

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights

Public Hearing – 29 July 2024

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Inquiry into Compulsory Income Management

Question reference number: IQ24-000140

Question asked by: David Shoebridge

Type of Question: Spoken. **Hansard Page/s:** 10

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 05 August 2024

Question:

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: After the last hearing, there was some data provided about income management exemptions. Do you remember providing those answers?

Mrs Hope: Yes, we do have the officer here with that information.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: Someone in my team has put it in a graph dealing with the data going from 2011 through to this year. Did you have a look at the data and did you notice the structural disparity for exemptions that were granted to First Nations peoples as opposed to non-First Nations peoples? Did you look at that disparity?

Mr Boneham: At the last hearings, we mentioned that for Indigenous or First Nations applicants the number of applications is significantly less than their actual percentage. For example, there are over 80 per cent of Indigenous First Nations people on the programs, but in most cases only around 40 per cent to 50 per cent of applications are from First Nations people.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: So, there's that structural disadvantage insofar as less applications for exemption pro rata have come from First Nations peoples? Did you have an explanation for that?

Mr Boneham: No, we don't know why that's the case.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: Did you think maybe you should explore that and maybe work out how you could help First Nations people seek the exemption so there's some kind of at least starting point parity? That was never explored?

Mr Boneham: We would need to take that on notice, because Services Australia is responsible for the exemption process. We'd need to ask what they actually do in relation to promotion of the exemption process.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: Can you think of any explanation apart from systemic discrimination, any other explanation, for why First Nations people have not accessed the exemption at anything like the rate of non-First Nations peoples? Have you got any other working hypothesis?

Mr Boneham: I wouldn't suggest that Services Australia is—

Mrs Hope: I'm not sure it's right for us to speculate either, to be honest.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: Can you explain why?

Mrs Hope: No.

Senator SHOEBRIDGE: Because you haven't looked at it?

Mrs Hope: We're happy to take that on notice and work with Services Australia, which does that work. What I can say, on behalf of Services Australia, is I know that they do a lot of work within First Nations community. I know they have a strong First Nations or Indigenous service officer network that they lean into within these spaces. I know that they are working very closely with First Nations communities in terms of a whole range of measures on closing the gap. The department and the Services Australia senior officials have had conversations about how we enhance that to make sure that First Nations people are actually receiving services they should, in particular in remote areas but not specifically. But we are happy to take that on notice.

Answer:

Indigenous status is not part of the eligibility criteria for exemptions. Not all Income Management participants will qualify to apply for an exemption under the legislation. The main reasons for exemptions being rejected are for not supplying the required evidence, or the evidence being insufficient (for example school attendance).

Further detail on eligibility for exemptions is provided at [Exemptions for enhanced Income Management and SmartCard in the Northern Territory - Enhanced Income Management and SmartCard in the Northern Territory - Services Australia](#)

Services Australia (the Agency) supports participants to provide the required evidence for an exemption in a number of ways. These include:

- Providing hard copies of evidence to a service centre, agent or remote servicing team, who will scan and send to the Service Officer assessing the exemption
- Participants authorising the Service Officer to collect school attendance evidence from the school on their behalf
- Service Officers can provide the participant with the Department of Education's email address to request evidence and they will directly supply the evidence to the Agency
- The Agency receiving faxes from community stores, community centres etc

The exemption assessment process involves a conversation with the participant where these additional supports are mentioned. They are also detailed in the request for additional information letter that the participant receives.

Services Australia has dedicated priority IM and enhanced IM phone lines where service officers are trained to assist Indigenous and remote participants with income management, including the exemptions process.

Remote Servicing Teams, Indigenous Service Officers and other specialist staff support Indigenous customers on income management through outreach services and this includes discussing exemptions from income management and supporting them with required evidence.

Services Australia also produces a number of reports of participants eligible for an exemption, which prompts staff to discuss the exemption service offer with eligible participants or to action an exemption where further evidence is not required (for example a full time student).