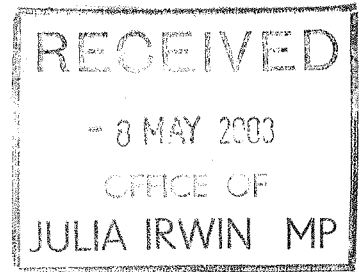




SENATOR THE HON JOE LUDWIG
Minister for Human Services
Manager of Government Business in the Senate
Senator for Queensland



C08/1367

Ms Julia Irwin MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions
Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 17 March 2008 in relation to a petition from Mr Matthew Kool about dissatisfaction in Centrelink service provision, in particular, the Morwell Centrelink Customer Service Centre.

I also received a copy of the petition earlier in the year through a representation by the Member for Gippsland, the Hon Peter McGauran MP, who wrote to me directly on Mr Kool's behalf. I take feedback such as this seriously and I asked Centrelink to review the issues raised by Mr Kool.

Both myself and Centrelink are committed to excellence in customer service and we will continue to build confidence in the way Centrelink conducts its business, through continuous improvement. I acknowledge that at times breakdowns can occur. However, as an organisation, Centrelink values and responds to customer feedback and takes necessary action when required.

Since July 2005, Centrelink has undertaken the systematic measuring of how long customers wait between entering Customer Service Centres and being seen by an employee. Although queue wait times at Morwell are generally within the Centrelink standard, delays were identified for several weeks towards the end of 2007 and at the beginning of 2008. This was a result of a seasonal peak in workload, arising from former students entering the labour force. This has now been overcome and, since early February, Morwell Customer Service Centre has been well within the acceptable queue wait time.

As a result of the issues with queue wait times for the above mentioned period, a thorough review of Morwell's operations, including staffing levels, was undertaken in late January 2008 prior to and during the time of the petition. Several measures were introduced as a result of the review. These include ensuring more effective rostering of employees to better meet peak periods, improved management of workflow and employee work practices and an increased emphasis on employee training to ensure availability of skills across all customer groups. A new leadership team was appointed to identify and lead the implementation of these changes. These measures have already led to significant improvements in queue wait times. In addition, the office layout at Morwell has been redesigned to address the concerns of senior customers by creating a separate service area for them. The changes have been commented on positively by this particular customer group.

In the near future, Centrelink will be holding a community focus group to identify any further areas for improvement.

Two different teams of employees work within the Morwell Customer Service Centre; one is dedicated to face-to-face customer service and one is part of a national business integrity team focused on compliance processing work on a national basis. The business integrity team does not normally provide front-line customer service, however, the team assists front-line employees during periods of peak demand by providing targeted support for customers wishing to take up the self-service option. The front-line employees provide services to all customers at two access points in the office; the Seniors and the Working Age service areas. The new office layout is such that the working areas are physically independent of each other.

Centrelink is committed to making it easy for customers to access our services. Morwell, along with Warragul and Wonthaggi Customer Service Centres, provide services to the LaTrobe Valley and South Gippsland areas. In view of the distance some customers, who wish to have face-to-face contact, have to travel to access Centrelink services, a series of Agents operate in most of the major small towns across the region. Customers are also being encouraged, where possible, to conduct aspects of their business online or by telephone via Interactive Voice Response, thus reducing their need to personally visit Customer Service Centres.

The Morwell Centrelink Customer Service Centre services the three major centres of Morwell, Moe and Traralgon. No onsite service has ever been provided within Moe or Traralgon as both areas are in reasonable proximity to Morwell.

Under Social Security Law, customers also have rights of review and appeal against decisions made by Centrelink. The review and appeals system is designed to protect customer rights and ensure correct decisions are made in accordance with legislation. It consists of both internal and external review mechanisms. Customers who are dissatisfied with the service they have received can contact Centrelink's Customer Relations Line on Freecall 1800 050 004. Where there is evidence that a breakdown in service has occurred, the matter is thoroughly investigated.

Once again, thank you for writing.

Yours sincerely

JOE LUDWIG
Minister for Human Services

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