

Politics Federal [Centrelink](#)

## OPINION

# Today, I tried to call Centrelink 17 times. I got through to hold music once, then it hung up



**Catherine Xie**

Contributor

October 18, 2023 – 3.58pm



Listen to this article

5 min

It is 2pm and I am listening to hold music on my mobile's speakerphone, a mix of instrumentals and other melodies – the widest array of tunes I have ever experienced while waiting for a person to answer the phone. Jerome Alexander's *Wasps* is my favourite of the lot.

Recently, I have been on hold so much that I can now predict which song will be next.



Two-thirds of calls to Centrelink are going unanswered. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN SHAKESPEARE

Of course, my preference would be that Centrelink answered the phone, but my expectations have been whittled down over the past few weeks. Today alone, I have attempted to call 17 times using seven phone numbers. This is the first time I have successfully found myself on hold. I cheer silently at being slotted into a line, as I'm told the wait will be a minimum of an hour-and-a-half.

For the most part, every time I repeat this process, a cheery automated voice will ask me for my customer reference number before informing me that "we all deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect" and asking whether I'll agree to complete a quick questionnaire at the end of the call (I begrudgingly agree with the superstitious hope it might push me ahead in the queue). Then the voice brightly alerts me that all their operators are busy, before promptly ending the call with a chirpy, "Goodbye!" The line goes dead before I can tell the robot how I really feel, courtesy and respect be damned.

When I call back, the robot has remembered my number, and this time, she is more curt in her message. "We know you have been trying to reach us," she says before the line cuts out entirely.

My experience is not unique. On Reddit, there is an entire thread where people, also frustrated and desperate for support, share keywords to use when the robot asks what you are calling about that might improve your chances of getting put through to an operator.

During a February Senate estimates hearing, Services Australia, which oversees Centrelink, revealed that between July 1, 2022, and January 31, 2023, two-thirds of calls to Centrelink went unanswered.

Of the 25 million calls made during this time, [only 8.35 million were answered](#), and an executive for Services Australia confirmed the majority ended without the caller speaking to an actual human.

My bills are late and things that once were necessary are being put on hold. My body is twisted by the pressure and the uncertainty, by the shame and self-loathing. I can feel the tension in my ribcage, in the hollow right beneath my breast.

In December 2019, I opened a cafe in Melbourne. With hindsight, mine is a simple fable that reflects what happened to so many businesses nationally, globally. The cafe closed in May this year.

I applied for the Austudy payment in August. There are individuals and families who have waited months to receive their first payment. Twenty-two days ago, someone at the local Centrelink office told me I'd "hopefully" have an answer to my application within 48 hours. She crossed her fingers in front of me and winced a little when she said, "hopefully", as though she already knew that a week later I would be yelling at the robot voice and being urged to show restraint.

Collectively, we should have a lot of sympathy for Centrelink workers. Many offices are understaffed and have workers undertrained to deal with people who are often the most vulnerable members of society, many of whom are far more desperate than I have ever felt.

As a first-generation Chinese Australian, I feel bashful and spoiled to even complain. Like many immigrant Australians, I have an intimate understanding of what life could otherwise look like, and I would never claim that I am not thankful to be here.

The year that my father was born — 1957 — was the start of the worst famine China has ever experienced. He moved to Australia in 1989, stepping onto the plane three days before the Tiananmen Square massacre. It is obvious why he feels fortunate to live here.

For my parents, it is unconscionable to not feel gratitude for where we live, and I agree up to a point. But as a country, we owe it to ourselves to be better than we were; to develop a welfare system that will cushion and protect people when times become tough.

The following week, I spent over 10 hours on the phone to Centrelink. The last person I spoke with told me my reassessment should take about 48 hours. 61 days after submitting my initial claim, it was approved. Before that last call ended, they asked: "This is the complaints and feedback line. Do you have a complaint?" As it turns out, I do. And so do many others.

**Catherine Xie is a Melbourne student and freelance writer.**

***The Opinion newsletter is a weekly wrap of views that will challenge, champion and inform your own. [Sign up here.](#)***



**Catherine Xie** is a freelance writer and student based in Melbourne.

---

