

Centrelink's controversial data matching program sends shock waves through the legal community

Revelations that Centrelink will extend their data matching program to include pensioners and people with a disability sent shock waves through Queensland's community legal centres today.

Community legal centre staff are already stretched to capacity and struggling to respond to the volume of calls from people who are confused about Centrelink's new online compliance system. Community legal centres fear that extending this program to include pensioners may take them to breaking point.

Georgina Warrington, Director, Basic Rights Queensland comments, 'Many people are calling our centre in a very distressed state. They are confused as they have been informed that they must repay debts that they believe are wrong. Their distress is exacerbated by the lack of information and they incorrectly believe there is nothing which can be done to remedy their situation.'

'These people are phoning us and because of the sheer volume of calls, are unable to get through. If they do get through they find that all appointments we have available for the (following) week are booked out by Monday lunchtime. With very tight timelines, this means the debt recovery process may start automatically, without them having a chance to respond. The announcement by Centrelink to extend this program to include people on the aged and disability pensions means that many more vulnerable people will be left confused and distressed and without the assistance they need to access their legal right to dispute the decision.'

James Farrell, Director, Community Legal Centres Queensland said, 'Even before this clunky process was rolled out by Centrelink, Community Legal Centres could only assist half of the people seeking our help. Tens of thousands of people are already missing out on the help they need, and things are about to get worse. The Turnbull Government will reduce federal funding to community legal centres by 30% from July, while demand for services will increase as Centrelink tries to claw back more money from vulnerable older people and people with disability, who often need legal help to understand their rights.'

'Centrelink should suspend its data-matching process, and make sure that legal services are available for people to get help to navigate the system,' concluded Mr Farrell. 'Government has a vital role in providing basic supports to people, including social security and legal help. This Government must do more.'

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Community Legal Centres Queensland Inc (formerly QAILS) is the state-wide peak body representing community legal centres in Queensland. Queensland community legal centres have 40 years of service delivery experience providing free information, advice and referral, casework and representation to the community. www.communitylegalqld.org.au

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