

## **Improving Centrelink service delivery for people experiencing family and domestic violence – EJA briefing to inform SA workshop**

Economic Justice Australia (EJA) recognises the Government's concerted efforts to improve social security service delivery for people experiencing family and domestic violence (FADV), including recent amendments to the Social Security Guide and more specific inclusion of social security in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022 – 2032.

This briefing contains targeted recommendations that have the potential to greatly improve Centrelink's service delivery for people experiencing FADV – **changes that do not require changes to the Guide or legislative reform**. Examples included in this briefing are drawn from EJA members' input and deidentified summaries from interviews conducted during recent interviews with community service providers across Australia to identify barriers to social security access for women outside metropolitan areas (*full report pending*).

Economic Justice Australia has specific recommendations for legislative reform to affect changes to Crisis Payment and access to special circumstances debt waiver which can be found here - [www.ejaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-or-Safety-Legislative-Brief-2024.pdf](http://www.ejaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-or-Safety-Legislative-Brief-2024.pdf).

### **1. Assist people experiencing FADV to satisfy POI and documentary evidence requirements**

EJA acknowledges the importance of proof of identity (POI) processes in protecting the integrity of the social security system, securing individuals' personal information and ensuring payments are made to the correct person.

People are required to provide specific POI and sometimes other documentation when claiming a social security entitlement, but these requirements can prove unduly onerous or impossible. In some cases, people delay leaving a violent relationship.

*People say, oh I really want to leave but I can't get Centrelink because I don't have access to my bank account, I don't have my ID card, I don't have this, and I don't have that. It's a major barrier. (Regional Queensland)*

When people do leave, they often leave in a hurry. Some may leave without even basic POI, but many leave without the full range of documentation required to claim or maintain social security payments. Delays and the cost of securing new documents can significantly add to a person's stress and can delay their Centrelink claim, both of which increase a victim-survivor's vulnerability and the likelihood they will return to the violent relationship.

Victim-survivors face particular challenges where the perpetrator has tightly controlled access to all documents and records, it is not safe to return to a property to collect documents, or an order prevents contact between the parties. Some perpetrators will deliberately hide or destroy documents.

Some victim-survivors are turned away from Centrelink offices when they do not have required POI.

*They don't have ID. They go to Centrelink. They're just turned away. (Rural Queensland)*

*I recently attended a local Centrelink service centre with Susan, my client who's in her 60s, who had fled domestic violence just days prior. Susan was without any income or savings. Centrelink told Susan that she didn't have the correct ID and her claim couldn't be processed until she provided them. We were told to use a computer in the corner of the public waiting room to try to get what she needed. I could see that Susan was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and distressed as she 'isn't great with a computer' and was also uncomfortable trying to access personal information in the public space. We left and basically, I helped her get the documents over a period of weeks which she then provided to Centrelink and her claim was lodged. It's common for women to have to rely on emergency relief payments while gathering correct POI for Centrelink. (Regional NSW)*

During our discussions with senior Services Australia staff responsible for POI, they have asserted that lack of POI should not prevent a person accessing their social security entitlement as Services Australia has processes available to assist with identification where a person is unable to otherwise satisfy requirements, but that is not borne out on the ground.

*I often assist women who want to leave violent relationships, but they are locked out of Centrelink payments because they lack POI and other paperwork. They see Centrelink as 'the keepers of the money', and the process of providing evidence as a process whereby they are required to prove they are 'worthy of that money'. (Very remote NT)*

Without access to Centrelink payments, victim-survivors must make a choice between staying in a violent household or extreme poverty for themselves and their children.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia use its information gathering powers to access required documents held by other government departments, including Births, Deaths and Marriages, to proactively assist victim-survivors to satisfy POI and other documentary requirements (*consistent with recommendations 10.1, 13.3 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

### Points for discussion

- What current services/options are available to people struggling to provide POI?
- How can Services Australia ensure people aren't turned away because they lack POI?
- How can Services Australia actively help people obtain POI?
- Can Services Australia develop mechanisms to deal directly with state government agencies holding POI documents?
- How can Services Australia manage privacy concerns?
- How can Services Australia ensure information is secure?
- If Services Australia secures confirmation of a person's POI, could Services Australia provide a copy of that POI to the person.

## **2. Increase social worker services for people experiencing FADV**

Centrelink social workers are uniquely equipped to support people with complex needs, including those who have recently experienced FADV. Their input can be pivotal to securing Centrelink payments which provide essential financial support and may be critical to a victim-survivor not returning to a violent relationship.

Unfortunately, our members report many people in crisis struggle to access Centrelink social worker support, often waiting days or longer to speak to a social worker, including when an appointment has been offered during the person's initial contact with Centrelink. Access has declined since social workers were removed from Centrelink offices.

*I recently assisted one of my clients, who was experiencing FADV, to attend her local Centrelink office. She was in a state of crisis and asked to speak to a social worker. She was directed to a phone in the public waiting area and told to call the general line, wait on hold and then ask to speak with a social worker. (Regional NSW)*

Dismissal of a client's distress and referral to a phone in a public area where a person may wait by themselves within full view of others for an hour or more, to be given an appointment days later, is completely contrary to trauma informed best-practice to assist victim-survivors to escape violence. Even if a person waits to get through on the phone, they are often not comfortable and will not share information about their personal circumstances with someone they feel they do not know. Such procedures reflect a failure of the national FADV response.

EJA calls for the re-establishment of Centrelink office social work units, staffed to respond to local needs. Face-to-face interviews increase the likelihood of disclosure of difficult or traumatic issues given workers are better able to build rapport than during a telephone call, also increasing people's confidence that the social worker understands them and the gravity of their circumstances. Centrelink social workers are well placed to make warm referrals to

local community support organisations. Adequate social worker staffing also removes the burden from front-line staff struggling to manage heightened behaviours of people who are angry or in distress.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia increase access to social workers, particularly on-site social workers, to better provide timely support to people experiencing FADV (*consistent with recommendations 10.1, 13.3 and 13.4 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- What is Services Australia's current social worker support capacity (by phone and in service centres)?
- How long do people need to wait for a social worker appointment?
- How many service centres have retained in-house social workers?
- How are decisions made about which services centres have social workers in-house?
- Are there plans to get more social workers on the ground (outside of Smart Centres) to respond to people in crisis?
- Are there plans to employ more social workers?

### **3. Make Centrelink offices more conducive to disclosure of FADV**

The layout of Centrelink service centres, which generally include open plan office spaces and very public reception areas, does not encourage people's disclosure of FADV. Many victim-survivors experience embarrassment and shame discussing their highly personal experiences, a problem exacerbated by a real or perceived lack of privacy. This issue is particularly prevalent when FADV has included sexual violence.

Some people describe a reticence to disclose FADV because they feel humiliated, anticipating being perceived as a negative social security recipient stereotype. Others report barriers linked to demographic factors, including:

- Some First Nations people experience fear and mistrust of government agencies, including concern that if they disclose FADV they risk losing their children to child protection services.
- Some people from culturally and linguistically diverse background feel uncomfortable and are afraid they will be misunderstood due to Centrelink staff's lack of cultural awareness.
- Some people from regional, rural and remote communities fear the information may not remain confidential, including where they know people who work in the particular Centrelink office, Centrelink staff know other people to whom they are connected, or staff know other parties involved.

The consequence of clients' discomfort disclosing FADV is that Centrelink then lacks details of the client's circumstances, which can undermine access to appropriate social security entitlements.

*My job is to assist women experiencing family and domestic violence. My clients are made to sit for hours in the public waiting room of their Centrelink service centre or turned away when they seek assistance with a social security issue. My clients are told they must book appointments up to 4 days in advance to speak to a Centrelink worker, and when they return for the appointment, they have to sit in a public area with a worker behind a plastic screen and explain their deeply personal experiences of family violence. (Regional Victoria)*

*Our local Centrelink service centre is regularly described as intimidating and scary by people experiencing family and domestic violence. Not only does the service centre consistently have a queue wrapping around the block toward the petrol station nearby, it also has 3 or 4 security guards who will question you at the front door before you can enter. When people experiencing family and domestic violence attend to ask for help with a social security issue, they are immediately directed to a computer or phone in the public waiting area. It is rare to be shown how to use the computer, let alone access a social worker or culturally appropriate support. (Remote NT)*

Dismissal of a client's distress and referral to a phone in a public area where a person may wait by themselves within full view of others for an hour or more, to be given an appointment days later, is completely contrary to trauma informed best-practice to assist victim-survivors to escape violence. Even if a person waits to get through on the phone, they are often not comfortable and will not share information about their personal circumstances with someone they feel they do not know. Such procedures reflect a failure of the national FADV response

EJA calls for a review of Centrelink office design to increase people's privacy and comfort when engaging with Services Australia staff to increase the likelihood of people disclosing relevant personal information, including FADV. In particular, private spaces should be available away from public waiting rooms for social workers and other staff assisting clients with complex needs.

EJA has also become aware of other issues related to Centrelink office design and location. People escaping domestic violence are often extremely concerned about the perpetrator finding them. Some are extremely reticent to enter their local Centrelink office because they believe the perpetrator will be alerted to their presence (by others at the office) and will come to the office and stop them when leaving. This is particularly the case in smaller towns or regional centres. Further, some domestic violence workers have told us their clients won't attend the local office because they believe there is not back door to escape if their violent

partner has them 'trapped'. This can prove extremely challenging when the person lacks the skills or resources to engage digitally or over the phone, particularly given paper claim forms are no longer available.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia increase the availability of safe spaces for disclosure of FADV (*consistent with recommendations 10.1, 13.3 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- Are there plans for office redesign to help clients engage with staff in a more confidential location?
- Are there plans for office redesign to provide increased privacy for people dealing with Services Australia staff by phone?
- What is the process to assist a victim-survivor of domestic violence who becomes physically trapped in a Centrelink office?
- Are there other approaches being discussed?

#### **4. Increased training and support for frontline staff to be proactive and responsive when assisting people FADV**

Centrelink staff face a challenging task administering and explaining payments with rigid and sometimes complex criteria to large numbers of people, many of whom are stressed and frustrated by the time they come into contact with staff. Staff members need as much training and support as possible to effectively assist people who have experienced FADV.

While specialist staff, including social workers, are essential, the capacity of frontline staff is also critical. EJA members regularly report that frontline staff are not proactive in the way they engage with people. Centrelink front counter staff do not routinely ask questions which would help identify whether someone may be at risk of family violence and consequently support systems are not triggered, including access to appropriate payments and social work support. Our members and other community service providers also commonly report that clients are not aware that Centrelink has social workers working within the agency.

*When my clients, who are experiencing family domestic violence, attend their pre-booked Centrelink appointments, they are automatically directed to the computers in the Centrelink service centre to use them. This can be really difficult when they don't have the skills to do that and are traumatised.*

*Centrelink workers' lack of training in trauma-informed practice is a significant barrier to my clients' engagement with Centrelink and access to social security entitlements. (Rural Queensland)*

*A single referral to a social worker would have prevented that cascading of events. (Member centre)*

Frontline staff may realise that a person is unable to engage with Centrelink appropriately as a result of trauma, or they may perceive behaviours arising from trauma as aggression and harassment. These same clients are often referred to online systems with which they repeatedly fail to engage. This can be particularly difficult for clients who are overwhelmed as a result of ongoing violence or the turmoil associated with leaving a violent relationship and establishing a new, separate life.

EJA calls for increased training and support of frontline staff to provide a proactive and responsive service to people experiencing FADV. Frontline staff should also have a positive obligation to refer people to a Centrelink social worker and/or appropriate support services. Services Australia should prioritise hiring and retaining frontline staff with the relevant experience and education qualifications needed to provide a trauma-informed service for people experiencing FADV.

Improving services to people experiencing FADV also requires additional training to ensure frontline staff are across the main payment rules accessed by people escaping violence. For example, Crisis Payment has a 7-day claim period which is a poor fit for people who have experienced a traumatic event. DSS has stretched this claim period through changes to the *Social Security Guide*, including having two sets of rules depending on whether a person has left their home (time limit can commence 7-days after a person decides they cannot return to their home) or has had a perpetrator removed (an additional 14 days to submit documents if initial contact is made within 7 days). However, this nuance is not always well understood by frontline Centrelink staff or victim-survivors, who may not claim because they have been told there is a 7-day time limit, have been turned away or have had their claim rejected because they did not provide adequate information.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia increase training and support for frontline staff to be proactive and responsive when assisting people experiencing family and domestic violence (*consistent with recommendations 10.1, 13.3, 23.3 and possibly 23.4 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- What family and domestic violence training do front-line staff currently receive?
- Specifically, what training is undertaken by customer access officers who triage all customers as they come into a Centrelink office? What is their direction/instructions and key objectives?
- Are there plans to increase front-line staff's capacity to deal with FADV victim-survivors?
- Are there other approaches being discussed?

## **5. Increase access for domestic violence support workers**

There are many pathways into support for people experiencing FADV, with community-based organisations serving a critical role supporting people to leave FADV and re-establish themselves. These services need better access to Centrelink staff through streamlined

communication systems. Workers consistently report great frustration that when a victim-survivor is with them, they must ring a general number and often wait over an hour to talk to Services Australia staff or be cut off.

Often the client's issue would be simple to resolve with a single piece of information, but delays caused by the inability to contact Services Australia in a timely manner means resolution could take weeks and the client's vulnerability may increase significantly in the meantime.

*If only we had that point of contact for our clients who are at highest risk or in crisis. Ideally, that contact would be local so they understand the context.  
(Regional Queensland)*

This possibility offers enormous benefits to Services Australia, given a community worker will have an established relationship with a client, will have drawn relevant details from long and complex histories, will manage a client's challenging behaviours, and will support a client to understand/implement information provided by Services Australia.

We are also aware that telephony screening protocols may be affecting access when a community organisation makes more than one call a day from their phone number, including when those calls relate to different clients.

The Advocates Line trialled with EJA members is proving to be highly successful. We understand that some of its success may rely on the social security expertise of our members but seek the development of a scalable model to support timely engagement between community workers supporting victim-survivors and Services Australia.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia develop a mechanism for community workers to engage directly with Services Australia in a timely way to better support their mutual clients, similar to the largely successful Advocates Channel (*consistent with recommendations 10.1, 12.1 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- Are there plans to expand the Advocates Channel or to take a different approach to increase community workers' access to Centrelink staff, e.g. provide FADV workers access to social workers or a FADV specific point of contact?

## 6. **Improve telephone access**<sup>1</sup>

Numerous factors undermine phone access to Services Australia. Despite Services Australia's significant efforts to monitor and manage demand, long incoming call wait times remain a problem, with some people unable to stay on hold until their call is answered. That includes people who have travelled to secure a phone connection. Calls drop off without clear

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<sup>1</sup> Additional submission points 6. & 7. added 2 August 2024.



explanation, and the unexplained blocking of incoming calls from the same number causes great frustration. It can also prevent services being able to make calls about more than one client in a day.

Many people report frustration that outgoing calls do not identify that the caller is from Services Australia. People experiencing FADV often refuse or are reluctant to answer phone calls from private or blocked numbers due to a real or perceived risk that the perpetrator or related person is trying to contact and locate them. It is near impossible to verify the identity of a caller using a private number even after the call. The usual solution, to return the call, is unavailable as numbers are blocked, so people can be unaware that Services Australia has been trying to contact them.

Victim-survivors' engagement with Services Australia can also be undermined because:

- If the phone call is missed, and the person then attempts to engage with Services Australia through normal phone channels, they will face an extended wait time, which may result in missing an appointment.
- Many other agencies use private numbers. If waiting for a pre-booked Centrelink appointment or callback, it is impossible to screen calls to be available for the call.
- Perpetrators may be monitoring devices and technology, and a victim-survivor may not be able to come up with a convincing cover story about the private number.

In our experience, Centrelink workers, including social workers, will call people experiencing FADV from private numbers without exception. Even when appointments are booked in advance or the client has elected to use the callback option rather than waiting on hold, the calls appear on their phone as a private number, and they do not always answer the call.

*The callback calls from Centrelink are always private numbers. Women in domestic violence situations are terrified and they don't answer, and they are not going to answer private numbers for their own safety. Even when we request that Centrelink send a text before they call the client – they either don't or it's never consistent. We often get women who get the text a day or half a day after the scheduled call, and they've missed the call because they haven't had a chance to come into town to safely take the call away from home. (Regional WA)*

EJA urges Services Australia to ensure that all calls (including callback requests and scheduled appointments), are made using identifiable telephone numbers rather than private or blocked numbers.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia provide customers a choice about whether calls are received as a 'private number' or 'Services Australia', instead of automatically blocked numbers listed as 'private number' (*consistent with recommendations 10.1 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia ensures that, when requested by a customer, all confirmation text messages regarding pre-booked appointments and callbacks are received in advance of the scheduled time (*consistent with recommendations 10.1 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- What are Services Australia's plans to improve telephone access by reducing wait times?
- What are Services Australia's plans to increase access for people with limited phone services (e.g. poor connectivity in remote areas)?
- Are there plans to improve access for services providers contacting Services Australia on behalf of multiple clients on the same day?
- Is it possible to identify Services Australia as the caller through phone ID where the person has opted-in?

### **7. Reintroduce paper forms (and other non-digital systems)**

The 2023 Digital Inclusion Index reveals two thirds of those surveyed experience some level of digital exclusion. Services Australia has been steadily reducing alternatives to online services such as paper forms, client initiated postal communications and face-to-face servicing. This makes it very difficult for people experiencing FADV who cannot engage digitally because they lack access to digital devices, connectivity or capacity.

Service providers have frequently raised their frustration that paper forms are no longer available, including forms they could download and work through with clients to help them understand what is required to claim a payment.

→ **Solution:** That Services Australia reintroduce paper forms for all administrative processes, making those forms easily downloadable and accessible from Centrelink offices (*consistent with recommendations 10.1 and 23.3 of the Robodebt Royal Commission*).

#### Points for discussion

- What are the barriers to re-introduction of paper forms?