

ACOSS - summary of dealing with Amy's Robodebt:

- Letter dated 23 October 2016 arrived at our address on 2 November 2016. Amy was overseas, so I opened it and let her know via email and social media. It required her to confirm employment income by 11 November. This was impossible to do as she was overseas, and she could not access her records. The income included in the letter, as advised by the ATO, appeared correct to her. However, I'll come back to this.
- On 15 November 2016 Centrelink sent an 'account payable' with no details of calculations. It claimed that Amy owed \$5,521.87.
- On 17 November Centrelink sent a letter regarding a review of employment income details. It advised that the debt was \$5,521.87 including a debt recovery fee of \$458.79.
- Once Amy had considered the Centrelink demands, I assisted her to draft a letter to Centrelink. In this she disputed the alleged debt, and authorised me to deal with Centrelink on her behalf. I then sent the letter to Centrelink a covering letter, with a copy of my passport on 28 November 2016
- on 21 December 2016 there had been no response to my letter. I emailed Hank Jongen, a man who publicly identified as being General Manager of Centrelink. This turns out to be misleading, as he was actually just a media spokesperson or spin-doctor for Centrelink, and one of 30 so-called 'general managers'. [<https://www.smh.com.au/public-service/centrelinks-robodebt-crisis-who-is-hank-jongen-20170124-gtxn0u.html>] My email to Hank elicited a response from Elise (no surname given) that my email had been referred to the relevant expert area
- on 21 December I also wrote to our local MP (Mark Butler) and was advised that his office would refer my complaint to the minister, Alan Tudge
- I was advised to contact Centrelink's debt recovery, as if I failed to do that they would almost certainly commence recovery action, even though the amount was disputed
- I had several calls with debt recovery, and they initially demanded a minimum of \$100 per week. After many discussions, and asking for week to get legal advice, I was given until 5 January to respond. However, a short while later I received a call that inputting a stay until 5 January had resulted in referral to a debt collection agency being put on hold for 5 years! This meant that Amy had the option of waiting for the result of her review request and any subsequent appeal per Centrelink advice
- I liaised with previous employers to get pay records and forward them to Centrelink. On 28 December 2016 I posted records to Centrelink Online Compliance
- After many other interactions, including letters that I posted, details were provided. On every occasion I called, I spoke to a different person, and had to spend time establishing my relationship to Amy, and my authority to act on her behalf

- The referral from our local member to the Minister then elicited a response from a more senior Centerlink staff member, Sue Hill, who became the case manager for review and debt recovery issues on 6 January.
- A letter dated 4 January 2017 advised that the debt had been reviewed and reduced to \$3,346.69 to be paid by 1 February 2017. This seemingly had been prepared before Sue Hill became involved.
- On 11 January letter arrived for Amy noting that I had been appointed as nominee in response to her recent (28 November 2016) request. It had no signature block nor a signature. I also received a similar one. I rang Sue Hill about progress and she advised that she had not been able to locate my letter of 28 December with employment records. She asked me to provide a copy. She would not accept an email. She suggested that I fax it to her (12 pages at about \$20 per Australia Post). Eventually I found a way to get the information to her via MyGov.
- On 12 January Sue advised me that the supposed debt was now nil. Letters to Amy and me followed, none of them apologised for the error.

Some of the many barriers we had to cross to resolve this were:

- Centrelink ignored my request to provide details of how the debt had been calculated – this is referred to as an ADEX. I made it clear that it was an FOI request
- Centrelink effectively operates with reverse onus, claiming there is a debt, and requiring a person to refute it
- My attempts to be recognised as an authorised to act were not accepted and recorded, requiring me to establish this on every contact. It seems I needed to request to become a nominee – a term used by Centrelink for someone who is authorized to act on behalf of another.
- Phone calls dropped out on many occasions, and the person I had called did not call me back. The next time I called, I spoke to another person and had to start again.
- to use MyGov to deal with Centrelink requires an Australian mobile phone to which a security code is sent. Amy no longer had an active one, and the number recorded on MyGov was an old one. Even if she had one, she had to get a code sent to her old number to change it to a new one.
- When I attempted to use MyGov, it crashed with Google Chrome. The Centrelink app required me to identify myself. I provided 6 unique identifiers, but this apparently was not enough. Helpdesk staff suggested I go to a Centrelink office to verify my identity, but I had no confidence this would work as there was nothing else I could effectively supply.

- Centrelink will not accept emails, and refused Amy's request to contact her by email
- Legal advice is inaccessible for most benefit recipients – community legal funding has been slashed, and regular legal advice is too costly.
- the extent of actual debts is unclear as Centrelink is deliberately obtuse. The Minister has claimed that 70-80% are accurate, but he seems to rely on the extent to which debts have been disputed. A Centrelink whistleblower indicated that only a handful of debts were genuine, and other evidence suggests that the upper limit of genuine debts is perhaps 20%.
- Amy's supposed debts arose because of:
 - double-counting of income from one employer;
 - averaging of ATO income across each fortnight;
 - inclusion of income from one employer outside the period in which she received Youth Allowance
 - inclusion of exempt income
- I estimate it took me at least 30 hours to resolve this matter

Is it a flawed system? Definitely. Is it accidental or deliberate?

- the Community Affairs References Committee tabled its report on the Robdebt in June 2017 with 21 recommendations and a call for the Government to re-assess all debts determined through the use of income averaging. The government has partially implemented a couple of these and largely rejected the rest.
- the government continues to portray recipients as dole bludgers and imply fraud is rampant. ANAO reviews indicate the level of fraud might relate to less than 0.5% of benefit recipients.
- last financial year 48 million calls to Centrelink received a busy signal. That's approximately 200,000 per day. Centrelink refuses email interactions, and MyGov is a nightmare.
- How many people have the knowledge, skills, time and lack of fear to challenge these alleged debts?
- *"The legislation was not intended to work; it was intended to heap stigma on social programs and reinforce the cultural narrative that those who access public assistance are criminal, lazy, spendthrift addicts."* Virginia Eubanks