



Australian Government

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# SERVICES AUSTRALIA SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT REVIEW

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by Graham Ashton AM APM

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**KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



The Australian Government acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live on. We pay our respects to all Elders, past and present, of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.

# Services Australia security risk management review – key findings and recommendations

On 24 May 2023, the Hon Bill Shorten MP, Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Minister for Government Services announced a security risk management review for Services Australia (the agency) to be led by former Chief Police Commissioner of Victoria Police, Graham Ashton, AM APM.<sup>1</sup>

## Terms of reference

Matters to be considered include:

- Adequacy of the physical security measures.
- Whether improvements need to be made to Managed Service Plans (MSPs).
- The adequacy and operations the state criminal laws to maximise protections of staff, customers and the public including but not limited to the use of penalties and restraining orders or alike.

In relation to the face-to-face service centres, the reviewer was asked to:

1. Examine the security and procedural measures that provide a safe environment for the agency's employees, customers and members of the public.
2. Examine the effectiveness of the work health and safety system, regarding the effectiveness of controls in respect of customer related violence.
3. Examine the agency's approach to detecting, responding and managing service delivery to customers who demonstrate threatening, aggressive and/or violent behaviours.
4. Consult with staff and union representatives about the adequacy of arrangements to provide a safe and secure work environment.

The review was initiated following an incident involving the serious assault of a staff member that occurred at the agency's Airport West Service Centre on 23 May 2023. The individual circumstances of the incident is the subject of a Comcare Investigation and criminal proceedings, as well as internal consideration by the agency. As such, the individual circumstances of the incident are not the focus of this review, however have informed the consideration of issues raised.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hon Bill Shorten MP, **Review to protect front line staff** [media release], Ministers for the Department of Social Services, 24 May 2023

## About Services Australia

The agency's purpose is to support Australians by efficiently delivering high-quality, accessible services and payments on behalf of the government. Australians need the agency and its staff during times in their life when they may be most vulnerable or in crisis. Accordingly, many customers also present with complex vulnerabilities that can impact their engagement with agency staff. This highlights the need to prioritise the security and safety of staff, particularly when working in isolated locations and service centres.

The agency is an executive agency within the Social Services portfolio with responsibility for supporting individuals, families, businesses and communities by efficiently delivering high-quality, accessible services and payments on behalf of government.<sup>2</sup>

The agency designs, delivers, coordinates and monitors government services and payments relating to social security, child support, students, families, aged care and health programs. Its vision is 'to make government services simple so people can get on with their lives'.<sup>3</sup>

During the course of an individual's life, most Australians will rely on a payment or service delivered by the agency. In 2021–22, the agency had 26.4 million Medicare customers, 11.4 million Centrelink customers and 1.2 million Child Support customers.<sup>4</sup>

The agency provides services and payments to Australians through online transactions, over the telephone and in service centres. This review, as per the terms of reference, is primarily concerned with service centres.

The agency has 318 service centres across Australia. As at 30 June 2023, the Face to Face Services Division comprises of 6,470 staff, with the majority of them working in service centres. They are complemented by specialist staff such as social workers, assessors, and out-posted staff. In some locations, other government agencies are co-located in service centres, including the National Disability Insurance Agency. During 2022–23, over 10 million contacts occurred through service centres.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Services Australia, **Services Australia Annual Report 2021–22**, Services Australia, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Services Australia, **Services Australia Annual Report 2021–22**, Services Australia, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Services Australia, **Services Australia Annual Report 2021–22**, Services Australia, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Source: Services Australia administrative data

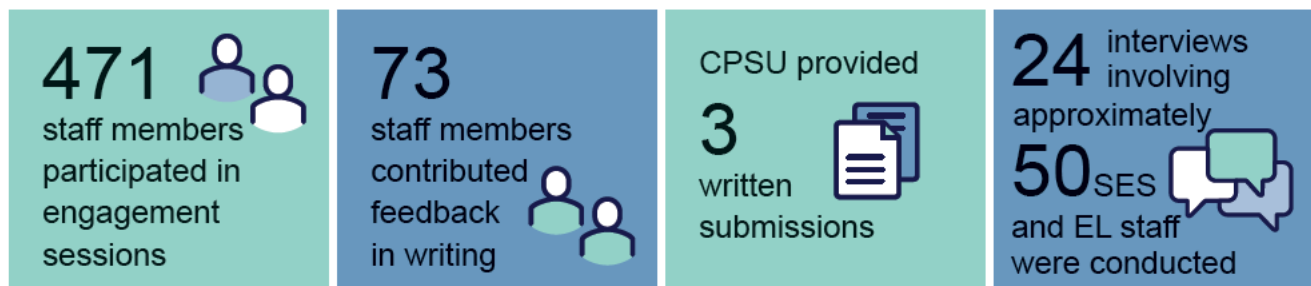
## Summary of findings

The review found that the agency has a very strong service ethos, which results in a customer service culture, led from the senior executive service (SES) of the organisation, and which is a credit to the agency and its staff. There is a genuine commitment to ensuring that the customer receives a timely, quality service, and that level of commitment would be the envy of any large organisation; public sector or government. This review has considered the extent to which this culture of service excellence is matched by a culture of safety excellence.

It is important from a safety point-of-view though, that this service culture does not impede on security and safety practices. During the review, examples were provided that suggest this is currently a risk. The agency should ensure that it can maintain a safety culture to match their service culture.

Effective leadership plays a critical role in maintaining staff safety at service centres. The importance of recognising this was a consistent theme throughout staff engagement. Accordingly, this review has made recommendations on a number of improvements, which will better support leadership within these centres.

An important feature of this review was the level of staff engagement undertaken. Service centres were visited, staff and executive leaders interviewed, policies reviewed and a series of staff engagement sessions were held. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) officials were also provided an opportunity to nominate delegates to take part in a dedicated CPSU engagement session. Staff engagement sessions were undertaken with representation invited from every service centre, as well as with service centre executive leaders, national managers and the CPSU delegates. Staff who attended the engagement sessions were provided with the opportunity to submit any feedback for consideration directly via email.



In total, 471 staff members participated in these sessions and 73 staff members contributed feedback in writing.

Eight service centres were visited, which provided an opportunity to view the physical security measures, the application of WH&S controls as they relate to customer aggression, and to engage with service centre staff.

The CPSU also provided 3 written submissions to the review, CPSU Initial Submission: Services Australia Security Risk Management Review, CPSU Submission on behalf of NDIA Workers in Co-located Service Centres: Services Australia Security Risk Management Review and CPSU Further Submission: Services Australia Security Risk Management Review. These submissions included a combined 18 recommendations.

Twenty-four interviews involving approximately 50 staff were also conducted, with SES and executive level (EL) staff who are responsible for functions relevant to the review.

All agency staff engaged in the review in a positive and constructive manner driven by a genuine interest to improve the safety of staff, and were responsive to requests for further information requested of them.

As might be expected, a range of views were expressed, both positively and negatively, about security and safety within the agency. Some staff do feel they are unsafe at work and their security and safety is not prioritised. Some also feel that their concerns about their safety is minimised by their leaders. The agency must work to alleviate these concerns.

It should be seen positively that agency staff are strong users of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), as it demonstrates a confidence in that service. It is important though that EAP data is used to its maximum degree to understand staff needs and identify associated trends it might need to address. This review found that, when combined with staffing data, injury data and customer aggression incident reporting, opportunities exist for the agency to improve its understanding and use of anonymised EAP data to inform staff-focused supports.

The review recommends that the capabilities of the agency's Security Branch be lifted to address the security and safety gaps identified. The recommended additional roles and functions will be need to be undertaken by the Security Branch. They are critical to success in lifting the safety and security of staff to the required level.

Customers exhibiting aggression are always going to present a challenge to the agency given their vulnerabilities. The principal service delivery model for dealing with customer aggression at the agency is known as the MSP. The use of the MSP model was reviewed and found to be fit for purpose. That said, the rate of customer aggression incidents caused by customers already on MSPs are high and accordingly, changes have been recommended to strengthen the model.

To protect agency staff further, an examination of available legislation that presently protects staff was conducted. There are opportunities to make better use of existing legislation such as Commonwealth trespass laws; however, the review does recommend some legislative change, primarily the introduction of workplace protection orders in Commonwealth workplaces. This would remove the need for staff to take out orders individually.

From a safety viewpoint, the physical layout of service centres are of considerable concern to staff. The current design of contemporary service centres, which are being gradually rolled out nationwide are well received from an aesthetic aspect as they create a positive and welcoming atmosphere for customers. Staff concerns though are that the design is too customer focused and presents considerable safety risks to staff. Service centre design forms part of a safety ecosystem along with security design, technology features and emergency response policies. At service centres that are at risk of high levels of customer aggression, the current design option known as the 'lobby' design was found to be most fit for purpose. This option will require several modifications recommended in this review to ensure the 'lobby' design provides a more cohesive protection for staff in collaboration with policy and security features.

During this review, opportunities were identified to enhance some of the information and communications technology (ICT) systems managed by the agency to provide greater visibility of risks to the safety of staff, and create easier pathways to obtain important risk-related information. The agency recently commenced work on several internal ICT initiatives that address staff wellbeing. These should continue to receive priority attention.

There is also a strong focus in the agency on respecting the privacy of its customers' data. This is understandable and very important when considering the personal nature of this information. That said, fears of contravening privacy legislation has acted at times as a dampening effect on safety measures within the agency. This was also determined to be the case by an internal PhD candidate who had examined customer aggression in detail. It is important that staff are aware of their privacy obligations, but also of the safety exemptions within the existing privacy legislation to deal with situations where safety-related information needs to be shared.

## Recommendations

The 44 recommendations identified were:

### Recommendation 1

The agency's Work Health and Safety Strategy 2021–26 should be amended to reflect a zero tolerance for workplace injury, and the requirement to eliminate risks to health and safety of workers and other persons so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate risks, they must be minimised as far as is reasonably practicable and demonstrate commitment to staff safety.

### Recommendation 2

The agency's Work Health and Safety Strategy 2021–26 should also be amended to ensure mechanisms are available in the workplace that prioritise staff safety and staff empowerment to provide feedback.

### Recommendation 3

Individual SES performance agreements should contain at least 1 practical commitment regarding staff safety and wellbeing. This commitment should be drawn from the key wellbeing documents such as the strategy, EAP data, and/or the people performance scorecard.

### Recommendation 4

Urgent communication should occur to leadership at service centres regarding their decision-making authorities, and role clarity on issues affecting staff safety.

### Recommendation 5

Allocation of leadership roles in service centres should be based on a matrix that takes both staff ratios and centre risk profiles into account. This should include the number of customer aggression incidents being experienced by the centre, and the number of MSP customers.

### Recommendation 6

Upgraded security systems and enhanced security features should be incorporated into the standard security design of all service centres.

### Recommendation 7

The design principles and security features of the lobby design, including the additional features identified in the report, should become standard features in all service centres at risk of high levels of customer aggression. This includes an expansion of the online booking system and the customer self-check-in kiosk. In other service centres, features of the lobby design should be implemented commensurate with the level of risk (noting the need for modification depending on the size and layout of individual service centres).

### **Recommendation 8**

Emergency response procedures – aggression (ERPAs) should be exercised regularly to ensure staff familiarity with them. This exercise should include the security guards and co-located staff at the service centre.

### **Recommendation 9**

Service centres at risk of high levels of customer aggression should appoint a role known as security officer (SO). This role would ideally be augmented to the duties of an existing staff member in the same manner as a health and safety representative (HSR) officer currently is.

### **Recommendation 10**

Urgent advice should be provided by the Security Branch to the services firm defining the role expectation of the second guard. The second guard, where required, should be engaged under the permanent guarding arrangements.

### **Recommendation 11**

The agency should ensure that the services firm are providing security guards that are trained and equipped to perform the role and functions described in the agency security guard standard operating procedures.

### **Recommendation 12**

Service centres regarded as being at risk of high levels of customer aggression should be attended by 2 security guards at all times.

### **Recommendation 13**

The Security Branch should undertake a quality assurance process regarding guarding quality and engage with staff to inform the process.

### **Recommendation 14**

The agency should ensure that the new security officer role at service centres engages in the quality assurance process with the Security Branch regarding security guard issues.

### **Recommendation 15**

The agency should work with the services firm to conduct a refreshed approach to market for security guard services for the agency.

### Recommendation 16

The existing Commonwealth Trespass provisions should be better used by the agency as a response to threats or actual customer aggression.

### Recommendation 17

The current *ACT Workplace Protection Order* provisions should be adopted for use by the Commonwealth as a staff protection mechanism nationwide.

### Recommendation 18

Consideration should be given to the creation of a national penalty provision and associated state and territory supportive amendments for the assault of a Commonwealth frontline worker.

### Recommendation 19

In addition to the publicity required to inform the community of the recommended legislative amendments, consideration should be given to a publicity campaign to encourage the community to respect Commonwealth frontline workers for the necessary and difficult work they do.

### Recommendation 20

The functions of the agency's Security Branch should be enhanced so it can respond immediately to customer aggression incidents as they occur, engage with law enforcement agencies and manage business as usual (BAU) security and safety requests.

### Recommendation 21

The agency should incorporate a light blue polo shirt option as part of its staff uniform wardrobe offering.

### Recommendation 22

Staff representatives should be included on any uniform design committees considering any future corporate wardrobe changes.

### Recommendation 23

The Electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card functionality should be enhanced, to reduce the need for customers to attend a service centre in person each time they are eligible for an immediate payment that needs to be paid via an EBT card.

### **Recommendation 24**

When undertaking policy development and program design the agency should take a customer-centric approach and this will be enhanced, by including a staff safety assurance lens.

### **Recommendation 25**

The allocation of social workers within service centres should take into account the importance of their support role within service centres, particularly for service centres that experience high levels of customer vulnerability and customer aggression incidents.

### **Recommendation 26**

The agency should implement a range of solutions to assist leadership execute their responsibilities for staff safety within service centres. This includes enhanced emergency response guidelines, security support, training and debriefing frameworks and customer signage.

### **Recommendation 27**

The agency should enhance staff protections, personal duress systems and remote monitoring in small and geographically dispersed service centres.

### **Recommendation 28**

The draft protocol agreement between the agency and partner agencies should be progressed with co-located agencies with a view to formalising the arrangements within the agreement.

### **Recommendation 29**

The agency should ensure that staff working in service centres from co-located agencies are included in emergency management planning and exercises.

### **Recommendation 30**

SOs recommended for service centres should ensure staff from co-located agencies understand and are consulted on the safety responses used in the relevant centre.

### **Recommendation 31**

The 'Advanced customer aggression training' or a similar model should be used or developed for enterprise-wide use and be made available to all service centre staff.

### **Recommendation 32**

The current percentage of staff that have undertaken the 'Customer aggression emergency response training' is 49%. Given the importance of this foundational training, the percentage completion rate should be lifted is a priority.

### **Recommendation 33**

The agency should ensure that the first aid training offering is sufficiently augmented to include training in mental health first aid. Mental health first aid training should be provided to all staff in service centres. This should be broadly implemented in line with the agency's current mental health capability framework.

### **Recommendation 34**

The 'Customer aggression reporting dashboard' should be finalised into production as soon as possible, and receive continued support from Technology and Digital Programs to ensure completion.

### **Recommendation 35**

Customer aggression incident information should be integrated across systems that record customer interactions to provide an agency enterprise view of customer aggression information.

### **Recommendation 36**

The agency should lift its engagement with law enforcement agencies to enable better risk intelligence gathering and evaluation of customers subject to a MSP.

### **Recommendation 37**

MSPs that are not centrally managed by Personalised Services should be managed at a service centre other than the service centre normally frequented by the customer.

### **Recommendation 38**

The agency should consider technical options that better enable the storage and transfer of images of customer subject to MSPs who have committed or threatened serious aggression, between centres.

### **Recommendation 39**

Service centre leadership handover documents should include details of MSP customers that could attend the centre and include a photograph of that MSP customer.

### **Recommendation 40**

The MSP letter should be amended to include a stronger warning that attendance at a centre is a breach of the trespass provisions and that actions may be taken should attendance occur. Service of these notices should be conducted in a manner that legally satisfies 'service' in its legal meaning in the relevant state or territory.

#### **Recommendation 41**

The agency should seek authority to allow Personalised Services Service Officers (PSSOs) and one main contacts (OMCs) to dispense with proof of record ownership identity questions where it is an operational necessity to do so, in order to prioritise staff safety.

#### **Recommendation 42**

The agency should develop a relationship with state and territory parole boards, with a view to enabling servicing restriction notices to be included as part of a MSP prisoner's parole conditions.

#### **Recommendation 43**

The customer incident management system (CIMS) database should provide an opportunity for service centres to share urgent risk information, including photos, quickly between service centres when customers on MSPs are actively presenting themselves at centres. This should also provide visibility to the Security Branch at an enterprise level.

#### **Recommendation 44**

The CIMS filter that currently restricts the display of customer aggression incidents to the previous 12 months should be removed to enable staff to see a longer history of incidents.



