

Centrelink's response to the Special
Needs of Homeless People-
Centrelink's Role in Responding to
Homelessness

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Homelessness

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Centrelink's Role in Responding to Homelessness

Centrelink is the key service delivery agency for the Federal Government. Among the population, Centrelink is seen as the face of Government and is the first door that people access when seeking assistance, due to changing life circumstances.

At Centrelink, service provision does not exclude any sector of the community, but does attempt to provide high level support to those people who are facing significant disadvantage. People who are homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, are offered access to a range of service options, through access to Social Workers, Centrelink Community Officers, and other specialists who are located in every Centrelink Area. Centrelink technology is offering multiple options for on-line service delivery and access to Centrelink information.

Centrelink has recognised that it can make a significant contribution to the support of people who are homeless and is well positioned to offer practical assistance and the provision of support to empower customers to make personal life choices and lifestyle changes. In recent years, Centrelink service delivery has evolved in order to better meet the needs of, and provide service to, people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness. We have made significant efforts to ensure that all of our staff are sensitive to the needs of people who are homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless. Our Social Workers and Centrelink Community Officers have long established and productive links within the community. We continue to seek improvement in service delivery, to better assist people to meet the challenges of life. In order to provide clear pathways to economic independence and enhanced social participation, Welfare to Work with a Participation focus has been introduced to the Centrelink network and is currently being implemented.

The Welfare to Work measures announced in the 2005-06 Federal Budget, represent a \$3.6 billion investment in moving “Working Age” Australians from welfare to work. The 2005 Federal Budget introduced comprehensive reforms of the welfare system for working age Australians. The Welfare to Work measures recognise the need for higher workforce participation in order to maintain Australia’s standard of living. The proportion of the working age population is decreasing over time. Centrelink will contribute to the achievement of the Government's two main goals of lifting workforce participation and reducing welfare dependency while supporting economic and social participation by:

- Promoting incentives to participate while still focusing on maintaining a strong safety net for those who require it;
- Connecting customers to appropriate services; and
- Helping Customers Meet Obligations, through setting achievable goals.

Since 1974 the proportion of Australians who are of working age and receiving income support has risen from 5% to 20%. The social impact of welfare dependency is high. Australia has around 690,000 children living in households where neither parent works.

Increased participation in work by all Australians who are capable of working, including welfare recipients, increases individual well-being. Building these measures brings to the fore innovative new measures. These include increasing participation rates of people with a disability. This replaces existing processes for people with a disability, both Disability Support Pension claimants and people lodging medical certificates.

- New customers with a disability who are assessed as having 15-29 hours capacity will no longer be eligible for Disability Support Pension but will receive an enhanced New Start Allowance or Youth Allowance and have a requirement to engage in a suitable program of assistance and/or seek work that matches their capacity.
- Customers who claim DSP until 30 June 2006 will be assessed under current rules but may be reviewed after July 2006

From 1 July 2006, changes will come in to place with a focus on increasing participation of parents. There will be new eligibility criteria for people claiming Parenting Payment Partnered and Parenting Payment Single.

- Customers must have a qualifying child under the age of 6 years (reduced from 16).
- Changes will be introduced for New Start Allowance customers with a dependent child under 16 including modified activity test requirements and access to Pension Concession Cards for single customers.
- Current customers will remain eligible under current criteria and participation requirements will be phased in after 12 months for those whose youngest child is 6 years or older.

From 1 July 2007, measures will include increasing the participation of the mature age people. People in the 40-49 year age bracket will have access to the "Work for the Dole program. For people aged 50+, there will be an alignment of activity test requirements with that of other job seekers. For people 55+ there will be access to options of voluntary work/part-time work of 15 hours a week to satisfy activity test.

In July 2006, an Employment Preparation program for parents and mature age people will begin. New policies focus on encouraging self reliance and recognising the capacity of many welfare recipients to work part-time and attain economic stability. This approach recognises that the best form of income support comes from a job, not from welfare.

Welfare to Work aims to increase labour force participation and to increase employment over time. These reforms aim to generate stronger economic growth, increasing individual's and Australia's prosperity. The Government will be investing in services to help people find a job and keep it. These services will include such things as:

- Rehabilitation;
- Education and Training;
- Disability Open Employment Services; and

Increasing the number of places available for Child Care.

The primary changes under Welfare to Work are in the obligations for People who can work. Parents in receipt of income support payments will generally be required to seek part-time work if their youngest child is aged 6-15 years of age. People with disabilities receiving a Centrelink payment, who are assessed as being able to work more than 15 hours part-time

will be required to seek part-time work. In conjunction with these measures, services to help people into work will increase, with funding to new initiatives of more than \$2 billion. A new “Comprehensive Work Capacity Assessment” will be introduced to better assess and connect people with services.

The measures described have been developed in order to support people to improve the social and economic prospects and to decrease dependency on income support payments. This has an overall effect of increasing the standard of living and general well-being of community members. It is however recognised that there are some people within the Australian community who face areas of significant disadvantage. Centrelink is committed to responding to the needs of all customers and to the development of service provision that will best provide support to people in times of life crisis or disadvantage. One mechanism to address such an issues is Centrelink’s Response to Homelessness Strategy.

For Centrelink's purposes, homelessness and risk of homelessness are experienced when an individual or family has inadequate access to safe and secure housing, which meets community standards. For example:

- Is without conventional accommodation (e.g. sleeping rough, squatting, living in a car) or
- Lives in, or moves frequently between, temporary accommodation arrangements (for example with friend's or extended family, emergency accommodation, youth refuges) or
- Lives medium to long term in a boarding house, caravan park or hotel, where accommodation is not covered by a lease or
- Lives in accommodation which falls below the general community standards which surround health and well-being, such as access to personal amenities, security against threat, privacy and autonomy or
- Is facing eviction or
- Lives in accommodation not of an appropriate standard which may be detrimental to their physical and mental well-being, and / or where they have no sense of belonging or connection. This includes Indigenous Australians living in crowded conditions and /or disconnected from their land, family/kin, spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices.

It is noted that the individual's own perception about the suitability of their accommodation needs to be considered when applying this definition.

Centrelink plays a crucial role in assisting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access income support, stabilise their accommodation and participate in society as fully as possible. Centrelink's commitment to people who are homeless is to address social and economic exclusion, and respond to both the structural and individual factors that contribute to homelessness. Responding to homeless customers is a responsibility for all of Centrelink's staff.

For people who are homeless, Centrelink is committed to:

- Ensuring that our staff are adequately trained to identify people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and to respond appropriately to their needs
- Identifying and overcoming the barriers faced by people in accessing Centrelink services. We will provide flexible or alternative servicing models, and develop partnerships with community agencies to improve design, delivery and access to our services.
- Providing immediate service to homeless customers, to avoid the risk of losing contact with them while they wait for a future appointment
- Focussing on people's strengths and abilities, and identifying achievable outcomes to assist them to improve their situation
- Promoting social inclusion by identifying realistic participation activities in consultation with individual customers and, where appropriate, the other agencies with whom they may be involved
- Collaborating with other agencies to ensure an integrated response to each customer. This includes supporting and promoting community agency initiatives which assist people who are homeless to overcome their adverse circumstances.
- Assisting customers to achieve sustainable changes in their circumstances; Ensuring consultation with people who are homeless, and the major agencies who work with them, in shaping our future service directions; and
- Providing feedback to Government about homelessness in Australia.

Centrelink Social Work Service developed an Action Plan for Centrelink's Response to Homelessness, in collaboration with a cross section of representatives from Centrelink's Nation Office and Area networks, including Indigenous and Multicultural Services Business Teams. The plan guides the development of an integrated servicing approach to customers who are homeless. This is relevant to the work of all Centrelink service delivery channels. The plan is adaptable to suit changing requirements. are in place or are in development to assist with the delivery of service to people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness.

Customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and the service providers who work with them, generally have a limited understanding of Centrelink's roles and of a customer's rights and obligations. This can result in difficulty in accessing services available, when needed. Collaborative action, particularly through partnerships is acknowledged as the best way to reduce barriers and enhance the experience of working with Centrelink and developing channels for appropriate servicing strategies. Centrelink is involved in a diverse range of activities which improve service delivery to people who are homeless. Servicing strategies have been inconsistent, but a cohesive Response to Homelessness Action Plan allows all service delivery to people who are homeless, to be consistent.

(Centrelink Social Workers)

Our Social Workers provide professional services to the most marginalised and disadvantaged customers of Centrelink, utilising a Socially Inclusive framework. In Centrelink, the Social Work objective is to assist the customer, regardless of experiences and circumstances, to achieve his/her potential.

Social Workers work with customers to assist with and improve their engagement in social and economic participation. In doing this, the Social Worker explores the customer's needs and social circumstances, identifies appropriate options, assists the customer to consider these options and then develops an action plan with the customer. Social Workers also assess the customer's social and personal circumstances that relate to payment and service eligibility, undertaking an holistic assessment of the customer and their life situation.

Social workers provide casework services to Centrelink customers who are most at risk of harm or abuse, exclusion from the labour market, poverty or social isolation and/or who may have difficulty in undertaking participation activities.

Centrelink Social Workers share values, knowledge and skills with Centrelink staff (throughout all parts of the organisation)) to assist them to engage with customers, and develop personalised and effective labour market and income support options and solutions by using appropriate referral practice. Social Workers also offer case consultation and guidance, mentoring and coaching to staff including specialists Through community engagement strategies, Social Workers work with community agencies to develop and sustain an efficient, effective and collaborative network of human services, including partnerships, which facilitate participation outcomes for mutual customers.

Centrelink Social Workers are based in, or provide a visiting service to, most Customer Service Centres (CSCs) across Australia, including inner city, metropolitan, regional and rural area. Where possible, visits are made to smaller sites and remote communities. Customer Service Centre Social Workers provide face to face services to customers, as well as to their community and undertake management responsibilities.

Social Workers are also based in a number of Call Centres. This is an alternative initial contact points for customers. Call Centre Social Workers take initial enquiries over the phone and provide customers with information, counselling and referral to key local services.

(Centrelink Community Officers)

Centrelink has 100 Community Officers (CCO) who are a dedicated resource to specifically provide services to homeless people. While Centrelink has various procedures and services in place to provide service to disadvantaged customers, Community Officers service those customers who have difficulties in accessing mainstream Centrelink services and require alternative approaches. For example, services delivered outside the office settings in locations such as rehabilitation centres, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, hostels, refuges, drop in centres and organised meeting places. The idea is to provide services in locations where customers feel more comfortable.

The key element in the CCO approach is out servicing. Out servicing by CCOs provides community agencies with a reliable and effective means of ensuring that their customers have access to appropriate income support. The objectives of the program are:

- Ensuring homeless and marginalised customers have equitable access to and maintenance of income support and services provided by Centrelink. This involves consultation with both customers and community agencies.
- Enabling homeless and marginalised customers to improve their capacity to participate in education, employment and/or enhance customers' opportunities for social participation.

- Providing information and assistance to homeless and marginalised customers and community organisations to ensure that they understand their entitlements and obligations and developing strategies that assist these customers to meet these expectations.
- Developing administrative arrangements that are sensitive to the needs and circumstances of customers which are consistent with arrangement with other agencies which provide services to these groups.
- Where possible, empowering homeless and marginalised customers to be able to conduct their business through mainstream Centrelink services.
- Contributing to the development of comprehensive and coordinated packages of help in conjunction with other service providers.
- Promoting the early intervention of homeless and at risk people and providing effective linkages with other services, both internal and external.

There is a Poster Presentation by Centrelink Community Officers in the exhibition area.

(Centrelink Homelessness Contact Officers)

Centrelink Homelessness Contact Officers (CHCO) are a network of customer service staff located within Customer Services Centres (CSCs), Call Centres (CCs) and Customer Services Support Centres (CSSCs), who have a special interest in, and a level of knowledge and expertise on issues of homelessness.

The CHCO possess a thorough understanding of social issues and their impacts upon individuals and families. They regularly liaise with community agency staff to seek the best outcome for their customer. They can maintain flexibility in the application of Centrelink requirements for disadvantaged customers. In the local setting, they understand and can apply strategic plans within the local context

The CHCO maintains links with Centrelink Community Officers and Social Workers, who share their knowledge about local community issues regarding homelessness, and provide support to the CHCO in their role. Whilst being complimentary, the role of the CHCO is essentially different to the roles of both the CCO and Social Worker.

CCOs have contact with homeless and marginalised customers at various locations in the community, and have expertise on issues of homelessness. However, they are not, by the nature of their role, readily available for consultation with CSC staff on a needs-basis regarding customer service issues. The CHCO can provide this on-the-spot source of expertise, but is not expected to personally interview all homeless customers.

Whilst the Social Worker is also another source of expertise for CSO staff on issues of homelessness, they are not necessarily experts on technical and payment-related issues, and the CHCO provides this functionality to fellow CSOs who are dealing with customers who are homeless or at risk.

Additionally, CCOs and Social Workers have a role in undertaking outreach activity, attending community forums and initiating community partnerships. Their role is primarily one of support for CSC staff.

(Indigenous Services)

The Indigenous Services Team is responsible for providing high level advice and direction that assists Centrelink to improve servicing arrangements for Indigenous Australians. Ensuring Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander customers and communities have equitable access to culturally appropriate programs and services. To facilitate this process Centrelink have developed three key strategic directions which guide Indigenous servicing within the organisation.

- Centrelink's Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation;
- Indigenous Servicing Strategy 2001 - 2004; and
- Indigenous Employees' Action Plan.

These strategic directions confirm Centrelink's commitment to making a difference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through responsive high quality government services and opportunities.

The Indigenous Services Team assists Centrelink, Client Departments and other Agencies to work in practical ways with Indigenous people and their communities, to achieve integrated services which improve economic and social participation for Indigenous Australians.

The Indigenous Services Team are supported by a network of Indigenous Services staff who provide a specialist service to those people living in metropolitan, remote and rural parts of Australia and service delivery channels, which include:

Indigenous Customer Service Officer (ICSO) who deliver Centrelink services to Indigenous customers. They work directly with Indigenous customers to access Centrelink services and to deliver appropriate participation outcomes and deliver a full range of services to Indigenous customers in a way that meets their needs. They are able to negotiate and facilitate servicing options with Indigenous customers and improve the number and quality of services delivered to Indigenous customers. ISCOs can liaise with external providers to enable appropriate referrals for Indigenous customers. With this approach it is possible to identify the barriers to return to work by working with customer service staff, business, and community and government agencies. They can assist Indigenous customers to access programs and services which support return to work. They ensure the correct payment is made to the right person at the right time, every time. The ISCO is able to recognise customers at risk and provide appropriate service and referral. Using Indigenous community network links, assist, coordinate and facilitate community events such as NAIDOC celebrations, open days and community forums and Participate in and promote Centrelink programs and services via community functions.

Indigenous Service Officer (ISO) lead a team to facilitate appropriate participation and income support outcomes for Indigenous customers. ISO work within Centrelink, business, community providers and Government to facilitate appropriate participation and income support outcomes for Indigenous customers and work with Centrelink staff to develop strategies to resolve and improve customer outcomes. They provide advice and assistance to Centrelink staff on strategies that are sensitive and culturally appropriate. Ensure effective communication with Indigenous customers and community, encourage access, promote self service and channel choice to services offered by Centrelink and other agencies. ISOs ensure that Centrelink staff understand the local geographical and cultural diversities, and their

impact on Indigenous people, when developing strategies for the delivery of new business to customers. They assist in developing strategies to address the impact of changes on Indigenous customers and communities. Indigenous Service Unit Managers focus on the delivery of Centrelink Business that may impact on Indigenous customers and communities. These positions also provide leadership and guidance to their respective areas on Indigenous servicing issues. Indigenous Employment Outreach Officers assist Indigenous customers to access appropriate programs administered by Centrelink to enhance their opportunities to become more competitive in the labour market.

Remote Visiting Teams travel to remote areas throughout Australia to service those customers who do not have direct access to Centrelink programs and services due to their location.

Centrelink Agents & Access Points

Centrelink contracts Indigenous Community Organisations to employ local Indigenous Australians under the Centrelink Agent and Access Point Servicing model to improve the quality, and access to Government services and payments in rural and remote Australia. Centrelink has almost 150 Agents in Indigenous Communities across Australia.

Indigenous Call Centres

Centrelink has 3 Indigenous Call Centres. The Indigenous Call Centres were implemented to provide a culturally appropriate access channel for Indigenous people particularly in remote areas, who may not have direct access to Centrelink. The Call Centre queues are located at:

- Palmerston (NT);
- Cairns (QLD); and
- Kalgoorlie (WA).

The three queues including ABSTUDY answer approximately a half a million calls per year.

Remote Area Service Centres (RASC) is one of the AWT initiatives from the budget in 2001 and will see the opening of 12 such sites in the next few years. Providing new and permanent Centrelink services is positively aimed at better servicing our Indigenous customers in a number of remote communities throughout Australia and includes the employment of local Indigenous people. It ensures the needs of Indigenous customers and communities are met.

(HOME Advice Program)

Centrelink is involved in a community partnership arrangement with the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and community agencies in eight locations throughout Australia. This Partnership is the Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program. This program seeks to use an early intervention approach to assist clients in the prevention of homelessness. Centrelink Social Workers work with community agencies to provide support to clients to maintain secure, appropriate and safe accommodation. The aim is to assist clients who face difficulty in maintaining tenancy, due to life issues or personal or financial circumstances. The early intervention approach works to prevent the need for crisis response, in accessing emergency accommodation, legal action relating to eviction and reduction of debt. The community organisations have access to the services of a dedicated Centrelink Social Worker to provide

direct access to Centrelink services and income support provision. The community organisations seek to assist in the areas of resolving tenancy issues, assisting in budgeting and with financial matters, providing support and counselling to families, developing pathways to training and employment and provide information and facilitated referral to other services where appropriate

More information can be obtained in presentations on HOME Advice Program in two of the Thursday afternoon concurrent sessions.

(Telstra Message Box)

The Telstra Message Box is currently being rolled out within Centrelink offices throughout Australia. It is a Telstra service made available to homeless or transient people living in Australia who do not have access to a secure or working phone, and have inadequate access to safe and secure housing. Individuals are allocated a voicemail box to enable family or other people to whom they provide their details, to leave messages. Message box holders are able to retrieve their messages using a pin number, from Telstra home or business phones or payphones, free of charge. Social Workers and other specified staff within the Centrelink office are able to issue the cards. Access to this service is available on request by individuals at their local Centrelink office.

(On-line service delivery)

A further advance in technology is the provision of on-line service to Centrelink customers. Customers are now able to access Centrelink information, download forms, lodge some forms and contact Centrelink online. This offers customers more choice when accessing Centrelink services. They can use access points at Neighbourhood Houses, Libraries and other access points.

The Online Application does not assess eligibility for the payment but it does guide the claimants through question sets, which change with the input of data. The Online Claim. The Online Claim Application gives the customer greater access to existing Centrelink information, a faster indication of what is required of each individual to complete their claim and immediate online access to all additional forms and modules that may be required. This reduces the time taken from the first contact with customers to the provision of service.

The Online Claim Application gives customers flexibility, in time and place, to submit their claim. Customers can access the Online Claim Application during normal Online Services hours (Sunday to Friday 3.30am-10.30pm and on Saturday between 3.30am - 6.00pm except for National Holidays).

(Homelessness Indicator)

New developments are occurring in Centrelink in relation to homelessness. Technological development is underway in relation to the provision of a Homelessness Indicator. This tool will be used by Centrelink staff to identify the life circumstances of our customers who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness. The Homelessness Indicator will be flagged on the record of customers who may need additional assistance from Centrelink in relation to compliance with mainstream Centrelink requirements. The Indicator will provide service direction for staff to assist customers at risk of homelessness or who are homeless and who face significant barriers to participation. The Homelessness Indicator will also allow for the provision of information on demographics of homelessness in any area of Australia and this information can be utilised in the planning of future service delivery.

The Homelessness Indicator will be trialled from March, 2006 and is expected to be rolled out Nationally by December, 2006.

Weekly Payments

Centrelink Customers generally receive their entitlement once per fortnight. For most this does not present major financial difficulties. However, it is recognised that for some customers, managing money over a two week cycle is difficult and for some impossible. We are currently exploring the benefits, costs and issues created by the payment to some customers on a weekly basis. The current Weekly Payment trial is being conducted in 69 Customer Service Centres, across Australia. The trial commenced 24 October 2005 and will run until 30 April 2006. There is a recognition that there are issues for some customers with fortnightly receipt of income support payments, that may be addressed by weekly payments. The trial is a process to evaluate the costs and benefits for them and other stakeholders.

The causes of homelessness are found in structural factors such as poverty, lack of affordable housing and unemployment. An individual's vulnerability to homelessness is impacted by personal factors that may include poor health, disability, and social and cultural issues. Access to appropriate services may be limited for people who have no access to stable accommodation. A diverse range of services are required to address these issues. Centrelink is well positioned to assist customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to make a real difference in their difficult life circumstances. There are however, recognised challenges that face us in service delivery to this disadvantaged customer group. We seek opportunity to participate in community forums so that we can enhance our knowledge and practice mechanisms. We continually seek to develop appropriate service delivery strategies that meet the needs of all of our customers. We seek to learn about strategies that work and also to learn from strategies that have not been successful in meeting the needs of our customers, who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness. Within the community, Centrelink is often seen as the first place to go when a family crisis strikes. Whether that is house fire, family bereavement, loss of income, domestic or family violence or homelessness, Centrelink is well placed to provide support and assistance to the community. We will continue to evolve and develop new mechanisms for service delivery to all clients. We recognise that homelessness is a major social issue and Centrelink is committed to delivery of service to people facing accommodation crisis.

Centrelink's responses to homelessness include both direct initiatives to improve services to customers who are homeless, and indirect initiatives in which homelessness and/ or social exclusion are addressed via broader policy approaches. Over recent years Centrelink has actively partnered provider agencies and implemented government initiatives to understand how to achieve better outcomes for customers who are homeless. We strive to improve service delivery. Work is underway nationally to enhance and develop a consistent approach to service delivery for customers who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness.

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Centrelink Homelessness Contact Officers

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