
SUPPLIED IN CONFIDENCE TO THE NSW I.C.A.C.

[Service NSW 2021 COVID-19 Micro Business Grant]
‘Retrospective Clawback and Extortion Scam’

[2022 - present]



Witness Personal Account and Victim Impact Statement
[Complainant #28f: ‘Steve Ridd’, Nature Trail]

The following written evidence received from Steven Ridd by email to steve@naturetrail.com.au .

START OF EVIDENCE



TRISH DOYLE MP

STATE MEMBER FOR THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

4 May 2023

The Hon. Daniel Mookhey MLC
Treasurer
52 Martin Place
SYDNEY NSW 2001

The Hon. Jihad Dib, MP
Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
52 Martin Place
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Daniel + Jihad

Dear Treasurer and Minister,

I am writing on behalf of several constituents who have contacted my office regarding a random audit carried out by Service NSW on Covid-19 Support grants.

In the last few weeks, we have had several complaints from constituents who have been informed by Service NSW that under a random audit, they no longer meet the eligibility requirements for grants they were previously eligible for and must provide supporting documentation to prove their eligibility again, or risk being referred to Revenue NSW for debt recovery.

Hearing the experiences of my constituents, I believe the conduct of Service NSW audit team has been brought into question due to their alleged heavy-handed and intimidatory nature. I have provided examples from two constituents outlining their treatment.

- I) *'On Wednesday the 5th of April 2023. At 1:05pm Greg called from the Micro Business Audit Team. I rang back instantly and got Nathan or Ethan who asked for the Grant back, I was told I could sell up, increase my mortgage, or face criminal proceedings and time in jail. I stated I can't take this, and I have a senior's card. I am appalled at this hypocritical heavy handed bullying tactics from State Government.'*
- II) *'On Tuesday 11 April 2023, I received an out-of-the-blue phone call to my mobile followed by an email purportedly from Services NSW. Both demanded an audit of my business regarding its 2021 pandemic Micro Business Grant to me of \$15,214, despite being eligible at the time. The NSW Government is claiming that I am somehow subsequently now not eligible and want the approved compensation money back or else they will refer me to Revenue NSW to sue me. Yet, I provided all the criteria documentation at the time and my local tour business, Nature Trail, was deemed as eligible. I keep records and I can only re-submit the same records as I did upon application for the NSW Government's Micro Business Grant. May be the bureaucrats shredded my records, but that's not my fault.'*

Each constituent that has contacted our office has likened Service NSW tactics to the failed 'Robodebt' disaster and I would be inclined to see their point. I appreciate that audits are a standard practice in grant rollouts, however treating small businesses owners who were unable to work throughout the Covid lockdown as guilty until proven innocent does not seem fair.

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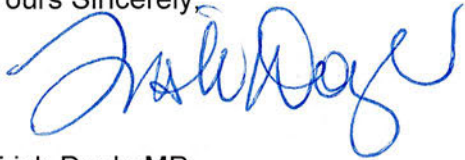
5 Raymond Rd Springwood NSW 2777

trishdoylemp.com.au

Treasurer and Minister, I am writing to request a review of the approach that Service NSW applies to their audits. In particular, the alleged heavy-handed nature of the Service NSW audit team.

Thankyou for your consideration of this request.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Trish Doyle', written in a cursive style.

Trish Doyle MP

Member for the Blue Mountains

Parliamentary Secretary for Environment, Heritage, Climate Change and Energy

Over 2000 people died after receiving Centrelink robo-debt notice, figures reveal

By [Shalailah Medhora](#)

Posted 18 Feb 2019

<https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/2030-people-have-died-after-receiving-centrelink-robodebt-notice/10821272>



More than 2030 people died after receiving a Centrelink debt notice, also known as robo-debt, according to new data released by the Department of Human Services.

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- [1800 RESPECT](#) on 1800 737 732
- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [BeyondBlue](#) on 1300 22 46 36
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890

Of those, 429 - roughly one-fifth - were aged under 35. The figures cover a period from July 2016 to October 2018.

To give you a comparison, there were 3139 deaths of people aged between 15 and 35 in 2016 overall, according to the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#).

While the department does not collect data on the cause for death in these cases, nearly a third - 663 people - were classified as "vulnerable", which means they had complex needs like mental illness, drug use or were victims of domestic violence.

Greens Senator Rachel Siewert, who asked the Department for the information, told *Hack* that there could be more people with vulnerabilities than what is reflected in the official stats.

Have you received a robo-debt notice? We want to hear what the experience was like for you. Send us a message on Facebook or [email us here](#).

"Because of the way the system works at the moment, people don't feel confident or don't feel safe or trust the person that they're reporting to to flag that they feel vulnerable, or flag that they might have poor mental health at the time," she said.

Senator Siewert also said evidence from a Senate inquiry into the system found that getting a debt notice when you've done nothing wrong can bring on depression or anxiety.

"People talk about feeling stressed and anxious through the system, feeling humiliated and they get depressed."

"That sets alarm bells for me, the high proportion of people with vulnerabilities," she said.

This should be ringing alarm bells for the Government in terms of further investigation."

The vast majority of people who died were still receiving Centrelink payments at the time of their deaths. Responsibility for Centrelink lies with the Department of Human Services.

More than 500 people who died were receiving Newstart payments, and a further 520 were on the Disability Support Pension.

Men were twice as likely to die than women.

Minister says there's no link

A spokesperson for Human Services Minister, Michael Keenan, told *Hack* the automatic debt notice process is "reasonable, lawful and fair".

They said the department had sent out 900,000 discrepancy notices - that is, a letter asking the welfare recipient to explain why the info they've given doesn't match what the department has. That doesn't always lead to a formal debt notice because the recipients of the letter can provide additional information that clears the discrepancy.

"Any suggestion that the Department of Human Services' debt recovery efforts have contributed to customer deaths is simply not supported by the facts or statistics," the spokesperson said.

"The department sent more than 900,000 debt letters to individuals during the period 1 July 2016 to 31 October 2018. A total of 2030 of those individuals died during the same period, which represents 0.21 per cent."

This was more than ten times lower than the overall death rate for all of the department's customers during the same period, which was 3.64 per cent."

It's important to note here that the figures provided by the spokesperson include deaths of people who receive a pension payment, which by definition puts them in the older age bracket.

"The number of days that elapsed between customers receiving a debt letter and their death was 222 days, or almost eight months. Any number of factors in an individual's life could have contributed to their death during such an extended period and it would be foolhardy to draw a link to one particular cause without evidence to support such a claim," the spokesperson said.

"Debt recovery remains an important priority for the Coalition Government and where people have been overpaid, they will be required to pay the money back. Since 1 July 2016, this Government has achieved savings of \$2.9 billion through cracking down on welfare fraud and non-compliance."

Senator Siewert will seek further information from the department. She wants answers to clarify how, if at all, the robo-debt system exacerbates stress and anxiety.

"I find it quite disturbing, and it indicates to me that the department should investigate further and I'll be chasing this up during Senate estimates this week," Senator Siewert said.

What is robo-debt?

In 2016, Centrelink started using a computer system to match up tax records with welfare payments, to see if there were any discrepancies.

The old non-automated system generated 20,000 letters to people who had received Centrelink payments a year. But in the early days of the new system, that jumped to 20,000 letters a week.

Centrelink has raised nearly 410,000 debt notices since the automated [system began in July 2016](#), but 70,000 have been written off or reduced already.

"Robodebt has unleashed thousands of debt notices in error to parents, people with disabilities, carers, students and people seeking paid work, resulting in people slapped with Centrelink debts they do not owe or debts higher than they owe," ACOSS CEO Dr Cassandra Goldie said.

"It has been a devastating abuse of government power that has caused extensive harm, particularly among people who are the most vulnerable in our community."

The family of 28-year old Melbourne musician Rhys Cauzzo told *The Saturday Paper* that "aggressive" payment [demands from a debt-collection agency](#) on behalf of Centrelink contributed to his suicide.

"People with severe depression don't handle financial pressure. And these numbers didn't make sense. He was always anal about keeping financial records," Rhys' mother, Jenny Miller, said.

Because it was computer-generated, *Hack* started hearing stories of how people were told they owed thousands of dollars due to admin errors.

Like hospitality worker Laura, who was told she owed \$24,000 - basically her annual income.

"[I felt] physically sick and I lost my shit straight away."

Laura told *Hack* getting the debt notice was stressful and impacted her mental health.

"I've suffered from depression for a very, very long time and especially at the end of last year when I first got this debt I was already not feeling well because of other things, so I ended up not being at work for a month," she said.

"No one's listening... I'm basically being called a fraud and a liar and that I don't matter."

"It straight away said I was guilty, and a year later [I'm still trying] to prove I'm not guilty," Laura said.

"That's a year's worth of my life of stress and struggle that I shouldn't have had to deal with... It's a joke."

*

*

From: MOH-Minister <MOH-Minister@health.nsw.gov.au>

Sent: Friday, 21 April 2023 3:31 PM

To: steven@talbotanalysis.com

Subject: Response to your enquiry - M23/1795

Dear Mr Ridd

Thank you for writing to the Hon Rose Jackson MLC, Minister for Mental Health.

As the issues you have raised fall within the administration of the Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government, your email has been referred for consideration.

Thank you again for bringing this matter to the Minister's attention.

Emails to this address are not regularly monitored.



NSW Health



TRISH DOYLE MP

STATE MEMBER FOR THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

4 May 2023

The Hon. Daniel Mookhey MLC
Treasurer
52 Martin Place
SYDNEY NSW 2001

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The Hon Jihad Dib MP

Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Youth Justice



Ref: COR-01852-2023

Ms Trish Doyle MP
Member for Blue Mountains
By email: bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Ms Doyle *Trish,*

Thank you for your letter of 4 May 2023 to the Hon Daniel Mookhey and myself about the methods and content of communication to customers about audits conducted for the COVID-19 Micro-business Grant. I am sorry for the delay in responding.

I acknowledge the frustration that the process is causing customers. However, Service NSW must ensure that delivery of monies by the NSW Government is done with fairness and to the highest ethical standards, ensuring equity for all NSW citizens.

I have been advised by Service NSW that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Premier prioritised a cash injection to businesses in NSW in the face of the Delta outbreak and NSW lockdowns. In order to ensure swift payment so that customers were assisted promptly, some businesses were automatically assessed based on the self-declaration that they provided at the time of application.

As per the grant's Terms and Conditions, grants that were automatically assessed were later scheduled for manual assessment. These reassessments started in 2022 and are continuing, and customers who missed providing evidence with their initial application are being asked to substantiate their claims. Service NSW conducts these reassessments to confirm that the correct funds were released to customers based on the grant's eligibility criteria.

Service NSW acknowledges that they have received complaints about the tone of communications. They have reviewed the tone and content of correspondence used when advising customers of the commencement of grant audits. They have also reviewed how customers can confirm the legitimacy of correspondence received from Service NSW.

I have been advised that Service NSW will continue to carry out reassessments and Service NSW has confirmed that they have changed both the correspondence and the process, providing customers with support and options to provide the evidence missing off their files.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jihad Dib".

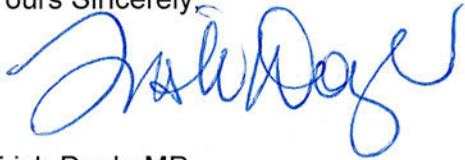
Jihad Dib MP
Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Youth Justice

23/07 /2023

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Trish Doyle MP

Member for the Blue Mountains

Parliamentary Secretary for Environment, Heritage, Climate Change and Energy



TRISH DOYLE MP
STATE MEMBER FOR THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

21 November 2023

The Hon. Jihad Dib, MP
Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
GPO BOX 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

COVID-19 Micro-Business Grant - Audit

Dear Minister

I write to you on behalf of Steven Ridd of 5 Kundibar Street, Katoomba. In 2021, Mr Ridd was a recipient of the COVID-19 micro-business grant. On 11 April 2023, he was informed that his business, Nature Trail, was being audited in relation to this grant. On 17 November 2023, after a significant period during which he received no communication from Service NSW, he was informed that they are temporarily pausing compliance audit activity in relation to his grant application.

Mr Ridd is unhappy with the continued delays and feels that he has been left in a state of needless suspense. He would like to receive confirmation that he will not need to repay the grant.

I am seeking closure to this matter from the NSW Government, since I have to date received no clarification one way or the other. So I am in limbo, probably like many other micro businesses who have done the right thing being firstly deemed eligible for the grant and secondly providing the additional requested documentary evidence from Service NSW subsequent 'audit'.

Minister, I respectfully ask that you investigate this matter and provide a response.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Trish Doyle MP
Member for Blue Mountains
Parliamentary Secretary for Environment, Heritage, Climate Change and Energy

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 5 Raymond Rd Springwood NSW 2777

 bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au

 trishdoylemp.com.au

The Hon Jihad Dib MP

Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Youth Justice



Ref: COR-05324-2023

Ms Trish Doyle MP
Member for Blue Mountains
By email: bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Re: concerns about COVID-19 Micro-business grant audit and pause

Dear Ms Doyle *Trish,*

Thank you for your representations dated 21 November 2023 on behalf of Mr Steven Ridd about the pause of the Service NSW compliance audit of his application for a COVID-19 Micro-business grant for his business, Nature Trail. I apologise for the delay in responding.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure customers were assisted promptly, Service NSW paid the grant funds to some businesses based on the self-declaration they provided at the time of application. As per the grant's terms and conditions, Service NSW is now conducting reassessments to confirm the correct funds were released to customers based on the grant eligibility criteria.

I acknowledge and appreciate the concern which may be associated with the review process. Service NSW continues to offer support and guidance for grant recipients as they gather the information needed to complete the eligibility check.

On 17 November, Service NSW informed Mr Ridd it had temporarily paused compliance activity on his grant application and would contact him when the review was finalised to advise next steps.

The review is aimed at identifying ways to help make it easier for micro-business owners to participate, including considering the length of time business owners are given to respond. Grant recipients have also been given the option to continue with the current compliance audit process if they prefer.

Please be assured Service NSW aims to exercise the highest standards of ethical financial management to ensure integrity of process and equity for all citizens of New South Wales.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

Sincerely

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Jihad Dib MP
Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government
Minister for Emergency Services
Minister for Youth Justice

04/03/2024

End of supplied evidence

This document submitted by Steven Ridd, Managing Director, Wistmans Wood Holdings Pty Limited [ACN 600 331 931] as trustee for Wistmans Wood Trust [ABN 51 965 308 493] trading as Nature Trail. Registered Address: 5 Kundibar Street KATOOMBA NSW 2780.]

By email icac@icac.nsw.gov.au



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION
AGAINST CORRUPTION

Level 7, 255 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, New South Wales
Australia