

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic 2020

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

021 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

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Topic: Support to stranded Australians

Senator Kristina Keneally

Question

Senator KENEALLY: Right. I know you gave out a list of the number of phone calls you made. How many texts messages have been sent out? I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

Mr Sheehan: I'd have to take it on notice, but I would assume that we've sent out as many as possible.

Senator KENEALLY: When these calls are made, are they being made at an appropriate time for the recipient, or are they being made during Australian business hours?

Mr Sheehan: We discussed that with Services Australia. They're working extended hours so that the calls are made at an appropriate time. If there's information indicating otherwise then I apologise. For exceptional reasons, I couldn't listen this morning at 10 o'clock, but I had colleagues who were watching, so if there is feedback that someone got called at an inappropriate time we'll take that on board.

Senator KENEALLY: I'm happy to table for you the stranded Australians' Facebook posts regarding the DFAT phone banking. I've redacted their names, because it will be public information—

Mr Sheehan: Of course.

Senator KENEALLY: but if you do need names I'm happy to provide them. We are being told that people are getting phone calls in the middle of the night. We have also been told that they are waiting up to 40 minutes for a call to connect to a DFAT officer. Are you aware of either of the two issues—that people are being called in the middle of the night or that they're waiting on hold for 40 minutes?

Mr Sheehan: I was not aware of the calls in the middle of the night, and we will follow up on that, because certainly that's not the intent. We aim to be calling at time-zone-suitable times, if I can use that term. I will find out. Also, we'll check on call waiting times. We've had, I think, 100,000 consular phone calls since the beginning of COVID. We heavily staff our emergency

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call unit and also our consular crisis centre. We now have a total on the task force of 166 staff, so we're endeavouring to make sure that we are doing everything we can at maximum capacity. I'll find out. It may have been a particular time of day. There may be a reason for it, but I would hope people would not be left waiting like that. We'll look into that. I don't think that would be typical at all.

Kristina KENEALLY: When these calls are made, are they being made at an appropriate time for the recipient or are they only being made in Australian business hours?

Tony SHEEHAN: They are working extended hours to ensure calls are made at appropriate times. We can look into if people are getting calls at inappropriate times.

Answer

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has intensively staffed consular call lines in 2020.

Services Australia conducted a specific callout on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade between 19 and 25 November, which called registered Australians to ensure we understand their circumstances and intentions about seeking to return.

For this campaign, Services Australia programmed calls based on the location of each registered Australian to ensure contact occurred at a reasonable hour in their time zone. This was effective for nearly all calls, though Services Australia reported that less than 1% of calls occurred outside planned hours. In a small number of cases, where the nominated contact person was already in Australia or a third location (not in the reported case location), they may have received a call at an unplanned early or late hour.

When Services Australia operators transferred calls to DFAT consular staff, these clients were not placed in wait queues. During the campaign, the average wait time for clients calling in or for those transferred to the DFAT Consular Emergency Centre, was 24 seconds. Both Services Australia and DFAT were unaware of the 40-minute wait time advised to the Committee.

A total of 18,783 SMS messages were sent during the campaign - one to each client with a mobile phone. The Department followed these texts with call attempts.

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Topic: Support to stranded Australians

Senator Kristina Keneally

Question

Senator KENEALLY: This is a question for Mr Sheehan. You talked about the hardship program and you made mention that it was split between loans and grants. I think I asked at the last hearing if we could get a breakdown. You said \$9 million had been given out to 1,772 applicants. Can we get a breakdown between loans and grants, please? I'm happy for that to go on notice if it needs to.

Mr Sheehan: We do have that information. I think we can provide it to you. If I find it before we finish, I'll give it to you. Otherwise, we'll take it on notice.

Answer

As of 26 November, 1,772 applicants had been approved for loans or grants under the Hardship Program. Of those, 976 applicants have returned completed legal documents to commence funding.

DFAT has committed a total of \$9.56m to these 976 applicants, composed of \$3.1m in repayable loans and \$6.46m in grants. Of this, DFAT has already expended a total of \$2.82m, composed of \$2.54m in repayable loans and \$0.28m in subsistence grants.

Repatriation airfare grants are paid directly to the airlines on behalf of vulnerable Australians. As of 26 November, based on flights that have occurred or have been booked, we expect to pay \$6.18m in airfare grants directly to airlines (on behalf of vulnerable Australians) once final charges are settled.