



Centrelink robo-debt correspondence 'incomprehensible', Senate inquiry told

Legal services attack 'catastrophic' effect on vulnerable Australians and call for end to debt recovery program

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Lawyers working for community legal centres have told a Senate inquiry on Tuesday that it was extremely difficult dealing with Centrelink on behalf of people with "robo debts" and that correspondence was often "frankly incomprehensible".

Paula Hughes, a policy lawyer from LawRight, a Queensland-based legal service, says her colleagues have "significant difficulties" convincing Centrelink staff that LawRight is a legal advocate for Centrelink recipients.

The organisation's volunteer lawyers often spend hours on the phone trying to get through to Centrelink and, if they manage to make contact with Centrelink staff to request documents, they will often not get a reply, she says.

If Centrelink staff do send documents in relation to recipients' alleged debts, the documents are "frankly incomprehensible".

"[They] go no way towards understanding the nature of the debt being alleged," she has said.

A Senate inquiry into Centrelink's automated debt recovery system was held in Queensland on Tuesday.

It heard representatives from not-for-profit legal services including Queensland Advocacy Incorporated, Basic Rights Queensland Incorporated, the Queensland Council of Social Service, the Australian Association of Social Workers and the Department of Human Services.

Emma Phillips from Queensland Advocacy Incorporated said the government's controversial debt recovery system has had "catastrophic" effects on vulnerable Australians.

"The initiative was implemented too quickly without adequate testing and consultation, and therefore [its] many errors could have been predicted," she told senators. "It has been implemented during a period when those most in

need are looking to an increasingly lean and patchy social welfare system for support.

“The timeframe of 21 days to challenge or settle the debt was inadequate in circumstances where inadequate details were provided of how the debts were calculated.”

Cassandra Goldie, the chief executive of the Australian Council of Social Service, told senators she wanted the government’s debt recovery program to end immediately.

She was “deeply concerned” it was continuing to cause harm and she strongly opposed any expansion of the program to people on the age pension.

“The small changes that have been made by the government and the Department of Human Services since the robo-debt program was first unleashed on the community have only led to slight improvements,” she said. “They do not go to the heart of the major flaws in the program.”

The Greens senator Rachel Siewert told Guardian Australia that the problems experienced by Centrelink recipients in Queensland were similar to those in other states but community legal centres were having a particularly hard time.

“They have a lot of volunteer lawyers and they spend hours on the phone trying to contact Centrelink staff, but you can’t email Centrelink so you have to send faxes or ring,” she said. “They’ve found it really hard to get information but then when they do get documents they’re often illegible.

“A lot of lawyers have said there needs to be more face-to-face contact with Centrelink staff but they’re not getting it.”

In April, the chief executive of Dun and Bradstreet, Simon Bligh, denied allegations that his company had been harassing or threatening debtors, saying there had only been one upheld complaint for every 100,000 contacts.

A Senate inquiry will be held in Canberra on Thursday.

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