

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Public Hearing – 02 June 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 6

Question reference number: SQ20-000470

Senator: Murray Watt

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 17 June 2020

Question:

Senator WATT: Thank you, Chair. Ms Campbell, when did you become aware of the government's intention to announce the refund on Friday afternoon?

Ms Campbell: I had provided advice to ministers in the lead-up to that decision.

Senator WATT: When did you become aware of the decision to make the announcement around the refund?

Ms Campbell: I think I became aware on Thursday.

Senator WATT: Do you know when the decision was made to announce the refund?

Ms Campbell: We'll need to take that one on notice, when the exact decision was made.

Senator WATT: But you were informed on Thursday afternoon or morning?

Ms Campbell: I can't recall; we can take that on notice.

Senator WATT: Okay. A decision was obviously made, at the latest, on Thursday, possibly earlier, but was only announced late on Friday afternoon. Is that the sequence of events, as best you know them?

Ms Campbell: The announcement was made on Friday afternoon.

Senator WATT: And it was certainly made before the Prime Minister's press conference at 3 pm on Friday.

Ms Campbell: The announcement—I'll just check—

Senator WATT: No, the decision to refund was obviously made before the Prime Minister's press conference at 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon.

Ms Campbell: The decision was made before Minister Robert made the announcement.

Answer:

The Department of Social Services became aware of the decision to announce refunds on Thursday 28 May 2020.

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Public Hearing – 02 June 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 7

Question reference number: SQ20-000471

Senator: Murray Watt

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 17 June 2020

Question:

Senator WATT: Ms Campbell, we've talked in previous hearings about the significant pressure that your department has obviously been under, particularly running Centrelink and Services Australia—the services in response to COVID-19. I'm interested in some of the other activities the department has had to undertake at the same time. In particular, I'd like to know what costs have been incurred this calendar year in administering the online compliance initiative, better known as robodebt.

Ms Campbell: The online compliance initiative is administered by the agency Services Australia. We did ask the committee whether Services Australia were to attend today, and I understood that they were not required, so we can take that on notice.

Senator WATT: You and I have got a lot of history with robodebt, Ms Campbell. I think we first met at the Senate inquiry for robodebt. You were the secretary of DHS when robodebt was first introduced. You'd concede that, even this calendar year, administering robodebt and dealing with the legal action surrounding robodebt has been a significant drain on government resources in the middle of the COVID pandemic?

Ms Campbell: I don't have that information at hand. We can take it on notice.

Answer:

This calendar year, the estimated cost of administering the Income Compliance Program was \$47.1 million (as at 31 May 2020). As announced by the Minister for Government Services on 19 November 2019, debts are no longer being raised under the Income Compliance Programme solely on the basis of averaged ATO income data.

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Public Hearing – 02 June 2020 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 8

Question reference number: SQ20-000472

Senator: Murray Watt

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 17 June 2020

Question:

Senator WATT: As the Secretary of the Department of Social Services and formerly the Secretary of DHS, would you agree that it would have been better to have those resources available to assist people with COVID-19 rather than having to pursue the robodebt scheme?

Ms Campbell: I think Minister Robert made it clear early on that debt recovery was going to be suspended during this period. The government provided additional resources to Services Australia in order to administer and support people during this very difficult stage. I don't have the numbers with me, but Services Australia has employed a significant amount of staff to deal with the increased workload. We can take that on notice and provide that data to you. But Services Australia has also taken secondees from other parts of the Public Service, including the Department of Social Services, and there have been some 2,000 other staff redeployed from around the Public Service in order to deal with the surge in work. So I consider that Services Australia does have enough resources to deal with these issues.

Answer:

Around 1,300 compliance officers were redeployed to support COVID-19 service delivery functions. As at 28 April 2020 (demand peak) 11,898 additional resources were assisting Services Australia to manage its response to COVID-19, consisting of:

- 3,414 redeployed Services Australia employees
- 1,710 redeployed employees from 37 different APS departments and agencies, and
- 6,774 new employees:
 - 1,546 non-ongoing and casual employees
 - 3,125 labour hire employees
 - 2,103 employees through service delivery partners.

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Public Hearing – 02 June 2020
ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - Question 9

Question reference number: SQ20-000473

Senator: Murray Watt

Type of Question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s:

Date set by the Committee for the return of answer: 17 June 2020

Question:

Senator WATT: Ms Campbell, did you ever brief ministers on that AAT decision that I referred to, handed down in March 2017, that questioned the legality of the robodebt scheme?

Ms Campbell: Again, we're talking about the legal advice around a case which is before the courts and—

Senator WATT: I'm not asking about legal advice, I'm asking about a decision of the AAT. I'm not asking about legal advice regarding that decision, I'm asking whether you ever briefed ministers about that decision which questioned the legality of robodebt.

Ms Campbell: I would need to take that on notice. I provide a lot of advice to ministers and briefings to ministers and I can't recall what happened—

Senator WATT: I would have thought that's a pretty significant one that underpins hundreds of millions of dollars of savings per year. And you don't remember?

Ms Campbell: I'm saying I need to take it on notice because I cannot recall, and I would not want to mislead the committee

Answer:

I am advised that Services Australia has searched their records and have not discovered a briefing on this AAT decision.