assessment providers, focuses on job seekers claiming the Disability Support Pension or those job seekers in receipt of Newstart or Youth Allowance seeking exemption from activity test requirements due to disability, illness or injury, including mental illness. Existing data show that a significant proportion of the pilot target population will have a mental illness as either a primary or secondary condition.

The pilot will provide job seekers with access to a comprehensive, face to face assessment interview with an allied health professional, such as a psychologist or rehabilitation counsellor, with specialist medical input being called upon as required. It is anticipated that this approach will provide improved identification of a job seeker's disabilities or impairments, work capacity, barriers to participation and intervention needs. Upon referral to assistance, this information will also be available to the service provider, to ensure the provider has access to accurate and relevant information to guide the provision of assistance.

A final element of the pilot is that it will be examining the extent and nature of short term interventions, service gaps and whether direct purchase of recommended short term interventions by employment services is feasible or appropriate. This may be of particular relevance to job seekers with a mental health problem or mental illness, because the pilot will identify job seekers who, for example, may need access to a short period of cognitive behavior therapy or counselling to address anxiety and depression prior to commencing focused employment assistance activity, and the success or otherwise in obtaining these services. The findings from the evaluation of this pilot will inform the roll out of the Comprehensive Work Capacity Assessment measure, announced in the 2005–2006 budget.

Comprehensive work capacity assessments

From 1 July 2006, job seekers with significant participation barriers will have a comprehensive face to face assessment with a contracted work capacity assessor. Assessments will be conducted by a range of medical and allied health professionals, such as rehabilitation counsellors, occupational therapists and psychologists.

The assessment will be a positive, holistic exploration of a job seeker's participation barriers, work capacity and the nature of interventions and assistance needed to improve current and future work capacity. At the completion of the assessment, assessors will discuss appropriate participation assistance options available to the job seeker and will arrange rapid referral of the job seeker to an appropriate provider.

A comprehensive assessment report will be provided to both the selected service provider and Centrelink. Centrelink will use the information and recommendations in the report to finalise determination of the job seeker's income support eligibility.