

## **CEO Opening Statement – Estimates May 2023**

Thank you Chair.

I don't normally make an opening statement, but I would like to reiterate the comments from Minister Farrell on the incident we experienced at our Airport West Service Centre.

Last week was a terrible and saddening week for Services Australia, with one of our staff violently attacked by a customer.

Minister Shorten and I visited our injured colleague on Friday, and I hope she is recovering. Our hearts remain with her and the service centre staff who witnessed the attack and provided support in the aftermath.

We visited these staff at Airport West last week. Understandably, they're shocked by the traumatic events. I'm grateful they spent some time with me and my colleagues, sharing their views and experiences of this incident, and working in the service centre environment more generally. We're listening and wrapping our arms around them with every possible support.

It's been touching to see the care and well wishes for our colleague. But, I must call out, it has also been a time where I have felt dismayed and angered by some commentary suggesting this violent action against our staff member was justified.

**I want to be really clear - there's no excuse for violence or aggression towards Services Australia staff. Not now. Not ever.**

I'm deeply saddened that after the events of last week some of our staff have said they now feel fear instead of pride when wearing the blue Services Australia uniform. **This isn't acceptable.** They shouldn't have to feel this way.

When communities are in need, Services Australia staff are there. Through fires, floods and the pandemic, they show up. Even when they fear for their own loved ones, even when their own homes are under threat or flooded. They choose to be the helping hands.

Week after week, our blue shirt brigade have, and continue, to support our communities to deliver the payments and services that many, many Australians rely on. They're far from faceless bureaucrats. They're the parents, siblings, children and friends of many Australians and they're working hard across our communities to make a difference.

They touch the lives of almost every Australian and most of the time it's a positive experience.

We know that in our delivery of services to customers we don't always get everything right. Our service system does sometimes falter and there are occasions when our customers feel let down or left behind. However, I can assure you our staff remain committed to doing their best.

Over the last few years, all of us in Services Australia have committed ourselves to the principles of being **simple, helpful, respectful and transparent** in our engagement with the people who need us.

**We ask for respectful interactions with our staff in return.**

I'm determined we'll do all we can to support the staff from Airport West Service Centre, and all our staff serving customers across the country, so they can get on with their important jobs without having to worry about their safety and without fear of violence.

I'm committed to protecting our staff. It's why Mr Graham Ashton, the former Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, is now leading an urgent review into our security measures.

It will take into account the agency's already strong security basis, but examine what we can do better to deter future incidents.

I met with Mr Ashton last week and he's meeting Airport West staff this week, as well as staff in other service centres. He'll bring his initial insights back to me within the next fortnight.

Like other frontline operations, we already have strong security frameworks in place. We know we can never reduce the risk to zero but we can do everything in our power to deter violence.

We'll look closely at Mr Ashton's recommendations to see what else we can do to bolster our safeguards and help prevent this ever happening again.

Thank you Chair.