



22nd February 2023

The Hon Bill Shorten MP

Minister for Government Services

PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: minister@servicesaustralia.gov.au

Dear Minister Shorten,

Lived Experience Australia is a national representative organisation for Australian mental health consumers and carers, formed in 2002 with a focus on the private sector. All members of our Board and staff have mental health lived experience as either a consumer, family carer or both. Our core business is to advocate for systemic change to improve the lives of people with lived experience of mental health issues.

We are writing to raise an urgent issue in relation to Services Australia's current automated response system for incoming Centrelink phone calls. One of our Friends brought this issue to our attention as a parent and primary carer of a young person who currently has an active claim in for Disability Support Pension after initially filing for a Youth Allowance with Medical Exemption. In late January, the young person was notified through their Centrelink Express App that their Youth Allowance was to be updated to include the addition of a Youth Disability Supplement, followed a day later by a request, also in App, to submit their identity documents to progress their Disability Support Pension claim to the final stages by the 8th February. Following the advice given by Services Australia officers on multiple occasions, to call the Centrelink phone number to confirm that the documentation has been received in order to expedite cumbersome internal processes, our Friend and their teenager tried to call Centrelink 4 times over a period of 3 days. Each time, any attempt to progress their claim to speak to an Operator was met with an automated message stating that there was a long queue with the listener then instructed to call back later, followed by the call being dropped. Upon returning the call, the system identified the number and blocked access to the system, telling the caller to call back later and once more hanging up. This happened using 3 different phone numbers. The Friend then tried to reassure their young person that Centrelink had all the details they needed, and they simply needed to trust that they had followed the instructions and the claim would proceed accordingly.

On the 10th February, the young person then received a letter stating that their mutual obligations exemption was ending from the 18th February and that they would be required to attend appointments with their Employment Services Provider and meet the requirements as stated in their Job Plan to continue receiving their payment. While the parent was confident that their young person's psychiatrist would happily write another Medical Exemption, the parent conceded it would be at least 2 weeks before an urgent appointment would be arranged. Our LEA Friend relates that their young person was also aware of this and that their anxiety skyrocketed. The young person had also never been issued with a Job Plan, and there was still no communication on the outcome of their Disability Support Pension claim. Our LEA friend tried to support their young person to call both the Youth and Students Line as well as the Disability, Sickness and Carers Line. Once again, they received the same responses as their previous attempts and when the parent attempted follow up from their own phone the process remained unchanged. The parent then needed to support their teenager to attend a Centrelink office face to face by the end of the week while juggling multiple

other priorities and supporting their young person through an unknown process that is creating much anxiety.

This 17-year-old who lives with PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder as well as a recently diagnosed eating disorder, has also not received any information on the progress of their DSP claim. They have just taken great strides in returning to adult-education based learning after being away from a high school environment for more than two years. It is also pertinent to note that this parent and their teen are both on low incomes due to the complexity of the parent's own needs as both a consumer and carer and cannot work more than 25 hours per week away from the home due to their caring responsibilities. It had been hoped that by applying for Disability Support Person that the young person would be able to develop a sense of financial independence. This young person is now terrified that they are going to suddenly lose their income which has further impacted upon their ability to find hope for the future.

We wish to submit this as one particular example of how this sudden change to the Centrelink automated phone systems is now further compounding inequity for people with already significant lived experience of barriers to appropriate supports. This further hampers the person's redevelopment of agency in aide of the redevelopment of ongoing mental health wellbeing and appropriate self-management skills, that these kinds of income support options otherwise hope to foster. After the Friend of Lived Experience Australia raised this issue with us, upon investigation, we have found that similar concerns are being reported in the media including this article on SBS News: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/thank-you-goodbye-why-centrelink-is-hanging-up-on-australias-most-vulnerable/1wwdizbbm>

It saddens us greatly that, on one hand, the Federal Government is investing significant time and effort into understanding mental health inequity and access barriers and seeking to elevate lived experience leadership but, on the other hand, is approving processes such as these that exacerbate ongoing socioeconomic hardship, a social determinant of health well understood to be a driving factor in mental ill health and suicidal distress.

People with lived experience, disability, their carers, family and kin experience multiple additional barriers to attending a Centrelink office face to face, which this particular example amply demonstrates. The current system serves to also create access barriers for people in regional and remote communities who sometimes have to drive several hours or days to attend a local Centrelink Office which can result in loss of income where work has to be rearranged, postponed or cancelled in order to do so. This further adds to the burden cost of living impacts upon financial stressors where an internal governmental system has failed to consider the human element of attempts to streamline in the face of workforce shortages. The current system also presents negative implications for older people, people from migrant communities and anyone for whom, in applying the social model of disability, might otherwise benefit from a simple phone interaction particularly based on previous information provided by Services Australia officers.

We would like to request that this issue be rectified as a matter of urgency. The potential flow on effect to our already overburdened mental health system and the lives of those who are already most compromised by the current state of workforce, bed flow and other appropriate care alterative shortages requires immediate remediation if the government truly seeks to appropriately address factors of equitable access to reduce mental health and suicidal distress and not further compound it.

Kind regards,



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