

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: Advice on myGov usage

Question reference number: IQ20-000024

Member: Murray Watt

Type of question: Hansard pages: 17-18

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

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: Sure. To take a step back, was Services Australia surprised by the Prime Minister's announcement on 22 March around the lockdown? Were you given advance warning that that was coming?

Ms Skinner: We were watching the environment unfold—and we'd seen a slight uptick towards the back end of the week—and we were preparing for the fact that there would be a likely impact on the work that Services Australia did and we moved quickly to respond to that. We weren't flat-footed but we weren't on Friday night predicting that we would have that Centrelink queue that was shown on the TV either. We were just in the thinking phases.

Senator WATT: You were in a thinking phase?

Ms Skinner: It was clear that the environment for Australia was going to start to change—I think everyone could see that—and we moved particularly quickly on Monday and Tuesday to reposition ourselves to manage the load that we had.

Ms Campbell: Senator, my recollection was that there'd been an announcement earlier, on 22 March, about the changes to jobseeker and then there was the lockdown as well. So there were two events on that day.

Senator WATT: So, around the time of that announcement, what advice did Services Australia or the department provide to Minister Robert around the likely increase in the usage of the myGov website? What sorts of numbers were you predicting?

Ms Skinner: I would have to take that on notice. I can't recall off the top of my head what was provided at the time.

Answer:

Services Australia regularly briefs the Minister on ICT operations as part of its business as usual reporting. As part of Services Australia's response to the COVID-19 crisis, myGov capacity was scaled to support anticipated demand. Following the unprecedented call on myGov's and Centrelink's services after decisions of the National Cabinet were announced on Sunday 22 March, myGov capacity was further scaled to support up to 300,000 concurrent users.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Debt Repayment contacts

Question reference number: IQ20-000029

Member: Murray Watt

Type of question: Hansard page: 23

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

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: How many Australians have made contact with Services Australia since 3 April to pause or alter their debt repayment plan?

Ms Skinner: We can take on notice the specific number, if you want us to, from that start date. I think we've probably taken around 50,000 phone calls in relation to that—is that right?—but they're not necessarily about payment plans.

Ms Musolino: We have a dedicated line to assist people with these payment arrangements. We've actually taken 521,847 calls for the financial year to 31 March, but I can't break that up into how many people were calling to seek a reassessment, how many people wanted to seek a review of a decision and how many people wanted to increase or decrease their payment arrangement. They ring that support line for a whole range of reasons.

Answer:

Between 3 April and 30 April 2020, Services Australia (the Agency) answered over 36,000 calls to the dedicated phone line. The Agency is unable to provide a breakdown of the reason for the calls. Providing this information would require manual checking of individual customer records, which would be an unreasonable diversion of Agency resources.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Services Australia

Topic: Debt repayment arrangements

Question reference number: IQ20-000031

Member: Perin Davey

Type of question: Hansard page: 25

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

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator DAVEY: Like Senator Paterson I probably won't take my full time, but we'll see how we go. I want to come back to a question from Senator Watt about debt repayment programs. You said that people who are on an existing debt repayment program stay on that unless they contact you to make arrangements otherwise. Given that some recipients of the jobseeker payment are now getting the jobseeker payment plus the COVID-19 supplement, has anyone called in to ask for their debt repayments to be increased so they can finalise their debt faster?

Ms Skinner: I think we'd have to take that on notice.

Answer:

Please see answer to IQ20-000029.