

23 September 2019

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members

Inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program

Uniting Vic.Tas welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program.

Uniting Vic.Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 8,000 people delivering hundreds of services accessed nearly 200,000 times each year across Victoria and Tasmania. We work across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins.

The attached submission reflects our expertise and longstanding experience in supporting people impacted by Centrelink's compliance program, particularly the Government's debt collection practices. In line with Uniting's commitment to voice the lived experience of consumers, this submission draws on input provided through consumer focus groups to help reveal how Centrelink's compliance program impacts the daily lives, financial security, wellbeing and mental health of people in our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to this important consultation to support the inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. We would be pleased to provide further input on any of the areas covered in this submission, if requested.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Linossier
Chief Executive Officer

Inquiry into Centrelink's compliance program

Submission by Uniting Vic.Tas

23 September 2019



Uniting

Uniting's experience

Our experience

Uniting Vic.Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 8,000 people delivering hundreds of services accessed nearly 200,000 times each year across Victoria and Tasmania. We work across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins. As a significant provider of services and programs for people experiencing disadvantage, Uniting is well positioned to inform the committee about the social and economic impacts of Centrelink's current compliance program.

Our position

Uniting aims to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice. We believe that every Australian should have access government services that are fair, transparent, accountable, coordinated, consistent and respectful, providing accurate advice from well-trained customer service professionals who support people through difficult situations. However, it is clear to us, from the experiences of our consumers, that Centrelink's approach to debt recovery is acting as a deterrent that punishes and diminishes people who receive income support.

Fundamentally, we believe that an income support system which enables and empowers people to create change in their lives will benefit all Australians. Our welfare system should reflect the kind of Australia we want to be: a country that treats everyone with dignity and respect and inspires its people to participate in social, cultural and economic life.

Societies are defined by how they treat their most vulnerable. We know, based on international comparisons, that other countries have welfare models that maintain people's integrity, autonomy and sense of pride while supporting them into employment. Australia can have that too.

Correspondingly, we call for Centrelink's current compliance program to be reformed. At a bare minimum, our submission recommends some practical actions to improve our consumers experiences with Centrelink's compliance processes and reduce the risk of compounding disadvantage in the Australian community.

Input for this submission

Our submission draws on the experiences of consumers and backed up by program and service staff. The experience of our financial counsellors features strongly in this submission, given their critical role in supporting people experiencing financial insecurity and debt.

At Uniting we advocate for, with and alongside our consumers to help confront injustice and effect real change for vulnerable people and communities. We know that quite often it is the power of people's personal experiences that have the most impact in this work. We are grateful to the people who share their personal stories with us. And we often hear from them about how empowering and positive the experience is for them.

We held two consumer focus groups in Melbourne through our Enterprise Partnerships and Development area and Employment Services to ensure the Committee hears firsthand from the people who have lived experience with Centrelink's debt collection processes. We hope that the consumer feedback featured in our submission will help the Committee to understand the detrimental impacts that Centrelink's compliance program has for our community.

Our recommendations

Through our consultations we have identified actions that could improve Centrelink's debt collection processes including:

<p>Timeliness, consistency and accuracy of advice</p>	<p>Recommended action 1: Centrelink should develop clear and consistent consumer information, in multiple languages, to support consumers through the debt recovery process.</p> <p>Recommended action 2: Centrelink should establish a dedicated telephone support line to provide timely advice that helps people navigate the debt collection process, understand their rights and outline Centrelink's expectations and practices concerning debt repayments.</p> <p>Recommended action 3: Centrelink should improve communication pathways for registered financial counsellors (through a dedicated email or phone line) and establish a protocol for financial counsellors to empower them to act as lawful advocates of consumers they are working with in order to address multiple financial difficulties.</p>
<p>Sense of autonomy and control over debt recovery processes</p> <p>Reduce unexpected debt and associated poverty</p>	<p>Recommended action 4: The Department of Human Services and Centrelink, and its contracted debt collection agencies, should develop a more consistent and fair debt collection process that draws on existing best practice for debt collection to allow individual control and choice over how consumers prefer to pay their debt and respond sensitively to an individual's financial and personal situations. For example, the policy that utility companies now use for structuring debt repayments is guided by the principle that payments arrangements must, above all, be affordable for the consumer. The Australian Taxation Office's practices for people with financial difficulties and serious hardship are also recommended.</p>
<p>Accountability and transparency</p>	<p>Recommended action 5: The Australian Government should establish a formal complaints process, independent of Centrelink, to monitor and report on errors with Centrelink's Compliance Program.</p> <p>Recommended action 6: Centrelink should improve record keeping of staff phone advice and all decisions made, including making consumer records available to consumers if requested, to improve transparency about the decisions Centrelink makes that led to them having a debt.</p>
<p>Continuity of care and service coordination</p>	<p>Recommended action 7: Centrelink should implement a casework manager model for debt recovery processes in which Centrelink staff are allocated consumer files to ensure continuity of care.</p> <p>Recommended action 2: Centrelink should develop a centralised phonenumber to support consumers when debt recovery occurs, equipped with referral protocols to ensure consumers are linked into other supports.</p>
<p>Staff training and responsiveness</p>	<p>Recommended action 8: Centrelink should improve policies and protocols for crisis situations and increase availability of social workers.</p> <p>Recommended action 9: Centrelink should provide professional development opportunities to improve staff responsiveness, particularly in relation to people with disability, chronic health conditions and mental health conditions.</p> <p>Recommended action 10: Centrelink should implement referral protocols to ensure duty of care for vulnerable consumers in crisis.</p>
<p>Dignity and respect</p>	<p>Recommended action 11: Centrelink should provide training to customer service representatives to improve interpersonal skills and create a culture of respect, empathy and understanding, politeness and active listening.</p> <p>Recommended action 12: The Department of Human Services should develop and promote an independent complaints process so there are avenues for recourse for people who have negative experiences at Centrelink, similar to other corporate services.</p>

Our financial counselling services

Financial counselling services

We support people on low incomes and those experiencing financial difficulties can achieve financial security and independence through quality financial counselling. Our financial counselling services are free of charge and counsellors are bound by law to keep matters relating to finances confidential. Financial counsellors are trained to look at people's financial situation and identify the options they have to manage their situation, including through their income, expenses, assets and debts.

In 2018-19, we had 3,929 referrals into our financial counselling services, of which 65% were on Centrelink income support payments. Key financial difficulties experienced related to utility debts, credit card debts, housing arrears, personal loans, car loans, Centrelink debts and unpaid fines. The key vulnerabilities faced involved life events, limited capability to manage finances, mental health, family violence, economic abuse, disability and substance addiction. Of those seeking financial counselling, 68% were women and 80% had an income under \$40,000. The majority of people were aged between 20 and 59 years of age, with 12% over 60 years old. The majority of referrals were for single parents (34%), single people (29%) and couples with children (20%).

CareRing program

Accessing the right support can be challenging for people facing financial hardship, family violence, health concerns, housing or employment issues. To ease the burden, we have partnered with community agencies, government, utilities, and financial service providers to develop the CareRing program.

CareRing supports customers of Yarra Valley Water, NAB, ANZ, Suncorp, Jemena, Energy Australia, and Origin Energy. Our partners refer eligible customers across Australia to CareRing to better assess and respond to their needs. Issues often come to light when a customer is struggling to pay a bill or make repayments due to financial hardship.

Since its inception in 2014, CareRing has helped over 8,000 people across Australia. In 2018-19, 65% of people accessing CareRing were receiving Centrelink payments and 75% of people in the program were women. The majority (70%) were aged between 30 and 59 years of age, with 17% over 60 years of age. In terms of family composition, 30% were single parents, 25% were single people and 20% were couples with children.

Family violence, unemployment, homelessness, mental health issues, severe illness and divorce/separation were the key vulnerabilities experienced. The main causes of financial difficulty that led people to access CareRing were insufficient income/poverty, family or personal problems, utility bills, job loss or mortgage arrears.

Perspectives of our financial counsellors

To better understand the impacts of Centrelink's compliance program, we held a workshop with some of our financial counsellors based in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Consultations revealed the following themes:

Timeliness, consistency and accuracy of advice

Consumers of financial counselling service have experienced difficulties getting in contact with Centrelink to clarify individual payment arrangements when they are made aware they have a Centrelink debt. Often consumers receive very little to no direct contact from Centrelink including no notification of debts owed and no schedule of payments. Sometimes the first time a consumer finds out about a Centrelink debt is through a phone call from a debt collector, which is an extremely stressful experience.

Examples of the inadequacy and inconsistency of communications include:

- Centrelink staff involved in debt collection processes usually do not have a lot of information as the program now relies on automated data matching processes.
- Consumers are often very confused about who to contact about their debt and this creates a sense of panic and anxiety. There is also a tendency for consumers to avoid Centrelink because they live in fear of debt repayments beyond their means.
- Sometimes Centrelink requests documents which the consumer may not be able to provide which delays benefits or stops payments under compliance arrangements.
- Financial counsellors are unclear whether consumers are charged interest by Centrelink for their debt.

Recommended Actions 1,2 and 3:

- Centrelink should develop clear and consistent consumer information, in multiple languages, to support consumers through the debt recovery process.
- Centrelink should establish a dedicated telephone support line to provide timely advice that helps people navigate the debt collection process, understand their rights and outline Centrelink's expectations and practices concerning debt repayments.
- Centrelink should improve communication pathways for registered financial counsellors (through a dedicated email or phone line) and establish a protocol for financial counsellors to empower them to act as lawful advocates of consumers they are working with in order to address multiple financial difficulties.

Sense of autonomy or control over debt recovery processes

"People are treated like criminals and it really affects them emotionally."

Uniting Financial Counsellor

Debt collection agencies are motivated by the potential financial reward of securing a consumer on a payment plan. A debt collector does not know or have understanding for a person's financial situation or personal issues and they, therefore, do not take these issues into consideration when trying to recover costs.

Some financial counsellors report that when consumers have a debt Centrelink will automatically try to deduct 10% of a person's income support payments to repay the debt. This is often too high for consumers struggling on income support payments. Some financial counsellors have been able to reduce the payments so people can afford daily living costs, but this involves individual advocacy on behalf of a consumer, rather than a structured approach facilitated by Centrelink.

Our financial counsellors tell us that people feel they have no control over how the debt is repaid. To avoid this scenario, people sometimes agree, in good faith, to a payment plan they cannot afford. In situations where no payment plan is agreed to, people may have no knowledge that money will be taken out of their tax return. For example:

- Some consumers have had debts repaid through money being taken out of Family Tax Benefits at the end of financial year without their consent or knowledge.
- Tax repayments are made to pay-off debt, with fear that the childcare subsidies will be the next tax benefit that Centrelink will use to pay-off individual debt.

Conversely, our financial counsellors report better experiences when engaging with the Australian Tax Office, who are, on some occasions, able to structure payments or waive debts from being deducted from people's tax returns.

Recommended Action 4: The Department of Human Services and Centrelink, and its contracted debt collection agencies, should develop a more consistent and fairer debt collection process that draws on existing best practice for debt collection which allows individual control and choice over how consumers prefer to pay their debt and responds sensitively to an individual's financial and personal situations. For example, the policy that utility companies now use for structuring debt repayments is guided by the principle that payments arrangements must, above all, be affordable for the consumer, and Australian Taxation Office's Financial Hardship practices.

Unexpected debt drives people further into poverty

Our financial counsellors have witnessed people trying to survive financially while living on income support payments by selling furniture, not eating properly, turning off the hot water, not using heaters in winter and not buying essential items like winter jackets and boots. When unexpected costs emerge, such as through Centrelink's compliance program, these cannot be met and this situation drives people further into debt.

See **Recommended Action 4.**

Impacts on mental health, family functioning and employment

"They are so stressed financially that they have got their mental health to a point where they can't actually look for work."

Uniting Financial Counsellor

In our experience, having contracted debt collectors involved in Centrelink's compliance program affects people emotionally. It adds to the anxiety of falling behind rent or mortgage repayments or having received an eviction notice to vacate property and this can cause relationships to breakdown. Living with the stressors of financial insecurity and debt greatly impacts people's ability to look for employment. Often their financial stress can affect their mental health and their ability to look for work.

Further, our financial counsellors report that this situation makes parents feel ashamed and helpless as they cannot provide for the family – which can exacerbate mental health conditions and suicidal thoughts.

Consumer perspectives

Focus groups in September 2019 invited people impacted by Centrelink's compliance program to talk about their personal experience. These discussions reveal the following themes:

Timelines, consistency and accuracy of advice

"[I] feel like a criminal, [I] fear the call coming through. [I] was told of my debt and left with the bombshell with no guidance about the process."

"[If only] Centrelink had a process and stuck to it."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

"Getting into debt you are not aware of – it's intimidating..."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Overwhelmingly, consumers report that they had accrued debt without knowing and as a direct result of Centrelink staff's misinformation and inaccurate advice. This is especially an issue for advice on child support, salary sacrificing, returning to work and how often incomes need to be reported. Our consumers acknowledged that there are some workers at Centrelink who are supportive, however, it is challenging for people to trust the information provided to them, given the inconsistency of advice provided across the organisation.

Sometimes debts relate to Centrelink changing the policies without telling consumers, then consumers making honest mistakes based on incorrect information. Other times, consumers' work or financial situation changed regularly but Centrelink's processes were not flexible enough to respond. They were then penalised for not informing Centrelink.

"You can ring up and ask one question and then have five different answers..."

"It really depends on the worker on the day... If you keep calling up, you might get the answer you want."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Inaccurate, outdated or inconsistent advice by Centrelink staff seriously impact consumers, in terms of both accruing debts and impacting their future income support payments. Some examples provided in our Consumer Focus Groups include:

- Several women with children reported Centrelink over-paying them without them realising it, only to find out at the end of financial year that debts of up to \$10,000 were paid without their knowledge or consent by taking their Family Tax Benefit payment that they had been counting on for financial support. They felt this was unfair and put them at a disadvantage.
- A consumer accrued a \$32,000 debt which they only found out about by letter and through an automated voice recorded message on their mobile phone. There was no human contact.
- A student received conflicting advice from multiple Centrelink staff which resulted in going through a 3-4 month compliance process before they could regain access to study allowance to pay for university books and tuition fees.
- Two Centrelink debts were accrued by a consumer who received conflicting advice about child support. As a result, she lost her Family Tax Benefit at the end of financial year and had to repay further debt to Centrelink through her income support payments.
- Several people had to pay Health Care Card expenditure back, after finding out they had later become ineligible for this benefit but had been using the concession card without realising their situation had changed.
- Two consumers accrued debts amounting to \$10,000 each by gaining child support when the children/grandchildren regularly moved between multiple homes.

- A man on the Age Pension received regular calls from a debt collector that would show up on his phone with the label "Fraud", which created stress and anxiety. The debt collectors wanted to increase his repayments but he could not afford it.
- Several people recalled having debts reduced or waived. In particular, those who dealt with the Australian Taxation Office's hardship department reported positive experiences.

What these examples illustrate is that debt happens because people's situations change regularly but Centrelink's processes lack the flexibility needed to adapt to changing individual circumstances (eg casual work or family arrangements). People are penalised by Centrelink's compliance program for honest mistakes, incorrect advice, lack of Centrelink notification or changing circumstances. Our consumers also spoke about it being better to stay in the system and end up in debt than to stop receiving income support payments after gaining employment and then not be able to get back into Centrelink if something went wrong. This was particularly of concern to people with mental health conditions or on the Disability Support Pension.

"It took me months before they would start giving me payments again...."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Centrelink's compliance program is a source of fear and worry for our consumers – they were anxious about ending up with a large future debt if they accidentally provided the wrong information. More support and education is required to help consumers understand the debt collection process and their rights to appeal.

See **Recommended Action 1, 2 and 3.**

Accountability and transparency

"Who cops the consequences of their bad processes? We do!"

"If a private company did this Consumer Affairs would be involved."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Currently, consumers must deal with the consequences of Centrelink's inadequate processes and prove that there are errors in their file that incorrectly led to a debt. Consumers are angry and frustrated that Centrelink is not held to account when they make mistakes (through either inconsistent advice or inaccurate data matching techniques), yet consumers are.

There are few avenues for redress or complaint. The appeals process is lengthy and the rationale for decisions that led to a debt notice are unclear. Consumers report that there are no records of the phone conversations they had that could prove they had received incorrect or conflicting advice. Steps to improve accountability put forward by consumers include:

- Detailed information on consumer files stored correctly in a centralised way
- A proper paper trail that records all phone advice provided and decisions made by Centrelink workers and the information provided for the data matching process
- Setting up a strong complaints process.

Transparency is also important to consumers, so it is clear what decisions are made about them. The information that Centrelink have on consumers record should be available to consumers so people can plan their finances, instead of being surprised at tax time.

"They (Centrelink) are not held accountable for their actions."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Recommended Action 5 and 6:

- The Australian Government should establish a formal complaints process, independent of Centrelink, to monitor and report on errors with Centrelink's Compliance Program.
- Centrelink should improve record keeping of staff phone advice and all decisions made, including making consumer records available to consumers if requested, to improve transparency about the decisions Centrelink makes that led to them having a debt.

Continuity of care and coordinated services

"What would make Centrelink's processes better? Continuity, being able to speak to the same people."

"Each worker should be able to understand your file."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Telling your story over and over again on the telephone to different Centrelink staff gives people the impression that they are not listened to or heard. Consumers report:

- Feeling frustrated because Centrelink's phone system has deteriorated and the new voice recognition with many prompts adds more time to an already lengthy waiting process.
- That it is now common for Centrelink to transfer consumers calls from section to section and then just hang up on you after waiting for a long period of time for advice.

Consumer Focus Group members value the ability to speak with the same customer service representative each time they call. This case management approach, having one support worker to handle a case, would improve continuity of care, help consumers to feel heard and facilitate coordinated and well-informed services that are responsive to individuals' needs.

Recommended Action 7 and 2:

- Centrelink should implement a casework manager model for debt recovery processes in which Centrelink staff are allocated consumer files to ensure continuity of care.
- Centrelink should develop a centralised phonenumber to support consumers when debt recovery occurs, equipped with referral protocols to ensure consumers are linked into other supports.

Staff training and responsiveness

Staff knowledge and provision of accurate advice

"A lot of times you go to Centrelink and they don't even know the answers..."

"[They] have not walked in my shoes. Be more understanding."

"This isn't me, it's you. It's your job. It's customer service."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

According to our consumers, Centrelink staff often lack the knowledge or training to provide consistent advice. Consumers have noticed a shift in the competency of Centrelink staff – as Centrelink's workforce are now predominantly contractors. They generally only receive basic induction despite working with vulnerable people and negotiating complex issues like disability, mental health or caring responsibilities. Adequately training staff is seen as critical to:

- Ensuring staff are equipped with the knowledge needed to provide consistent and accurate advice.
- Reducing the number of times phone calls are transferred when a staff member does not feel confident to give advice.
- Improving referral into other services, like financial counselling programs, which could offer people much-needed support.

Responsiveness to mental health, chronic illness, disability and crisis situations

"When people come to Centrelink they are at breaking point."

"The way you are dealing with my case is really damaging to me."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Consumers report that Centrelink staff often lack awareness of how people's chronic health conditions, mental illness and/or disabilities impact their daily life and, consequently, do not provide adequate support.

Disability education is identified as critical to improving Centrelink staff's awareness and responsiveness. Many consumers feel that applications for the Disability Support Pension are routinely rejected and that the application process is extremely long. Centrelink staff question the legitimacy of their mental health concerns, chronic health conditions or disability because Centrelink staff are not appropriately trained to understand and be responsive.

Centrelink staff are not well-trained to have conversations about difficult issues like suicide ideation, self-harm or mental health concerns which can emerge when a person finds out they are in debt. Social worker support through Centrelink is also difficult to access and not well-prioritised to respond to crisis situations.

For example, one of our consumers reported having a phone conversation with a Centrelink staff member where they said they wanted to commit suicide, to which Centrelink staff responded by providing a social worker who would call the consumer at a later date. No contact details were provided to the consumer who just had to wait for the social worker to make contact. No immediate support was provided – including any referral to crisis services, ongoing mental health services or telephone counselling (eg Lifeline or Beyond Blue). This situation highlights gross negligence of Centrelink staff – due to a lack of systemic protocols and policies to support people in crisis situations. It also contradicts the suicide prevention efforts of the Australian Government.

*"Chaos, stress, anxiety, unfair. Extremely poor communication!
Overwhelming. Inhumane. Shocking."*

"It does destabilise you quite a lot."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Recommended Actions 8, 9 and 10:

- Centrelink should improve policies and protocols for crisis situations and increase availability of social workers.
- Centrelink should provide professional development opportunities to improve staff responsiveness, particularly in relation to people with disability, chronic health conditions and mental health conditions.
- Centrelink should implement referral protocols to ensure duty of care for vulnerable consumers in crisis.

Sense of autonomy or control over debt recovery processes

"If you question them then you get labelled as a 'troublemaker.'"

"I haven't got no choices really...."

"It sounds like a power thing: 'We are Centrelink and we have the money. You have to prove it to me and I will play with you and wear you down.'"

Consumer Focus Group Participants

In Consumer Focus Groups, people describe feeling overwhelmed, disempowered and frustrated by having little to no control over planning for financial decisions. Consumers observe how Centrelink adopts a resistant attitude in order to wear people down until they give up fighting through the appeal process. There is also a sense that Centrelink has control over their livelihood because of the limited recourse for change or complaint. For some people, this means that they are scared of appealing debts for fear of retaliation by Centrelink, who also control whether they receive income support payments in the future. For example, one consumer with a \$8,000 debt from Centrelink described feeling intimidated when she went to a meeting as part of the appeal process only to find herself alone with five staff members on a panel assessing her case.

"It's very intimidating to sit on your own with a panel (of Centrelink employees). It's the language they use... I didn't expect to go into a panel with five people, I expected a meeting."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

See **Recommended Action 3 and 4.**

Unexpected debt drives people further into poverty

"Whether it's \$1,000 or \$10,000 it's still a debt."

"I just get by, day to day... And I think that's disgusting, being a grandmother and looking after my grandson." (with a \$10,000 debt)

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Participants in our Consumer Focus Group report debts of between \$1,000 and \$32,000. Five people out of 18 participants reported debts over \$10,000. Many of our consumers show extraordinary resilience and resourcefulness in managing tight budgets but adding debt for people already on low incomes creates difficult choices for people in their daily lives. It also exacerbates poverty and further entrenches disadvantage and inequality in our community.

When debts are paid unexpectedly by taking money from the tax returns of families without their knowledge or consent, this impairs their capacity to effectively plan their finances. For example, a consumer accrued a debt for not informing Centrelink when she went back to work early after maternity leave and the debt was taken out of her Family Tax Benefits. She was trying to pay her mortgage and having an unexpected debt created intense financial pressure that impacted her ability to bond with her young child. She felt that she was being penalised for making a genuine mistake and that this process put her in unmanageable financial debt.

"They bully you and don't understand if you can't afford very much money to pay back."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Having a debt impacts people in other ways too – it impacts credit ratings and this creates barriers to securing housing or changing energy companies. There is also immense stigma associated with debt, as discussed below.

See **Recommended Action 3 and 4.**

Dignity and respect

"I feel like a criminal. Left me feeling so anxious and mistrustful of the process."

"It makes you feel physically sick so you give up. It grinds you down until you quit."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

It cannot be underestimated how overwhelming, disempowering and intimidating it can feel to have an unplanned Centrelink debt for people who are already struggling to live on income support payments. They feel anxious about debt collectors calling them on private numbers and vulnerable because they have little control over their own financial future. Many also describe being frustrated at a process they viewed as unfair.

However, it is the attitude and interpersonal skills of Centrelink staff that left the most lasting impact on our Consumer Focus Groups. Instead of feeling supported, consumers describe Centrelink's customer service approach as resistant, demeaning, disrespectful, rude and unempathetic - all of which diminished their sense of dignity and worth.

Many consumers are upset by the lack of privacy and confidentiality at Centrelink when they share their private details in open plan office cubicles. People describe feeling ashamed, degraded and judged in these situations.

"The worst experience of my life was going into Centrelink - it's a degrading experience giving your details in a cubicle and being judged."

"(Centrelink) It's like a bank – everyone knows your business."

Consumer Focus Group Participants

Good customer service is important to our consumers, who feel that staff at Centrelink who could show empathy and compassion, foster personal connections and remember people's names make a huge difference to their wellbeing. Generally, our consumers believed that what is really needed from the government is a system that motivates, inspires hope and "enables people to feel better about themselves."

Participants in Consumer Focus Groups felt that Centrelink's approach to customer service is not about supporting people who need help but instead acts as a deterrent to punish and diminish people who cannot work.

"When they don't respect you, it burns you inside."

Consumer Focus Group Participant

Recommended Action 11 and 12:

- Centrelink should provide training to customer service representatives to improve interpersonal skills and create a culture of respect, empathy and understanding, politeness and active listening.
- The Department of Human Services should develop and promote an independent complaints process so there are avenues for recourse for people who have negative experiences at Centrelink, similar to other corporate services.

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