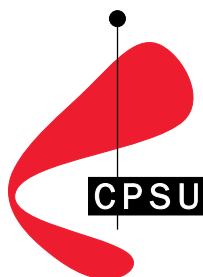


Securing Centrelink Safety

CPSU report into Centrelink
workplace aggression





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Executive Summary

Centrelink is a Commonwealth Statutory Authority responsible for administering a wide range of Government support services for many Australians including pensioners, the unemployed, students and families. Approximately one in three Australians are Centrelink customers and the agency has 27,000 staff employed at over 1000 locations.

This report is based on two surveys conducted by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) of members who work in Centrelink (CSCs). The surveys sought information from members on the incidence and type of customer aggression that they had experienced or witnessed at work, during home visits, while travelling to and from work and outside work.

The key findings are:

- Four out of five Centrelink members have been threatened by a Centrelink customer while at work.
- Centrelink customers are also subjected to physical and verbal abuse from other customers in Centrelink offices.

Verbal Abuse at Work

- Nearly two-thirds of members had been verbally abused at work in the last three months.
- These threats included swearing, yelling, shouting and thumping on desks in an attempt to intimidate the staff member.

Death Threats at Work

- Nearly one-third of members reported receiving a death threat. Death threats included:
 - A card sent from a customer containing a cartoon of the staff member hanging from a noose.
 - A customer who threatened to 'cut up' a Centrelink staff member with a chainsaw.
 - Numerous threats by various customers to stab and/or shoot Centrelink staff.

Physical Assault at Work

- Thirty per cent of staff members interviewed reported that they had been physically assaulted at work.
- The types of physical assault and threats included customers jumping over desks to attack members, tipping objects off desks, throwing objects such as office chairs, computers, garbage bins, food, telephones, pens, paper and magazines at members, knives being pulled out, and customers slapping, hitting and punching Centrelink staff and other customers.

Threats outside work

- CPSU members were also exposed to threats from customers when travelling to and from work. Eighteen per cent of members reported being threatened, with the majority reporting being followed or approached by a customer outside work.
- Nine members reported that they had been physically assaulted on their way to/from work by a Centrelink customer and three reported being spat at or having something thrown at them.

Customer on customer aggression

While some CPSU members interviewed about client aggression reported that they had not been personally attacked by a Centrelink customer, just 23 out of the 330 members surveyed reported that they had not at the very least witnessed client aggression while at work.

Workers at Centrelink are regularly being exposed to verbal abuse, death threats and physical assaults. These instances not only place the health and safety of the Centrelink worker at risk but also pose significant threats to customers who happen to be in the vicinity at the time.

Under-reporting

- The Commonwealth Ombudsman's Report of August 2008¹ found that there was inadequate recording of instances of customer aggression. CPSU members confirmed this with comments including that management sometimes 'actively discouraged the lodgement of EP63 forms' – the forms which record incidents of customer aggression. It was suggested that cultural change was required in some CSCs so that staff were 'supported in their lodgement without the events downplayed'.

Management response

- The response of Centrelink management is varied – some local managers are reportedly good at dealing with customer aggression in their office, while others are not. Senior management is generally seen as too removed to have any real impact on reducing customer aggression.
- Centrelink management does not take a consistent approach to customer aggression. In some cases it does not encourage the reporting of instances of aggression or act on them.

The CPSU is concerned that unless something is done now to address the issues raised in this Report, abuse and serious assaults of staff will continue and it may only be a matter of time until there is a fatality.

Key Findings

- The health and safety of Centrelink staff – and customers – are endangered on a daily basis.
- Customer aggression in Centrelink offices is a continuing, constant and substantial problem.
- Centrelink senior management need to act now to break the cycle of customer aggression. As a community we can no longer accept this level of abuse as 'normal'.
- Inadequate staffing levels in Centrelink offices can lead to delays, which make workplace aggression more likely.
- Staff who are subject to aggressive incidents are not properly supported.
- Centrelink's open plan office design is not working.
- A security officer may be needed for every Centrelink office, not just a select few.

¹ Commonwealth Ombudsman (2008) *Centrelink: Arrangements for the Withdrawal of Face-to-Face Contact with Customers*, Report 09/2008, August.

Introduction

About the CPSU

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is an active and progressive union committed to promoting a modern, efficient and responsive public sector delivering quality services and quality jobs. We represent around 60,000 members in the Australian Public Service (APS), ACT Public Service, NT Public Service, ABC, SBS and the CSIRO.

The CPSU represents thousands of members who work in Centrelink. These members work in front line customer service, information technology and systems support, policy development and professional roles including social work, psychology and counselling.

About Centrelink

Approximately one in three Australians are customers of Centrelink².

Centrelink pays 10 million individual entitlements each year and administers more than 140 services for 25 government agencies.

Centrelink employs more than 27,000 staff, the majority of whom are women. Centrelink has more than 1,000 locations ranging from large CSCs to small visiting services³. There are more than 300 CSCs Australia-wide⁴.

Time to break the cycle of violence

For a number of years, CPSU members who work in CSCs have been raising concerns about their health and safety and the safety of Centrelink customers. In some instances Centrelink management has acted, but often, steps to improve public safety and the safety of Centrelink workers has only been taken after a serious incident.

The CPSU undertook this study to learn more about the kinds of aggression that Centrelink workers and customers are regularly exposed to.

There is a clear need for Centrelink management to act to reduce the exposure of customers and staff to the actions of aggressive customers. This report contains suggestions from staff as to how Centrelink offices could be made safer places for all.

² Centrelink Annual Report 2006-7.

³ Centrelink Annual Report 2006-7.

⁴ Centrelink Information - A Guide to Payments and Services 2007-2008 available at www.centrelink.gov.au

Methodology

Centrelink classifies the CSCs into fourteen areas⁵ nationwide. The CPSU contacted members in each of the areas to ascertain the type and level of customer aggression occurring in Centrelink offices and whether the aggression was a national problem or specific to particular locations.

A minimum of twenty responses was sought from each area via a telephone survey, developed by the Centrelink team of the CPSU. The survey contained questions on whether a member had experienced customer aggression both at the workplace and outside the office and, if so, asked the member to provide examples of their experiences.

The CPSU membership database was used to identify CPSU members who worked in a Centrelink CSC. Random sampling was then used to draw a list of seventy members in each of the fourteen areas. In the first round of the survey, conducted between 21st May 2008 and 5th June 2008, CPSU members were called at home, work or on their mobile telephone. The member list for each area was used until at least twenty responses had been achieved.

Highlighting the importance of this issue for Centrelink CSC employees, of those people who were contacted, very few people declined to participate. In total, 330 responses were collected across the fourteen areas.

The first round results confirmed that customer aggression in Centrelink CSCs was placing the safety of Centrelink customers and employees at risk.

A more detailed follow up email questionnaire was sent to all 330 members to ascertain the type of support Centrelink employees were receiving from local and senior Centrelink management and whether they had suggestions as to how the incidence of customer aggression could be reduced.

Due to the limited response rate (38 of 330 members replied to the email), CPSU conducted a second telephone survey of those who had responded to the first survey.

Calls were undertaken between 27th June 2008 and 2nd July 2008 and, again highlighting the importance of the issue, in such a short period a total of 94 responses were collected.

⁵ Note that these numbers do not include National Office and the National Call Network. They are subject to change due to rationalisation but at the time of the survey numbered 14 areas.

Threats and Violence at Work

Members were asked whether they had ever been exposed to a threatening experience involving a customer at work. A 'threatening experience' was defined as 'an experience in the workplace where a customer, through their words or actions, had made the member 'feel uncomfortable, intimidated or fearful'. The response rate was high, with 267 members, or 81 per cent reporting that they had such an experience (Table 1).

Table 1: Have you had a threatening experience involving a customer at work?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	267	80.9%
No	63	19.1%
Total	330	100.0%

Members were then asked about the specific nature of the threats and whether they were verbal abuse, death threats and/or physical assault. These different types of threat are reported in turn below.

Verbal Abuse at Work

Of the 267 CPSU members who reported that they had a threatening experience at work, 96.6 per cent reported that they had been the victim of verbal abuse, including being sworn at and/or verbally threatened, while they had been at work (Table 2).

Table 2: Have you been the victim of verbal abuse while at work?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	258	96.6%
No	7	2.6%
No response	2	0.7%
Total	267	100.0%

Of the 258 CPSU members who reported that they had been a victim of verbal abuse (Table 3), more than one third reported that this had occurred in the last month. Overall, nearly two thirds (62 per cent) of those experiencing verbal abuse at work had been abused in the last three months.

Table 3: When was the most recent experience of verbal abuse while at work?

	Number	Per cent
In the last month	103	39.9%
In the last 3 months	31	12.0%
In the last 6 months	26	10.1%
In the last year	26	10.1%
More than a year ago	72	27.9%
Total	258	100.0%

Given the data above, it was not surprising that numerous staff members reported that verbal abuse was common at their workplace. The forms of abuse by customers included swearing and yelling, and shouting and thumping on desks in an attempt to intimidate staff. The abuse extended as far as threats by customers that they would return and stab/shoot the member or be waiting outside for them when they finished work. In one office, Centrelink's response has been to advise staff to walk in pairs to the station and avoid certain areas on the way home.

Members gave a number of examples of the abuse that occurred including:

- A member reported that because she was not born in Australia, she felt that she was targeted by customers with racist comments such as 'I don't want to be served by an Asian'.
- An Aboriginal member told of the verbal abuse they received because of their race.
- Two members told of instances where customers had told them in a threatening manner, 'I know where you live'.
- A member described a situation where a customer came in with a dog and told the member that he had a gun and a baseball bat.
- A customer threatened to get a knife and stab the member. The customer also picked up a chair.

Some of the verbal abuse from customers is aimed at mentally distressing the Centrelink worker. For example:

- One customer threatened to slit her throat and commit suicide if the social worker was not available to see her.
- Another threatened to hurt his own child and said that Centrelink would be responsible if it occurred.
- Another said that he would leave the office and kill his children because he hadn't received any money.

Members reported that some of the incidents were caused by customers who were alcohol or drug affected. One told of an instance where a customer pulled out a knife but was not capable of actually using it to carry out a threat. Another reported a serious incident where an ice addict who was also drunk carried weapons into the Centrelink office and the police had to be called.

Most often, verbal abuse of Centrelink workers occurs in open plan offices. Not only are the staff affected but any other customers who are in the office at the time are also exposed to this behaviour.

Death Threats at Work

Members were asked whether they had received a death threat while at work. Nearly one-third of members who had experienced threatening behaviour at work reported that at least one manifestation of this behaviour had been a death threat (Table 4).

Table 4: Have you ever received a death threat while at work?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	85	31.8%
No	179	67.0%
No response	3	1.1%
Total	267	100.0%

More than a quarter of those members who had been the subject of a death threat reported that this had occurred in the last twelve months (Table 5).

Table 5: When was the most recent experience of a death threat while at work?

	Number	Per cent
In the last month	6	7.1%
In the last 3 months	1	1.2%
In the last 6 months	7	8.2%
In the last year	9	10.6%
More than a year ago	62	72.9%
Total	85	100.0%

Members provided examples of the types of death threats they had received. Many indicated that these threats caused them great concern not only for their safety but for the safety of Centrelink customers. Examples included:

- One member reported receiving a card from a customer containing a cartoon of her hanging from a noose.
- A customer said that he would come back with a chainsaw and cut the Centrelink worker up.
- A customer made the gesture of cutting someone's throat and then uplifted the desk and tipped the computer off.
- A customer threatened to 'get' the member after work. The member called the police and left at a different time to avoid the situation. It should be noted that reports of customers waiting outside or threatening to wait outside for the member to finish work were alarmingly common.
- A customer became heated and abusive in a meeting with several Centrelink workers. The member who reported this incident is wheelchair bound and managed to move out of the way but reported that a colleague 'copped it'. By the time the police arrived and arrested the customer, he had 'trashed the office'. An hour or so later, the customer was back waiting outside the office and made death threats.

- One customer threatened to follow the member home and knife her while another threatened to 'slash' the member after they did not like what they had been told.
- A number of members reported that customers made threats about having shotguns. For example one customer whose payment had been cancelled threatened to shoot the member; another customer, who had just been released from gaol, said to the member that they would 'get them with a shotgun'; and a member was told by a customer that he had a shotgun and 'wasn't afraid to use it'.

Physical Assault at Work

Members were asked whether they had ever been physically assaulted at work. This included being shoved and having something thrown at them. Seventy-eight members (29.2 per cent) reported that they had been assaulted at work (Table 6). Nine members reported that this assault had occurred in the last month (11.5 per cent) and, in total; twenty two members reported being assaulted in the last year (Table 7).

Table 6: Have you ever been physically assaulted while at work?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	78	29.2%
No	187	70.0%
No response	2	0.7%
Total	267	100.0%

Table 7: When was the most recent experience of a physical assault while at work?

	Number	Per cent
In the last month	9	11.5%
In the last 3 months	2	2.6%
In the last 6 months	3	3.8%
In the last year	8	10.3%
More than a year ago	53	67.9%
No response	3	3.8%
Total	78	100.0%

The types of physical assault and threats included customers jumping over desks to attack members, tipping objects off desks, throwing objects such as office chairs, computers, garbage bins, food, telephones, pens, paper and magazines at members, knives being pulled out, and customers slapping, hitting and punching Centrelink staff. Specifically, 13 members reported that chairs had been thrown, 11 reported papers/forms being thrown, 8 reported that computers had been thrown or attempted to be thrown, 8 reported that pens had been thrown and 4 reported that desks had either been tipped over or pushed.

Centrelink has attempted to limit the ability of customers to throw computers by affixing computers to desks, but this only removes one of the objects that Centrelink customers use to throw at staff. Regardless, members reported that not all computers have been fixed to the desks.

Specific examples that members reported included:

- A member was held up against a wall by the throat and threatened with death.
- A member had a knife pulled on him in an office.
- A manager reported that they had countless staff beaten and threatened and had furniture thrown through the front window of the office.
- One customer threw a jar of excrement across the office.
- While a member was seven months pregnant a customer pushed a table at her.
- A member was concerned that a customer was about to 'go off' and so asked a colleague to help. The colleague was then assaulted.
- A member was spat on – the customer was charged with assault.
- A member reported that their team leader had been punched and another team leader had been dragged to the ground by her hair. The same member reported a customer using a pram as a battering ram.
- A member reported that some violent customers who attend the Centrelink office repeatedly target particular staff.

Members also provided numerous examples of instances of items being thrown through Centrelink office windows, windows being broken by customers punching or kicking them, customers threatening people in offices with baseball bats and at least one instance of a Centrelink office being set on fire. These situations place not only Centrelink workers in significant danger but also Centrelink customers.

As well as direct threats to, and assaults of, Centrelink staff members reported that often the violence occurred *between* Centrelink customers while they were attending an office. One member reported that 'customer on customer violence is the worst'.

Another member said that it was not uncommon to have fights break out in the queue, while another told of a situation where three customers began to fight in the office and he and his manager tried to stop it. In doing so, both he and his manager sustained bruises from being punched as was another customer and a child who happened to be in the office at the time. The three customers were arrested.

In addition to the risks within Centrelink offices, some Centrelink officers are required to visit customers at home. While in the home they can be exposed to various threats. These include direct assault of the Centrelink worker and the exposure of the worker to assaults that may occur between those present at the time.

For example, one member reported having an ashtray thrown at them by a female customer during a home visit. The male resident of the house also threatened the staff member with a glass flagon.

During a different home visit the same staff member had a female customer step out of her underpants and try to stuff them in the staff member's mouth.

Another member reported that she had been physically assaulted numerous times by customers during home visits including having had a dog set on her and having a toaster thrown at her.

Threats and Violence at Work - Summary

Workers at Centrelink are regularly being exposed to verbal abuse, death threats and physical assaults.

These instances not only place the health and safety of the Centrelink worker at risk but also pose significant threats to customers who happen to be in the vicinity at the time.

While in the past, any reports of aggression were treated seriously by management, over time these formal reporting mechanisms have lost their currency.

Members noted that management inaction over instances of customer aggression had led to a culture of non-reporting of what are considered 'less important' occurrences of customer aggression.

This is concerning because all of the examples provided in this Report describe situations which no worker should have to put up with as part of their daily work.

Threats & Violence Outside Work

It is clear from the evidence thus far that it is not uncommon for a Centrelink worker to be threatened that they will be physically harmed once they leave the office for the day.

Of the 330 CPSU members who participated in this study, fifty-nine reported that they had a threatening experience involving a customer on their way to or from work (Table 8).

Table 8: Have you ever had a threatening experience involving a customer on their way to or from work?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	59	17.9%
No	269	81.5%
No response	2	0.6%
Total	330	100.0%

The most commonly reported threatening experience involved being followed or approached by a Centrelink customer (59.3 per cent). Nine members reported that they had been physically assaulted on their way to/from work by a Centrelink customer and three reported being spat at or having something thrown at them (Table 9).

Table 9: How have you been threatened on your way to/from work?

	Number	Per cent
Were you followed or approached?	35	59.3%
Were you physically assaulted?	9	15.3%
Were you spat at or had something thrown at you?	3	5.1%
Other	22	37.3%

Note: asked of the 59 positive respondents to Table 8. Multiple responses allowed.

Six of those who had experienced threatening behaviour while out of the office reported that this had occurred in the last month. In the last six months, 17 members had experienced threatening behaviour while out of the office (Table 10).

Table 10: When was your most recent experience with threatening behaviour while out of the office?

	Number	Per cent
In the last month	6	10.2%
In the last 3 months	5	8.5%
In the last 6 months	6	10.2%
In the last year	3	5.1%
More than a year ago	37	62.7%
No response	2	3.4%
Total	59	100.0%

Members were asked to describe the threatening behaviour. As suggested by the data in Table 9, most often it involved being followed or approached by a customer. Where members lived near their work, particularly in non-metropolitan locations, there were reports of customers approaching them outside work with inquiries about their benefits.

In one instance a Centrelink client approached a member in her own backyard asking for advice. The member told the client to come into the office the following day since she didn't have her computer in front of her. Another member reported having inappropriate calls from a customer at home.

Other experiences included being verbally abused and intimidated by customers in the street, at restaurants and while shopping. For example, one member reported that a particular customer knew what time she left the office and ran at her from across the road to intimidate her.

Another staff member described a situation where a customer approached her in the supermarket, verbally abused her and demanded she pay for the customer's groceries. In another incident in a supermarket a customer ran a trolley at a CPSU member while the customer's child was sitting in the trolley. Yet another member described being followed to her car by a Centrelink customer who made comments of a sexual nature to her.

Some staff members told of very serious instances of physical assault and attempted assault. One reported that a customer recognised him in the local pub. The customer was drunk and tried to pick a fight. Another member was bashed by a customer in a pub and also reported that he had been assaulted by a customer on the way home from work.

One staff member was recognised by a client outside work who approached him and bit part of his ear off. Another had a customer approach him outside work and put him in a headlock. The customer scratched his face and injured his back and neck. The member stated that he no longer feels safe walking the streets.

Threats and Violence Outside Work - Summary

Not only do Centrelink workers face verbal abuse and physical assault while at work, they are also exposed to attacks outside the office where they are even more vulnerable.

Centrelink can take some important steps to protect workers outside the office.

These steps include ensuring that any incidents that occur while a Centrelink worker is travelling to and from work are covered by workers' compensation.

Centrelink should also provide assistance to workers who are threatened outside the office including help with any appropriate police action and the provision of security if necessary.

Witnessing Aggression at Work

While 63 of the 330 CPSU members interviewed about client aggression reported that they had not had a threatening experience involving a customer at work (Table 1), just 23 reported that they had not at the very least witnessed client aggression while at work⁶.

The type of aggression most often witnessed was verbal abuse and this was often accompanied by the customer becoming physically violent and throwing or breaking office furniture. Sadly, one member reported that witnessing aggression was so common that they couldn't remember details, while another said there were too many incidents to report all the details.

Some of the examples given by members of the customer aggression that they had witnessed included:

- Furniture being thrown at staff, windows being smashed. General verbal hostility from clients.
- One member reported that the front window of their office had been smashed and an aggressive customer verbally abused their team leader and office stamps were thrown, not at people but in anger.
- One member witnessed a customer smash a computer with a hammer.
- Another member reported seeing a customer throw a concrete pot at another staff member.

Other very serious incidents that were witnessed by Centrelink members included:

- A member being stabbed in the neck with a pen by a customer, just missing the main arteries in his neck.
- A siege where a manager was held in an office by a customer.
- A staff member was backed into a confined space and threatened. The police were called.
- Customers attacking the police who arrived to resolve an issue.
- A customer threatened to punch a staff member and showed a knife.
- A customer using pencils to attack a staff member in the eyes.
- Witnessing a customer throwing a computer at a colleague. The same staff member reported seeing a customer threaten to stab a colleague with a ball point pen.
- Chairs being thrown around the office by a customer who then jumped over the desk to attack a worker.
- A customer coming into the office with a sword.
- Customers kicking and breaking doors.
- Someone threatening he had hidden a bomb in the building.
- A colleague required stitches on their eyebrow after being hit with a mobile telephone. The customer was charged with assault.
- A customer hitting a staff member on the head with stick.

⁶ Customer aggression that was witnessed by Centrelink staff included verbal /physical threats to other staff or the abuse of office equipment and/or the actual office building.

The data in Table 11 shows that witnessing customer aggression is common in a Centrelink office. Forty per cent of all the 330 staff members contacted indicated that they had witnessed aggression at work in the last month and more than 63 per cent had witnessed an act of aggression by a Centrelink customer in the last six months. This suggests that significant numbers of Centrelink customers are also exposed to these acts of aggression while visiting a Centrelink office.

Table 11: When did you last witness threatening behaviour in your office?

	Number	Per cent
In the last month	131	42.7%
In the last 3 months	42	13.7%
In the last 6 months	36	11.7%
In the last year	27	8.8%
More than a year ago	65	21.2%
No response	6	2.0%
Total	307	100.0%

Members were asked whether witnessing customer aggression had an impact on them or made them worried (Table 12). Of those who reported being ‘not really’ affected or not affected by customer aggression, many were not involved in roles that required direct contact with customers. Others said that they were not affected because they were ‘used to it’ and ‘hardened’ to aggressive customers.

One staff member commented that this was because ‘I have been around for a long time. But I think they should have a security officer in the office at all time.’

Another stated that customer aggression ‘is part of the job and to be expected’. Yet another member stated that ‘it’s never nice but you get used to it’.

Numerous members reported concern not only for their own safety but also for the safety of other customers who happened to be exposed to the actions of an aggressive customer.

Table 12: Did witnessing client aggression make you worried or have an effect on you?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	80	55.2%
No	44	30.3%
Not really	21	14.5%
Total	145	100.0

Not all members answered this question. Percentages are of valid responses.

Eighty members reported being directly affected by witnessing customer aggression. They reported feeling anxious, distressed, having an increased heart rate, shaking, nervousness, feeling tense, and feeling stressed. Comments from members included:

- I am definitely worried, particularly at times when there are skeleton staff who are all women.
- Absolutely, it is scary for customers as well as staff.
- Of course I am worried... Next time it might be me!
- Yes, particularly for the security of other customers. It could escalate to something else.
- The aggression is disturbing to witness, interferes with work and concerns customers.
- I think that it is only a matter time before something serious occurs.
- I try not to let it worry me because it happens so frequently. I live in a small town and constantly avoid eye contact in case someone recognises me.

Witnessing Customer Aggression - Summary

The evidence provided by CPSU members suggest that acts of customer aggression are common in Centrelink offices.

While the aggression might not be aimed at the member, witnessing aggression has a significant impact on the health of Centrelink workers and on the wellbeing of Centrelink customers.

Management support

During the conduct of the first survey, several members discussed management responses to customer aggression at their workplace. Some suggested that local Centrelink managers were proactive in dealing with aggressive customers and this limited the level of aggression experienced in their office.

These management responses required further investigation and a second survey was conducted of the 330 members who answered the original questionnaire. Ninety four members were asked about the support they got from local and senior Centrelink management and about any practical steps that could be taken to reduce aggression and to assist staff who were victims of customer aggression.

Local Management

Seventy nine members (84 per cent) reported that they got enough support from their direct manager (that is, management based at their CSC) in dealing with customer aggression (Table 13).

Table 13: Do you get enough support from local Centrelink management in regards to dealing with customer aggression?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	79	84.0%
No	15	16.0%
Total	94	100.0%

Those who worked in a customer contact role and who said management was supportive used words such as 'accessible', 'helpful', and 'watchful' to describe their direct manager. Some of the specific comments from members included:

- 'Management and staff closely follow 'Local Response Guidelines', and staff and management are a small and close unit'.
- 'Management and staff look after each other and debrief. This office has its own response guide that has come about by trial and co-operation; this is in addition to the official local response guide'.
- 'The new manager and team leader have adopted their own Zero Tolerance policy. Local management are receptive to staff suggestions and have demanded security guards'.
- 'Management encourages staff to use the duress alarm and are very available to staff'.
- 'Very approachable management; they are very vigilant and enforce policies'.
- 'Local management is very in tune with people and staff have faith in her'.

Of the fifteen who said that management was not supportive, the most common complaint was a perception that local management supported the customer rather than the staff member. Comments included 'I don't believe the client should get preferential treatment by the Team Leader which is often the case'; 'It seems management are more worried about customers than staff'; and 'In the past, management has been more concerned with the customer than the worker. Sometimes it depends on the manager'.

Other concerns about local management included:

- 'Management changes frequently in terms of turnover and each manages in a different manner causing inconsistencies. Follow-up response is poor, immediate response is okay'.
- 'Once a ruckus begins, managers reluctantly support staff and do not enforce rules'.
- 'Management attitude is one of get over the incident within ten minutes and they play down seriousness of incidents so it doesn't reflect badly on office stats'.

Senior Management

CPSU members were asked about the support they received from senior Centrelink management in relation to customer aggression. Just one third of respondents (31 people) said that they got enough support from senior management (Table 14).

Table 14: Do you get enough support from senior Centrelink management in regards to dealing with customer aggression?

	Number	Per cent
Yes	31	33.0%
No	37	39.4%
Don't know	26	27.7%
Total	94	100.0%

The experiences of members with senior management varied. Members generally felt that it was most appropriate to address customer aggression at the workplace, but that policies of senior management constrained the ability of local management to take appropriate action against aggressive customers.

Some members reported that senior management at Centrelink were uninvolved, had no idea of the realities of working in a CSC and were too removed to give proper support. A key criticism was that local managers were not given sufficient resources, particularly in terms of time, to be able to adequately assist a staff member who had been exposed to customer aggression. As at the local level, another criticism was that senior Centrelink management were perceived as assisting the customer more than the employee.

Several members reported that senior management were proactive and had become involved in dealing with customer aggression. One member reported that 'management organised a meeting with a counsellor, the business manager and victim of abuse to sit down and discuss particularly traumatic incidents. If management are satisfied that a client is a repeat offender they will be banned from that office for three months. If problem client approaches office during this time they will be prompted to leave. If this does not happen then the police are called and incident is dealt with'.

This approach reflects the national *Guidelines for Working with Customers with Difficult or Aggressive Behaviours* (the guidelines) which were implemented by Centrelink in February 2007. However, the Commonwealth Ombudsman, in a report released in August 2008⁷, confirms reports by CPSU members that the Centrelink policy was being inconsistently applied.

⁷ Commonwealth Ombudsman (2008) *Centrelink: Arrangements for the Withdrawal of Face-to-Face Contact with Customers*, Report 09/2008, August.

Possible Solutions

Support of Staff

CPSU members were asked what Centrelink management could do to better support them if they were victims of customer aggression. The most common response was to provide better access to counsellors (43 members made this suggestion).

Some staff members reported that management did not always encourage staff to access counselling. Others reported dissatisfaction with the current employee assistance service provider used by Centrelink because they felt that the provider did not adequately understand the nature of the customer aggression that Centrelink workers experience.

Twenty-four members reported that there was a need for Centrelink to improve the follow-up that occurred in the days following an incident and the same number reported that there was a need for workers who had been exposed to customer aggression to have the option to temporarily change roles.

Fourteen members suggested that there should be an option to change work locations – particularly where the customer aggression involved threats to the member outside work or threats that the member would be assaulted once they were outside the office.

Finally, eight members reported that Centrelink management needed to properly support a gradual return to work program where necessary.

Other suggestions from members included:

- Management must encourage staff to report all incidents and follow-up any reported incidents within an appropriate timeframe.
- Ensuring that staff are aware of available facilities and programs such as counselling and are encouraged to use these.
 - The current cap on the number of counselling sessions that are available to employees free of charge must be reviewed.
 - The times that the counselling service is available are to be reviewed.
 - Paid time away from work to attend counselling sessions must be granted without question.
- Staff is to be provided with time away from customer contact immediately following an incident and given an opportunity to debrief informally with a co-worker.
- There must be recognition that workers who witness customer aggression may also need support.
- Management must provide access to legal support if required.

Practical steps to help prevent customer aggression

CPSU members provided a number of suggestions of how management could reduce the incidence of customer aggression within Centrelink offices. These are detailed below.

Training

According to CPSU members, the most important step management could take would be to provide training both in how to deal with aggressive clients and in the policies and procedures of Centrelink (27 members).

Members suggested that training in how to deal with aggressive customers should include how to identify unacceptable behaviour and at what stage staff should seek assistance; how to deal with customers with a mental illness; how to deal with customers who are affected by drugs and/or alcohol; and how to deal with customers to diffuse a situation before it escalates. Both staff and managers are to be properly trained in dealing with aggressive customers and managers should have some experience in face-to-face customer service so that they understand the pressures facing Centrelink staff.

Members suggested that improved training was required in Centrelink systems and processes. Some instances of customer aggression were sparked by a customer becoming frustrated because information was lost or they had been told different things by different Centrelink staff. Better training would not only improve the service provided by Centrelink workers but also improve their confidence and eliminate the confrontation that currently arises because of incorrect information.

Zero Tolerance

Sixteen members suggested that a zero tolerance approach to aggression was required. A zero tolerance policy would need to be accompanied by the provision of information to customers about the level of behaviour that is expected in a Centrelink office and information about the consequences of aggressive behaviour (including that they could be banned from the office).

Changes to Policies and Procedures

Fifteen members suggested that there could be changes made to systems and procedures to help prevent incidents of customer aggression. Accompanying this procedural change must be cultural change to encourage the proper identification and reporting of incidents of aggression.

Reporting

The Commonwealth Ombudsman's Report of August 2008⁸ found that there was inadequate recording of instances of customer aggression. CPSU members confirmed this with comments including that management sometimes 'actively discouraged the lodgement of EP63 forms' – the forms which record incidents of customer aggression. It was suggested that cultural change was required in some CSCs so that staff were 'supported in their lodgement without the events downplayed'.

Another key procedural change suggested by members involves better recording of the details of customers who have previously been aggressive while in a Centrelink office or during a home visit. Staff must be warned if a customer has previously acted inappropriately.

Troublesome customers should be allocated to a particular manager to deal with by prior arrangement.

8 Commonwealth Ombudsman (2008) *Centrelink: Arrangements for the Withdrawal of Face-to-Face Contact with Customers*, Report 09/2008, August.

Staffing levels

- Some instances of customer aggression result from delays in being served. Extended opening hours at Centrelink offices without the requisite increase in staffing levels has meant that at times there are fewer staff in the office and longer delays.

Physical Security

- Installing CCTV in Centrelink offices to dissuade customers from acting aggressively and to assist in the prosecution of any assaults.
- Employing security guards at Centrelink offices. In the offices where security guards have been employed, CPSU members reported a noticeable difference in customer behaviour and that they felt more comfortable having a licensed guard deal with bad behaviour.
- Forming better relationships with local police to improve attendance times and so that staff are informed of developments in the local area

Removing Open Plan Layout

- Reconsideration of the current open plan office layout:
 - Some workers currently work with their back to customers and feel vulnerable
 - Open plan layout can facilitate confrontation.
 - Open plan layout limits customer privacy.

Conclusion

It is clear from the suggestions above that a key cause of some customer aggression is a lack of funding. This includes insufficient funding for:

- training.
- security initiatives such as security guards and CCTV.
- adequate staffing levels.
- conversion of open-plan offices to a more suitable layout that protects staff and customers.

Centrelink does have policy in relation to this issue, such as the *Guidelines for Working with Customers with Difficult or Aggressive Behaviours*. However, it is clear from the stories in this report, Centrelink's current policies have not been effective in limiting instances of aggressive behaviour. As one staff member noted 'staff are suffering the consequences of Centrelink not enforcing policies and safety procedures'.

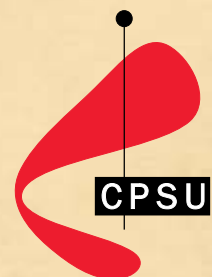
Given that the Ombudsman has confirmed Centrelink's current guidelines are not working, consideration must be given to legislating to better protect the health and safety of Centrelink workers and Centrelink customers.

Unless something is done now to address the issues raised in this Report, abuse and serious assaults of staff will continue and it may only be a matter of time until there is a fatality.

Key Recommendations

The key recommendations arising from this report are:

- There needs to be immediate acknowledgement from Centrelink that customer aggression is a very serious and substantial problem.
- Centrelink, in consultation and co-operation with its staff and the CPSU, must take immediate action to make offices safer.
- There must be more and better training for staff in how to deal with aggressive customers.
- Centrelink must ensure adequate staffing levels in Centrelink offices to minimise frustration and aggression caused by long delays.
- There must be better support and follow-up care for staff who have been subject to or witnessed aggressive behaviour from customers.
- There must be an independent review of the open plan office design with the results of the review shared with the CPSU and Welfare Rights groups and consultation over any proposed resolution.
- Every Centrelink office must be provided with a permanent security officer.
- Bad behaviour by customers should not be rewarded by quicker or more favourable service.
- There should be zero tolerance by Centrelink of aggressive behaviour by customers. Aggressive customers should be asked to leave the office and, if necessary, banned outright from attending the office.
- Centrelink needs to conduct immediate reviews of work practices and risk assessment processes at the national and the workplace level involving both staff and the CPSU.



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