

This chapter provides information about Centrelink payments and services for people experiencing a crisis or who need special help.

Payments

- Crisis Payment
- Special Benefit
- Disaster Recovery Payment
- imprisonment and payments from Centrelink.

Crisis Payment

Purpose

To provide financial assistance to:

- people who are forced to leave their home and establish a new home because of an extreme circumstance, such as flood, house fire or domestic violence, or
- people who remain in their home after experiencing domestic violence when the family member responsible has left or been removed from the home, or
- people being released from prison or psychiatric confinement who have been charged with an offence.

Qualifications

People who have experienced an extreme circumstance, such as domestic violence or a house fire

To qualify for a Crisis Payment a person must:

- lodge a claim within seven days after the extreme circumstance, or contact Centrelink with an “Intent to Claim” within seven days after the extreme circumstance occurred and lodge a claim within 14 days of contacting Centrelink, and
- be entitled to an income support pension or benefit, and
- be in severe financial hardship, and
- remain in the family home after experiencing domestic violence when the family member responsible has left or been removed from the home, or

- have left their home and be unable to return home because of the extreme circumstance and have established or intend to establish a new home, and
- be in Australia at the time the extreme circumstance occurs and at the time of claim, and
- not be subject to an Assurance of Support, except in certain circumstances when the assurer cannot provide support or when it is considered unreasonable for the person to accept the support offered by the assurer, and
- not have already received four Crisis Payments due to an extreme circumstance within the previous 12 months (a maximum of four payments can be made in any 12 month period), and
- not have intentionally brought about the extreme circumstance with a view to obtaining a Crisis Payment.

In situations when a person or persons are forced to leave their home because of a natural disaster, Crisis Payment may not be payable if assistance is available through an Australian Government or state/territory government Disaster Recovery Payment.

Centrelink Social Workers can provide counselling and support and referral to community services if required. For Crisis Payments when domestic and family violence are involved, the social worker will assess the claim for Crisis Payment.

People who have recently been released from prison or psychiatric confinement

Crisis Payment may also be paid to people who have been released from prison or psychiatric confinement if they were there as a result of being charged with an offence. The payment helps released prisoners with the costs of re-entering the community. In this situation the person must:

- have been in prison or psychiatric confinement for at least 14 days after being charged with an offence, and
- lodge a claim for Crisis Payment no more than 21 days before or within the seven days following the day of their release, and

- be in severe financial hardship, and
- be entitled to an income support pension or benefit, and
- be in Australia at the time of claim, and
- not be subject to an Assurance of Support, except in certain circumstances when the assurer cannot provide support or when it is considered unreasonable for the person to accept the support offered by the assurer.

There is no limit to the number of payments of Crisis Payment a customer can receive for release from prison or psychiatric confinement.

Residential requirements

To qualify for Crisis Payment, a person must be an Australian resident (that is, must be living in Australia) and be one of the following:

- an Australian citizen, or
- a permanent visa holder, or
- a protected special category visa holder (that is, someone who arrived on a New Zealand passport and who was in Australia on 26 February 2001 or for 12 months in the two years immediately before that date, or who was assessed as “protected” before 26 February 2004), or
- a holder of a specified sub-class of visa that qualifies the person for Special Benefit.

From 1 January 2008, Crisis Payment will also be available to assist eligible newly arrived humanitarian entrants with the costs of establishing long-term accommodation.

Payment information

Crisis Payment is a one-off payment, equal to one week’s worth (without add-ons) of the person’s pension or benefit. It is limited to four payments for extreme circumstances in any 12 months. This restriction does not apply to customers who have been released from prison.

How to claim

For information about how to claim, see Chapter 14. New and existing customers receiving payments from Centrelink can claim.

Important: A claim or “Intent to Claim” must be lodged within seven days after the extreme circumstance occurred or the date the person is released from prison.

Special Benefit

Purpose

To provide assistance to eligible people in severe financial hardship due to circumstances beyond their control and who are unable to earn a sufficient livelihood for themselves and their dependents.

Qualifications

Special Benefit is a discretionary payment and is only paid in certain circumstances. To qualify for Special Benefit a person must:

- be in severe financial hardship and unable to obtain or earn a sufficient livelihood for themselves and any dependents by reason of age, physical or mental disability, or domestic circumstances, or for any other reason over which the person has no control
- be unable to get any other income support pension or benefit from Centrelink, or a Service Pension from the Department of Veterans’ Affairs
- be in Australia during the period of payment, except under certain special or exceptional circumstances.

People receiving Special Benefit who are considered capable of working are expected to look for work and accept offers of suitable employment. People holding certain temporary protection visas who were granted Special Benefit after 1 January 2003, or who became of working age after this date, are subject to an activity test similar to that applying to job seekers receiving Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance. These provisions require affected customers to enter into an Activity Agreement. They may also be required to undertake activities such as vocational training, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme, and Work for The Dole.

There are penalties similar to those that apply to Newstart Allowance recipients for not satisfying the Special Benefit activity test.

Residential requirements

To qualify for Special Benefit, a person must be an Australian resident (that is, must be living in Australia) and be one of the following:

- an Australian citizen, or
- a permanent visa holder, or
- a protected special category visa holder (that is, someone who arrived on a New Zealand passport and who was in Australia on 26 February 2001 or for 12 months in the two years immediately before that date, or who was assessed as “protected” before 26 February 2004), or
- the holder of a certain temporary visa (for example, Spouse Provisional and Temporary Protection and similar visas).

Newly arrived residents generally have 104 week waiting period. There are some exemptions, including for refugees, the holders of certain other visas, Australian citizens, and in some circumstances their partners and dependent children. In some special circumstances, Special Benefit can be paid to people who are subject to the newly arrived residents waiting period. Generally, these people can only be paid if they can demonstrate that a substantial change

in circumstances beyond their control has occurred and that they are in severe hardship because of this change. Not finding or keeping employment is not regarded as a change of circumstances for the purposes of paying Special Benefit during the newly arrived residents waiting period.

Strict income and assets tests apply to this payment. For more information about exemptions from the newly arrived residents waiting period, see Chapter 8.

Payment information

Special Benefit is designed to meet cases of special need. The rate of payment is discretionary; however, it cannot be more than the amount of Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy payment that would be payable if the person was eligible.

For long-term cases, Special Benefit is not payable when the available funds and liquid assets of a person and their partner (if applicable) are more than \$5000. In cases of short-term need, Special Benefit is not payable if readily available funds exceed two weeks' benefit plus the amount of Family Tax Benefit that would be paid if applicable.

Any income is treated as a direct deduction (that is, dollar-for-dollar) from the rate of Special Benefit. There is no income-free area for Special Benefit.

Payment outside Australia

Special Benefit is not normally paid to people outside Australia. Some Special Benefit recipients may be paid for temporary periods outside Australia only in certain special or exceptional circumstances and only for the period of time needed to deal with the exceptional circumstance, up to a maximum period of 13 weeks. Special Benefit customers thinking about travelling outside Australia for any reason must contact Centrelink before they leave to get advice about what conditions apply.

For more information about payment outside Australia, see Chapter 17.

Compensation

Payment of a Special Benefit may be affected if a person gets Workers' Compensation or third party damages.

For more information about compensation, see Chapter 16.

How to claim

For information about how to claim, see Chapter 14.

Disaster Recovery Payment

Purpose

To provide financial recognition of the trauma and distress experienced by Australians affected in a major disaster, as declared by the Australian Government.

Qualifications

In the event of a disaster, on or off shore, the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, will determine if the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) will be paid to those adversely affected by the disaster for the purposes of the *Social Security Act 1991*.

A person qualifies for the AGDRP if the person:

- is adversely affected by a major disaster, and
- is an Australian resident, or
- holds a visa that is in a class of visas determined by the Minister, or
- is in receipt of an income support payment, or
- is a specified class of Australian citizens who are not Australian residents as specified in writing by the Minister.

Payment information

The AGDRP is a one off payment of:

- \$1000* per adult—an adult is any person considered independent
- \$400* per child—a child is any young person considered dependent or a Family Tax Benefit child.

* Current rate as at 1 December 2006.

A person cannot qualify for more than one AGDRP in relation to the same disaster.

Payments are made by direct credit to an Australian bank account in the first instance.

How to claim

All independent persons must lodge their own individual claim for the AGDRP. Children are to be included on their parents' /carers' claim. Claim options will depend on the nature of the disaster, but include:

- lodging a paper claim
- claiming on the internet
- claiming over the phone.

Claims for the AGDRP must be lodged within six months after the determination of the disaster.

Imprisonment and payments from Centrelink

Payments are not made to a person for any period during which that person is in prison or in psychiatric confinement because the person has been charged with a criminal offence, except for the period when the person in psychiatric confinement undertakes a course of rehabilitation. Once a person is released after having spent 14 days or more in prison, they may be eligible for Crisis Payment (see earlier in this chapter).

The payment to claimants released from prison recognises the difficulties they are likely to experience in re-establishing themselves in the community.

People released from prison may also be entitled to an early payment of up to seven days of the first instalment of their pension or benefit.

Services

- services for rural, regional and remote Australia
- services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Multicultural Services
- Centrelink Psychologists
- Centrelink Job Capacity Assessors
- social work services
- assistance to participate in the labour market
- services for homeless people
- Centrelink Community Officers
- services for people with a disability, illness or injury
- services for carers of someone who is frail aged, ill or has a disability.

Services for rural, regional and remote Australia

Centrelink has national rural, regional, and Indigenous servicing strategies that focus on meeting the needs of customers who do not have ready access to a Centrelink Customer Service Centre. Through these strategies, Centrelink has expanded its rural and remote network and established many new service delivery arrangements, including Centrelink Access Points, Agents, visiting services and dedicated Indigenous and Rural Call Centres.

Centrelink Access Points

Centrelink Access Points provide self-help facilities which enable customers to conduct their Centrelink-related business. Access Points are generally located in communities where population numbers are low and distance limits access to other Centrelink services. Access Point facilities include free phone, fax and photocopier

services. Centrelink forms, publications and other general information are also available.

From July 2005, selected Access Points—known as Access Point (Plus)—can sight, copy and verify customers' "Proof of Identity" documents so that the customer no longer has to send their original documents in the mail to support their claims. Currently, 115 of Centrelink's 180 Access Points have extended their service to include this activity.

For information about the location of Centrelink Access Points, see Appendix 1 or contact a Centrelink Call Centre by calling the "13" number (see the back cover of this book) that is most relevant to the enquiry.

Centrelink Agents

A network of over 370 Centrelink Agent sites operate from across Australia to deliver services and programmes on behalf of Centrelink to rural, regional and remote Australia.

Centrelink Agents are established in communities which require a more significant Centrelink presence than that provided through an Access Point. In addition to providing the same facilities as an Access Point, an Agent provides a face-to-face information service to the community and an internet enabled computer and printer for customers to conduct their business. The services provided also include:

- assistance and guidance to customers in the use of self service products (for example, internet for online service and automated phone systems)
- accepting claim forms and other documentation to be lodged with Centrelink
- responding to customer enquiries and providing assistance, guidance or referral as appropriate.

It is important to note that Centrelink Agents are not Centrelink staff and cannot make any payments or decisions about payments.

For information about the location of Centrelink Agents, see Appendix 1 or contact a Centrelink Call Centre by calling the "13" number (see the back cover of this book) that is most relevant to the enquiry.

Visiting services

Many Centrelink Customer Service Centres conduct visiting services to selected locations in rural and remote Australia. The frequency and types of these visits will usually be based on consultations with local communities and the specific needs of the customers involved. For example, Financial Information Service Officers may hold seminars in small towns where there are sufficient numbers of farmers considering retirement who need information about their income support options.

Visiting services can include appointments, provision of specific information on entitlements and eligibility, general advice, and help with forms and other customer requirements.

For information about visiting services, contact a Centrelink Call Centre by calling the “13” number (see the back cover of this book) that is most relevant to the enquiry.

Rural Call Centres

Centrelink’s Rural Call Centres are designed specifically to meet the needs of rural customers. There are two centres, one in Queensland and one in South Australia.

Rural Call Centres aim to overcome any disadvantages rural customers experience in having to use urban based Call Centres, providing better service to rural Australians irrespective of distance.

Customers calling a Rural Call Centre can expect to get through to a Customer Service Adviser much faster, providing greater flexibility for people living in isolated communities. Rural Call Centres consider ways of reducing the need for customers to visit their nearest Customer Service Centre.

Rural Call Centre Customer Service Advisers are recruited locally or from the surrounding district. This means they already have a valuable understanding of the area and the special needs and experiences of rural customers.

Rural customers in the “catchment” areas still call their normal Centrelink “13” number, but their phone calls are answered by the Rural Call Centres. Rural customers, enquiring about drought assistance are automatically referred to the Rural Call Centre network when they call the Australian Government Drought Assistance Hotline on **13 2316**.

For Centrelink Call Centre phone numbers, see the back cover of this book.

For more information about Centrelink services and payments for farmers, see Chapter 6.

Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Centrelink is responsible for providing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in metropolitan, rural and remote parts of Australia.

To deliver these services across Australia, Centrelink is supported by a strategic framework which guides Indigenous servicing within the organisation. The framework includes:

- Centrelink’s Statement of Commitment to Reconciliation
- Indigenous Servicing Strategy 2006–09
- National Indigenous Employee Plan 2005–08
- Minister’s Statement of Expectations
- Centrelink’s Statement of Intent.

To deliver these services, Centrelink has a network of Indigenous staff who provide a specialist service to help Indigenous people access services and programmes.

Centrelink’s Indigenous servicing infrastructure includes:

- **Indigenous Service Unit (ISU) Managers**—focus on the delivery of Centrelink business that may affect Indigenous customers and communities. These positions also provide leadership and guidance to their respective areas on Indigenous servicing issues.
- **Indigenous Service Officers (ISO)**—provide liaison with local communities and Centrelink, facilitating better communication between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers and Centrelink. The ISO role includes providing information to local communities to ensure that customers understand entitlements and identifying opportunities for enhanced service delivery. The ISO is also often a member of the community, participating in community forums.
ISOs are a resource for Centrelink staff in their dealings with Indigenous customers.
- **Indigenous Customer Service Officers (ICSO)**—are customer based and designed specifically to provide one-on-one individual customer service in a Customer Service Centre. The ICSOs also provide referrals to other Centrelink services and community agencies and when required provide an out service to their local community.

Centrelink uses the following delivery channels to provide services to rural and remote Indigenous customers:

- **Indigenous Call Centres**—Centrelink has three Indigenous Call Centres that answer around 250 000 calls annually. The Indigenous Call Centres provide a culturally appropriate access channel for Indigenous people, particularly those living in remote areas, who may not have direct access to other Centrelink facilities. The Call Centres are located at:
 - Palmerston (Northern Territory)
 - Cairns (Queensland)
 - Bunbury (Western Australia).
- **Remote Visiting Teams**—travel to rural and remote areas throughout Australia to provide services to Indigenous customers who do not have direct access to Centrelink programmes and services due to their location.
- **Remote Area Service Centres (RASCs)**—are small Centrelink offices located in remote areas. The RASCs predominantly service Indigenous customers and are generally staffed by local Indigenous people. Centrelink has RASCs in Laverton, Halls Creek Meekatharra, Fitzroy Crossing and Newman (Western Australia), Yarrabah, Western Cape and Bamaga (Queensland), and Tiwi Islands, Yuendumu, Borrooloola and Wadeye (Northern Territory).
- **Centrelink Agents**—Centrelink contracts community organisations to employ local Indigenous people under

the Centrelink Agent and Access Point Servicing Model. This model aims to improve the quality of, and access to, government services and payments in rural and remote Australia. Centrelink has over 180 Agents in Indigenous communities across Australia.

- **Cadetships**—as part of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' National Cadetship Program, the Centrelink Indigenous Cadetship Program recruits Indigenous Australians for careers within Centrelink.

Multicultural Services

Centrelink provides a number of services to ensure people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have the Centrelink information they need.

For more information about these services, see Chapter 8.

Centrelink Psychologists

Centrelink Psychologists are registered health professionals who provide professional assessments, including Job Capacity Assessments. Centrelink Psychologists see people of different ages, from all types of backgrounds and with a wide range of concerns. Their work focuses on assessing work capacity and determining which services and programmes will be suitable for people who may need help or support. Centrelink Psychologists provide advice and recommendations for assistance and initiate referrals to the most appropriate services (for example, the Job Network, Disability Employment Network, or community organisations).

Centrelink Psychologists also provide specialist assessments and offer short-term psychological interventions such as cognitive behaviour therapy, counselling, behaviour management and modification and motivational interviewing to facilitate a customer's engagement with the Job Network.

For more information about the Centrelink Psychologists, see Chapter 13.

Centrelink Job Capacity Assessors

Centrelink Job Capacity Assessors are allied health professionals. They come from a range of disciplines including psychologists, social workers, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Job Capacity Assessors help identify a person's ability to work and any barriers they face in getting and maintaining employment.

Centrelink Job Capacity Assessors may provide assessments for:

- job seekers claiming or receiving Centrelink payments who have been identified as having barriers preventing them from working
- people claiming Disability Support Pension or those having their Disability Support Pension reviewed
- voluntary job seekers such as mature aged people or Disability Support Pension recipients wanting to get a job.

Following the assessment, Centrelink Job Capacity Assessors can directly refer clients to an employment or support service that meets their individual needs. Services include the Job Network, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Disability Employment Network, Personal Support Programme, Job Placement, Employment and Training or Job Capacity Account short-term interventions. Many Job Capacity Assessors also provide Job Capacity Account short-term intervention services to help prepare people to receive employment assistance from the Job Network.

For more information about Job Capacity Assessments, see Chapter 9.

Social work services

Centrelink Social Workers provide professional assessments including Job Capacity Assessments, counselling and referral to community support services for customers who may be facing difficult personal and family situations.

For more information about social work services, see Chapter 13.

Assistance to participate in the labour market

Centrelink can provide customers with:

- encouragement and support to work out a plan to help them return to work, taking into account their needs and circumstances, skills and experience, and local opportunities
- information about the benefits of preparing for a return to work or study and the assistance available to help them
- advice on how to get the services needed, such as education and training services, employment services, child care and services to help with any personal difficulties
- details of financial incentives available to help with the cost of study, training or entering the workforce
- help with understanding their obligations, to ensure that their circumstances are taken into account.

For more information about participation and how Centrelink can assist, see Chapter 2.

Services for homeless people

Centrelink has many procedures and services in place to help people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, including a network of specialised officers, such as social workers, Indigenous specialist officers, Centrelink Community Officers and specialist youth servicing units.

Centrelink is sensitive to, and flexible about, the varying needs of people of all ages who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Centrelink can connect them with local community agencies offering help with finding accommodation and overcoming barriers that may be affecting their lives. Centrelink can also help customers access appropriate income support options, establish “Proof of Identity”, and refer them to agencies who can provide intensive personal support.

If a person is unable to produce standard forms of primary identification (such as a passport, driver’s licence, certificate of Australian citizenship or birth certificate), Centrelink can find alternative ways of establishing identity. This involves customers completing a form giving Centrelink permission to verify their identity by other means such as contacting schools, family members, hospitals, community agencies and landlords.

Specialist Customer Service Advisers also help people to deal with personal and social barriers to finding and maintaining appropriate accommodation and to link them with other support services in their community.

Centrelink administers a number of programmes and services offering personal support and assistance to young people who are homeless, or who are at risk of becoming homeless, and their families.

For more information about services and payments for young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, see Chapter 5.

Centrelink Community Officers

Centrelink Community Officers are available specifically to provide services to homeless and at risk people of all ages.

These officers deliver Centrelink services to people outside the mainstream office setting in locations such as rehabilitation centres, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, hostels, refuges, drop-in centres and organised meeting places, such as food shelters (where homeless people gather and feel most comfortable). They provide services at a wide range of agencies and offer intensive support and assistance to homeless and “at risk” customers to help them understand, claim and keep income support payments. They also provide referrals to Centrelink specialist services and programmes and other government and non-government organisations.

The key element in the Community Officer approach is providing services in venues other than Centrelink Customer Service Centres without compromising homeless or at risk people’s access to income support. This approach also means people seeking assistance can be in an environment in which they feel comfortable and can be supported by others such as hospital and refuge workers.

Centrelink Community Officers work closely with staff from local agencies to provide a holistic approach to helping people access income support and other support services.

Contact details for Centrelink Community Units and Centrelink Community Officers are listed by state/territory in Appendix 1.

Services for people with a disability, illness or injury

A range of Centrelink services are available to provide expert advice and to help people with disabilities, illnesses or injuries to access assistance services. For more information, see Chapter 9.

Services for carers of someone who is frail aged, ill or has a disability

Centrelink specialist services are available to provide expert advice and assistance to carers. These services include support from Social Workers and information kits for carers. Centrelink can also refer carers to support services such as Carers’ Associations and Commonwealth Carer Respite Centres.

For more information, see Chapter 10.

