

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

INQUIRY INTO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

PUBLIC HEARING 30 April 2020

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: APS Redeployments

Question reference number: IQ20-000015

Member: James Paterson

Type of question: Hansard page: 5

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator PATERSON: You also mentioned, I think, 1,700 people who'd been redeployed from elsewhere in the Public Service; they've come from other departments. If you have it to hand, I'd be interested to know which departments they've come from. But, if not, getting that on notice in some detail would be useful.

Ms Skinner: I have a very long list, but it is all major departments and many, many agencies. I can go through the list that Secretary Campbell has already listed. The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency have provided people. The Australian Communications and Media Authority have provided people. Australian Parliament House has provided people from Parliamentary Services and things like that. So pretty well all departments and agencies have contributed where they could.

Senator PATERSON: Great. Perhaps on notice, let's get a full list of that, because I think that would be interesting to see.

Answer:

As at 30 April 2020, 1,732 Australian Public Service (APS) staff are actively seconded to Services Australia to assist with the processing of Jobseeker claims. These staff have been redeployed from 37 agencies/departments in the APS. The breakdown of these agencies/departments can be found in the table on page 2.

In addition to the above, for the period 30 March 2020 to 30 April 2020, the following agencies/departments have also provided staff to support the surge effort at Services Australia. These agencies/departments are not included in the 1,732 total as at 30 April 2020 as they may have been recalled/withdrawn back to their parent agency/department to support critical COVID-19 functions or they are currently in the process of being on-boarded.

- Australian Building and Construction Commission;
- Australian Sports Commission;
- Civil Aviation Safety Authority Australian Government;

- Commonwealth Grants Commission;
- Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications;
- Digital Transformation Agency;
- National Faster Rail Authority;
- Office of National Intelligence; and
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

Table: Agencies/Departments with active secondments at 30 April 2020

Agency/Department
Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency
Attorney-General's Department
Australian Bureau of Statistics
Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity
Australian Communications and Media Authority
Australian Electoral Commission
Australian Parliament House
Australian Public Service Commission
Australian Research Council
Australian Signals Directorate
Australian Skills Quality Authority
Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority
Australian Taxation Office
Australian Transport Safety Bureau
Australian War Memorial
Bureau of Meteorology
Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions
Commonwealth Ombudsman
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Department of Defence
Department of Education, Skills and Employment
Department of Finance
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Department of Home Affairs
Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources
Department of Parliamentary Services
Department of Social Services
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Department of Veterans' Affairs
Hearing Australia
Infrastructure and Project Financing Agency
National Capital Authority
National Film and Sound Archive
National Indigenous Australians Agency
National Library of Australia
National Museum of Australia
Royal Australian Mint

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PUBLIC HEARING 30 April 2020

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: JobSeeker Claims Rejections

Question reference number: IQ20-000016

Member: Rachel Siewert

Type of question: Hansard page: 8

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Ms Skinner: In terms of JobSeeker payment claims, at midnight on 27 April we had received 986,174 claims. We've had two subsequent days. The inflows received on those days were around 20,000 additional claims, so we're just slightly over one million claims received now. Up until 27 April, we had finalised 745,378 claims. The Prime Minister mentioned that we were over the 800,000 figure; that was right. As of midnight last night, we're at about 840,000 claims that have been finalised since 16 March. About 250,000 claims are still on hand in relation to jobseeker.

Senator SIEWERT: Okay, thank you. What I'm trying to find out as part of this process is how many have been rejected. So could I ask you to take that on notice for me?

Ms Skinner: How many claims have been rejected?

Senator SIEWERT: Yes.

Answer:

From 16 March 2020 to 27 April 2020, of the 986,174 claims received for Jobseeker related payments, a total of 73,728 claims were rejected.

This includes claims for JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance (JobSeeker) and legacy Jobseeker payments including Newstart Allowance, Sickness Allowance and Bereavement Allowance.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: DVA Redeployments

Question reference number: IQ20-000017

Member: Jacqui Lambie

Type of question: Hansard page: 12

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator LAMBIE: That'd be great, thank you. We'll send them through. Just quickly, can you tell me whether there were any staff redeployed out of the Department of Veterans' Affairs?

Ms Skinner: There were some staff from the Department of Veterans' Affairs who came to support us. Around 25 staff from the Department of Veterans' Affairs have supported us.

Ms Campbell: And they are not officers who normally do claims processing in Veterans' Affairs; of course, that function still needs to continue. They are officers who do other elements that may not be continuing, such as commemorations, at this time.

Senator LAMBIE: Can I please have a list of those people and what parts of the Department of Veterans' Affairs they come from? You wouldn't be aware, but we have a massive backlog.

Ms Campbell: We are aware. We will take that question on notice.

Answer:

As part of its contribution to the whole of government response to COVID-19, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) has temporarily transferred 25 staff to Services Australia to assist it with its JobSeeker claims processing activities.

The 25 staff are Canberra based and none are from DVA claims processing teams. Their substantive roles include back-office support, policy, transformation, commemorations, legal services and audit.

DVA's claims processing staff (and those providing related support functions to claims processing) are based in Perth, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart. These are longstanding arrangements. There are no Canberra based DVA claims processing staff, and no plans to establish any.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Forecast cost of additional employees

Question reference number: IQ20-000018

Member: Rex Patrick

Type of question: Hansard pages: 12-13

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator PATRICK: In relation to the 6,700 staff that you've taken on, I assume that their employment costs come from an appropriation separate to the stimulus package.

Ms Campbell: Additional funds were provided to Services Australia for what we might term the departmental costs of running that. Yes, they're not included in the administered payments that are paid to the citizens. There's a separate appropriation.

Senator PATRICK: That was in the appropriation bills that went through the parliament just recently?

Ms Campbell: That's my understanding. I can get someone to check, but that's my understanding.

Senator PATRICK: Can you provide on notice what the cost has been with respect to those new workers and what the anticipated cost is?

Ms Skinner: The cost to date is around \$28.3 million. We can provide on notice what the forecast will be, depending on how the workforce is held.

Senator PATRICK: Thank you.

Answer:

The cost of the additional labour resources for COVID-19 activity as at 28 April 2020 was \$28.3 million. The estimated cost in 2019-20 is \$132.4 million. This does not include the cost of staff being redeployed from within Services Australia or being seconded from other agencies to assist with claims processing.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Telephony and Performance Metrics

Question reference number: IQ20-000019

Member: Rex Patrick

Type of question: Hansard pages: 13-14

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator PATRICK: Back to my question: how many additional people have been deployed on those telephony services?

Ms Skinner: I can get Michelle Lees to bring that data forward, to split that up between telephony and processing.

Senator PATRICK: Thank you—and any performance metrics you have. I'd be interested to see how that ties around any outages you've had on your website; as we know, there have been a couple. Or has there been just the one outage on the website?

Ms Skinner: The website's remained up. The performance of the website becomes degraded, like any website, when there are lots and lots of people trying to get onto it. On the day the grand final tickets come on, the Ticketek website struggles. The site has remained up. There was some extreme poor performance early on. The ICT teams have lifted the ability for people to log in and for the general capacity of the network to be improved, such that performance on myGov can sustain more users. It could only sustain about 90,000 consistent logins back on 16 March. It's now approaching an ability to sustain about 300,000 logins, which is a threefold increase.

Senator PATRICK: Some statistics on notice would be good.

Ms Skinner: Sure.

Answer:

As at 17 April 2020, Services Australia had an additional 7,071 people deployed to telephony, and an additional 5,126 people deployed to processing as part of the COVID-19 response.

The Employment Services telephone line average speed of answer was 23 minutes and 4 seconds for the period 16 March to 27 April 2020, compared to 24 minutes and 59 seconds for the same period in 2018-19.

The JobSeeker Payment claims processing performance result is 93.87 per cent of claims finalised within 16 days for the period 16 March to 27 April 2020. This is against the performance target of 80 per cent of JobSeeker Payment claims being finalised within 16 days.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Farm Household Allowance

Question reference number: IQ20-000021

Member: Perin Davey

Type of question: Hansard page: 15

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator DAVEY: I'd appreciate that. Are we still getting farm household allowance applications at this point in time? A lot of people have seen the rain and they think it's all stopped. If you're on farm household allowance, you also get the COVID-19 supplement.

Ms Campbell: We'll just ask Services Australia whether they've had some inflow of farm household assistance allowance.

Ms Skinner: Let me examine my detailed chart, and I'll just quickly see if we've got that particular data point with us.

Ms Campbell: Ms Lees seems to have it.

Ms Lees: Yes, we continue to receive applications for farm household allowance, but we would have to take on notice the exact numbers being received each week. We currently have 537 claims on hand and they're still being actioned.

Answer:

The table below provides detail on Farm Household Allowance claims inflow for the period commencing 9 March 2020 to 24 April 2020.

Week ending Friday	Inflow
13/03/2020	95
20/03/2020	117
27/03/2020	130
03/04/2020	193
10/04/2020	155
17/04/2020	185
24/04/2020	207

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Minister's office decisions

Question reference number: IQ20-000023

Member: Murray Watt

Type of question: Hansard page: 17

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: Were any measures that Services Australia recommended to the minister or his office to deal with that likely influx of applications rejected or delayed by the minister or his office?

Ms Skinner: I don't believe so, Senator, but I will take that on notice.

Senator WATT: So there wasn't any action recommended by Services Australia that the minister declined to take up?

Ms Skinner: Not that I'm aware of, but I will take that on notice to clarify.

Answer:

No.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Lockdown advice

Question reference number: IQ20-000025

Member: Murray Watt

Type of question: Hansard page: 19

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: When was Services Australia first advised of the government's intention to lock down pubs et cetera, which obviously was going to trigger a major demand on the system?

Ms Skinner: I'll take the specifics of that on notice, but, as we know, things were moving very quickly, and those discussions, I believe, occurred in national cabinet. (page 19)

Answer:

As part of its overall response to COVID-19 Services Australia (the Agency) has closely monitored and responded to changes in demand for its services throughout the evolving pandemic situation, including in relation to key announcements such as the introduction of social distancing measures, restrictions on gatherings, jurisdictional lockdowns and school closures. The Agency has been advised of particular decisions in line with appropriate Cabinet processes.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Special Benefit

Question reference number: IQ20-000027

Member: Rachel Siewert

Type of question: Hansard page: 20

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Could you also take on notice how many visa holders have now also had access to special benefit.

Answer:

As at 24 April 2020, there were 4,091 temporary visa holders receiving Special Benefit.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Minister Robert Letter

Question reference number: IQ20-000030

Member: Murray Watt

Type of question: Hansard page: 24

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 3

Question:

Ms Campbell: I'm advised that Minister Robert wrote to the CEO of the NDIA and the acting CEO of Services Australia on 5 March, outlining expectations in immediate actions to be prepared for COVID.

Senator WATT: The evidence we've had in other hearings of this committee was, for instance, that the health department began work in mid-January, and Treasury was doing work after that, but it wasn't until early March that Minister Robert asked your agencies to begin plans for what might come.

Ms Campbell: There was work underway earlier, with interdepartmental committees and the like. But I understand that, on 5 March, Minister Robert articulated the expectations, in writing, to the two CEOs.

Senator WATT: Can you table that letter, please?

Ms Campbell: I'll take that on notice.

Answer:

Services Australia began preparing to respond to COVID-19 in late January 2020. This included participating in relevant cross government committees, engaging bilaterally with other agencies, updating pandemic planning material and maximising agency preparedness to manage service impacts.

On 5 March 2020 the Minister for Government Services wrote to the CEO of the National Disability Insurance Agency and the then Interim CEO of Services Australia outlining his expectations in relation to emergency response preparedness for COVID-19. The letter is attached.

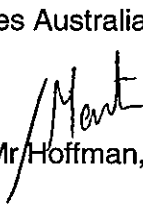


The Hon Stuart Robert MP
Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme
Minister for Government Services

5 March 2020

Mr Martin Hoffman
CEO
National Disability Insurance Agency

Ms Amanda Cattermole
Interim CEO
Services Australia

 
Dear Mr Hoffman, Ms Cattermole

Further to our ongoing discussions, I write to outline the Government's expectations regarding emergency response preparedness in response to the threat posed to the delivery of government services by the Coronavirus (COVID-19), which the Prime Minister has recently highlighted risks becoming pandemic.

Both Services Australia and the National Disability Insurance Agency are critical to the delivery of core government services that touch the lives of almost every Australian. As such, the continuity of adequate service delivery is paramount.

I am cognisant that a globally pandemic Coronavirus would likely lead to endemic spread of the virus domestically. This would pose challenges for Australians as they seek to access core services, and pose additional challenges for your service delivery networks in meeting service demands and managing your significant workforces. These challenges would likely include, amongst other things, how Australians are serviced during periods of self-imposed isolation and the impacts of significant unscheduled staff absences from processing, telephony and face-to-face servicing sites.

As discussed, my expectations are the following immediate actions are being taken within your respective agencies to ensure appropriate contingency preparedness and communications:

1. Standing up of a dedicated taskforce:
 - a. led by a suitable senior executive, to oversee planning, manage resources and direct responses in accordance with operational exigencies, and
 - b. to undertake appropriate Agency planning, including scenario based planning, with reference to Agency-specific and whole-of-government disaster and pandemic plans.

2. Institute a briefing schedule that ensures I am appropriately briefed, covering:
 - a. operational developments, metrics and collaboration with other agencies/departments;
 - b. key challenges, including those requiring escalation to support resolution at the ministerial level;
 - c. impacts for business as usual (BAU) operations, including effects on budgets, resourcing and key performance indicators (KPIs);
 - d. impacts on customers; and
 - e. any other relevant matters.

I now also seek your urgent further advice on any additional steps required in the short term to ensure your agencies are adequately positioned to meet the potential challenges ahead.

I have copied this letter to the Secretary of the Department of Social Services, Kathryn Campbell AO CSC, for her awareness.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stuart Robert', written in a cursive style.

Stuart Robert

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Medicare Data Matching

Question reference number: IQ20-000032

Member: Jacqui Lambie

Type of question: Hansard page: 26

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

- a) Senator LAMBIE: Thank you for that. I note that, on the same day Minister Robert stated that Centrelink would pause most debt recovery activities, the department issued a notice that it will use Medicare information to pursue potential overpayments. Do you know if the matching of Medicare records to your information about Centrelink recipients has begun?

Ms Musolino: I don't have the information in front of me but, from memory, that data-matching protocol is primarily about identifying fraudulent or hijacked identities. So it's about determining things like where somebody has taken over the identity of a deceased person, for example, and is trying to use that identity to make claims. I can take on notice to provide you with a copy of the protocol and some other information that is available on that data matching, but it's primarily focused on that identity theft issue. We're working very hard to make sure we help Australians protect their identities.

- b) Senator LAMBIE: Do you know if there have been any debt notices that have been raised as a result of combining these activities?

Ms Musolino: That activity actually helps identify fraudulent claims. I would expect that would have informed a decision to raise the debt in the case of a fraud or a serious noncompliance matter. I can take that on notice for a bit more detail.

Answer:

- a) Data matching between Medicare information with Centrelink recipients has commenced in accordance with Office of Australian Information Commission (OAIC) guidelines. This matching assists Services Australia in the prevention and detection of identity fraud. This work commenced following an OAIC review of the Medicare – Centrelink Data Matching Protocol and its gazettal on 6 April 2020.

The Medicare – Centrelink Data Matching protocol is accessible here:

<https://www.servicessaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-matching-of-centrelink-and-medicare-data-protocol.pdf>

- b) This data matching activity does not lead directly to the raising of debts. However, where a relevant match identifies potential identity fraud, any subsequent formal investigation into that matter may lead to the raising of a debt.

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PUBLIC HEARING 30 April 2020

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Deceased Estate Debts

Question reference number: IQ20-000033

Member: Jacqui Lambie

Type of question: Hansard Page 26

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator LAMBIE: Okay. Can you take this on notice too: whether any debt notices have been issued to deceased estates since 3 April.

Ms Musolino: I can take that on notice. I'll just mention that often, where someone does pass away and an executor is seeking to settle an estate, that's some of the priority work that we do deal with—that is, where an executor asks that we complete a person's affairs so that they can settle an estate and administer the estate. That's some of the work we prioritise, but I can come back to you on notice with that information.

Answer:

Services Australia is unable to extract the data required to respond to this question within the time requested by the Senate. Once the data is obtained this answer will be updated.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Special Benefit

Question reference number: IQ20-000049

Member: Rachel Siewert

Type of question: Hansard page: 19

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 May 2020

Number of pages: 4

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Ms Campbell, obviously we are reaching out on some of these individual cases but, quite frankly, some people don't know to come directly to a member of parliament. Therefore I'm asking if there is a broader fix so that Centrelink doesn't reject them but automatically looks at special benefit or looks at their circumstances in more detail?

Ms Campbell: I think we'll have to take that one on notice. Of course, the website does articulate the cases for special benefit, and I thought it articulated circumstances where there was alienation from parents, but we will take that on notice and have a look at it. We'll also take that feedback and see whether there's more we can do on the website to give people options that they might seek to explore.

Answer:

When a young person applies for Youth Allowance, Services Australia assesses whether they are dependent or independent. This assessment is based on the information provided by the claimant to support their claim. If they are assessed as dependent for Youth Allowance purposes, their parents' income and assets will be used to determine their eligibility for payments.

Where a person is regarded as independent for Youth Allowance purposes their parental income does not affect their payment. Criteria for assessment as independent includes the claimant:

- being aged 22 years or over; or
- being, or having been, legally married or in a registered relationship; or
- having, or having had, a dependent child; or
- being unable to live at home.

Where a customer indicates during their interactions with Services Australia, that they are vulnerable or there are concerns for the young person's safety, a Service Officer will refer the customer to a Services Australia Social Worker for assistance.

If a young person is under the age of 18 years, claiming payment (Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY, Disability Support Pension or Special Benefit) and has indicated they are unable to live at home, they are referred to a Services Australia social worker for an interview.

The role of the social worker is to:

- Assess and determine the customer's eligibility for the unreasonable to live at home (UTLAH) rate of payment.
- Provide immediate support and counselling.
- Assess and refer to appropriate community supports and services, depending on the person's circumstances.
- Recommend potential alternative rates of payment such as Away From Home or State Care (supported/unsupported) if not eligible for the UTLAH rate of payment.

The Payment and Services Finder on Services Australia's website assists people to determine which payment may be best suited to their individual circumstances.

Information on the eligibility criteria for accessing Special Benefit is also provided on Services Australia's website ([Attachment A](#)), including advice that the payment can be accessed where a person is in severe financial hardship and is unable to qualify for any other income support payment.

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/special-benefit>

Home > Individuals > Services > Centrelink > Special Benefit

Special Benefit

A payment if you're in severe financial hardship and can't get other income support from us.

We have information in different languages about Special Benefit



To get this you must be:

- in severe financial hardship for reasons beyond your control
- unable to earn enough to support yourself and your family
- unable to get another income support payment.

Read the full conditions under [who can get it](#).

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/special-benefit/who-can-get-it>
[Who can get it](#)

You can get Special Benefit if you're in severe financial hardship.

This payment can help if you meet residence rules and all of the following apply to you:

- you're in severe financial hardship due to circumstances beyond your control
- you don't earn enough to support you and your dependants
- you can't get any other income support payment.

You can claim Special Benefit for a child if any of the following apply:

- you have custody
- your child is an Australian citizen or permanent resident
- you can't get any income or family support payments because you're not a permanent resident
- you're in severe financial hardship
- you can't support yourself and your child.

Severe financial hardship

You're in severe financial hardship if any of the following occurs to you:

- you earn less than the highest Special Benefit fortnightly payment

- you can't improve your financial position
- you have limited savings.

Limited savings

For short term payments you and your partner must have no more than the fortnightly Special Benefit payment amount.

For long term payments you must have no more than \$5,000.

For more information you can either:

- call the help in an emergency line
- go to a service centre.