

DHS Snapshot

“We’re an agency made up of part-time working mums. We’re not earning a million dollars! We live in the communities we serve and we do the job because we care about it.” – DHS worker, CPSU survey 2016.

The largest Commonwealth government agency, DHS employs 36,594 staff¹ and maintains over 400 offices throughout Australia. DHS delivers services to our most vulnerable citizens, and will have at least one interaction with every Australian during their lifetime.

Over the last five years the workforce composition has seen a reduction in the level of permanent employment and an increase in the number of staff employed on a non-ongoing basis. Since 2011 non-ongoing employment has increased as a percentage of the total workforce from 4.2% to 13.6%. Currently 63% of non-ongoing staff are employed on a causal basis.¹

Women are 73% of the total workforce of the department. The majority of staff (64%) are employed at the APS3 and APS4 classification and have a salary range of \$56,069 to \$69,239, before tax.² The overwhelming majority (78%) of the department’s part-time workers, which make up 34% of the total workforce, are employed at the APS3 and APS4 classification.¹

A significant majority of DHS staff (70%) earn less than the average Australian wage.

These employees care deeply about the work they do. They are committed to delivering high quality service outcomes for government. However, with increased demands on DHS’ services they are facing increasing workloads, in combination with rising levels of customer aggression and multiple, complex changes to the nature and structure of their work.

In addition to these growing pressures, DHS employees are feeling the direct impacts of the Government’s failure to conclude workplace bargaining, almost three years after the process began. The Government’s bargaining policy would make them worse off, give them less control over any element of their working lives, and put them under increasing personal and workplace pressure.

Bargaining: The story so far

“It’s been three years without a pay rise, but the cost of living keeps going up. My family is going backwards financially.”

- DHS worker, CPSU bargaining survey 2016

- The current DHS Agreement expired on 15 December, 2014.
- The CPSU tabled its log of claims to DHS in December 2013, in readiness to conclude bargaining and have a new agreement in place before the expiry date. However, the Department did not agree to commence negotiations until June 2014, six months later.
- The first Enterprise Agreement Ballot was held from 4-10 September 2015. Of the 78% of staff who participated in the ballot, 83% voted to reject the proposed agreement.

¹ Department of Human Services 2014-15 Annual Report, 2015

² Department of Human Services Agreement 2011—2014, 2011

- The second Enterprise Agreement Ballot was held from 5-11 February 2016. Of the 77.5% of staff who participated, 79.5% voted to reject the proposed agreement.
- The CPSU lodged a Good Faith Bargaining application with the Fair Work Commission on 16 August 2016, and is awaiting the result of a hearing held on 25 October 2016.
- A third Enterprise Agreement Ballot will be held from 7-13 November 2016. The proposed agreement still contains a long list of cuts to conditions with no improvements to offset the cuts, which has resulted in staff overwhelmingly rejecting the Department's first two offers.

The bargaining process has been an abject failure, because instead of genuinely negotiating with its workforce, the department has continued to put forward very similar proposed agreements containing unnecessary cuts to key workplace conditions.

Under these cuts, a customer service officer who needs to leave work at 3pm to pick up her children from school, who has worked a 7:30am to 3pm roster for years in order to do this, has no guarantee that she will not be moved to a 9am to 5pm roster without having her preferences or needs considered. A casual staff member, employed as an "irregular or intermittent worker" despite having worked full time hours fulfilling an ongoing requirement for years, will have no control over his hours at all. CPSU members are telling their union they face having to leave their jobs if family-friendly rostering and consultation provisions are taken away.

These cuts are unacceptable, and will continue to be unacceptable, to a workforce composed of average income earners with mortgages to pay, families to feed, and a need for workplace conditions that allow them to balance the two. The three years they have spent without any pay increase is particularly galling when compared with the Department Secretary, Kathryn Campbell, whose pay has risen by 7.5% (just under \$50,000) since 2013.

Cuts to family-friendly working conditions

"I've always had a roster that allowed me to get my kids to school in the morning. My husband starts earlier so that he can do the pick-up. I'm good at my job and it's never been an issue before. But if DHS can just change my hours on a whim, I don't see how I'm going to be able to keep working here."

– DHS worker, CPSU bargaining meeting 2016

The Government's workplace bargaining policy has imperilled the working conditions and workplace rights of 35,000 people in its largest department, with DHS proposing to strip key provisions relating to hours of work, rostering and consultation out of the agreement and move them into unenforceable policy.

The APSC has argued that cuts to conditions are not required under this bargaining policy. However for DHS workers it is abundantly clear that this round of bargaining is all about reductions and cuts. The fact is that the two proposed agreements which staff have voted to reject thus far contained a long lists of cuts to conditions and workplace rights.

The Department's original position of cutting basic entitlements such as sick leave has been amended due to sustained staff opposition, but the rostering, scheduling and consultation provisions that form the bedrock of a family-friendly workplace are still at risk.

The Department has proposed to:

- Remove employees' rights to any control over their own working hours. Currently the system balances the interests of management and staff and requires genuine negotiation of working hours between an employee and their supervisor. If agreement about a suitable pattern of working hours cannot be reached, the agreement contains a safety net for workers; they can opt to revert to "default hours" (8:30am to 5pm.) Not only has the department proposed to remove the rostering protocols that allow staff to have some say over their hours of work, they have recently begun denying staff access to the default hours safety net under the current agreement. The CPSU is taking legal steps to enforce this provision, but this can only be done while the safety net remains part of the agreement.
- Introduce the ability to roster staff on "split shifts" (e.g. working from 8am until 12pm and then from 2:30pm until 6pm) or to roster staff according to their average hours for the week instead of for a set amount of hours each day (e.g. staff could be rostered to work 10 hours one day and 6 hours the next).
- Exclude casual employees from access to yearly salary advancement despite many casual employees being long-term employees working near to standard hours.
- Move agreed processes for performance management into policy, which is unenforceable by the Fair Work Commission and which will make it easier to terminate staff without a fair process.
- Remove the right of employees to have a union representative assist them during disciplinary proceedings or other workplace issues.
- Remove the obligation of the department to consult with employees about changes that will affect their working lives.

Maintenance of existing conditions is still the number one issue preventing DHS employees from accepting a new agreement. People's biggest concern is the removal of control over working hours for those working in a rostered environment, with issues around consultation, rights for part-timers and casuals and access to trained workplace delegates also high on the list.

Impacts of the bargaining stalemate on service delivery

DHS is an agency facing increasing systemic pressures due to understaffing, the increasing casualisation of the workforce, repeated IT system failures and a growing public demand for its services.

The key to DHS' continuing ability to function under these pressures is a hardworking, dedicated workforce who care deeply about their clients and the services they provide. The loyalty and motivation of these staff means that they go above and beyond, working around daily challenges to ensure the needs of the community are met.

Given the challenges facing the agency, it would have been in the best interest of both the department and the public to ensure a speedy, fair resolution of bargaining with DHS' workforce. This was not the time to engage in a protracted battle with employees, seeking to remove the rights and conditions they rely on in order to do their jobs effectively.

People who feel like they have no control over the way they work are much more likely to have low morale and feel disengaged from their jobs. Threats to the ability of DHS employees to have a say over their hours of work and to protect their workplace rights has eroded the employment relationship, which was based on trust. People no longer trust the department to make the right decisions for their staff or their customers.

The protracted delays in concluding bargaining are having an increasing impact on DHS' ability to deliver services to vulnerable Australians. The erosion of employees' confidence in their employer has decimated workplace morale, and caused a corresponding increase in resignations, stress leave and unplanned absences, which in turn increases the strain on remaining employees and impacts the services they are trying to deliver. An overworked and undervalued workforce means mistakes are made, staff turnover is high, and customers wait longer for the services they need. The impacts on service delivery of an exhausted, disillusioned workforce cannot be underestimated:

- DHS blocked 29 million calls to its call centres in 2015. For the calls that did get through, wait times were, and continue to be, well over an hour.- ANAO report and ombudsman³
- Call wait times are the single largest cause of complaints made to DHS by customers.³
- Indigenous Australians in remote communities can take more than a day to access telephony services.³
- Customer aggression has risen, with increasing numbers of DHS offices requiring permanent security guards.
- This year we have seen reports of impacts of the delays in payments for Austudy and Youth Allowance resulting in extreme financial hardship and the deferment or abandonment of study. DHS staff have also reported significant delays of carer's payments that have put vulnerable families in a desperate position.

In addition to this, deteriorating workplace relations during the bargaining process have led to a marked change in the willingness of DHS to consult with its workforce on major changes. A lack of consultation prior to decisions being made has removed staff's ability to engage as a valued stakeholder in change processes. By failing to engage staff in the continuous improvement of the service delivery model, the Department's approach means staff are not afforded the opportunity to protect their interests nor to demonstrate their deep understanding of the work processes involved in delivering the best outcomes for the community.

³ The Auditor-General ANAO Report No.37 2014–15 Performance Audit, Management of Smart Centres' Centrelink Telephone Services, 2015

DHS employees are committed to their jobs and the crucial service they provide to the community, but as long as the Government continues its dangerous attacks on its own workforce, we will continue to see impacts not only on workplace relations within the department, but on service delivery outcomes for Australians.
