

# Sum thing's not right

## Aid cash bungle hits thousands

**EXCLUSIVE**

**Julie Cross**

Thousands of Australians on income support payments have been either under or overpaid, with the public kept in the dark over the bungle.

A confidential government brief obtained under Freedom of Information laws reveals 11,000 people were affected by the welfare agency's tech glitch, with more than 7000 yet to be contacted.

Services Australia has come under fire for its dire performance in the past year, with angry customers taking to Facebook to complain about being kept on hold for up to

five hours, or making up to 120 calls a week and not being able to get through. Staff morale is at rock bottom, with a strike held last month over pay, and about 180 quitting a month.

The latest scandal was uncovered by the Opposition after it requested a copy of Minister Bill Shorten's Question Time brief.

It revealed thousands of Australians may have received incorrect rates of payment because customers had their superannuation incorrectly excluded from the income and

assets tests assessment upon reaching Age Pension age.

Services Australia general manager Hank Jongen said the agency had reviewed pay-

ment records of approximately 3800 Age Pensioners whose rate may have been wrongly calculated due to a system error. The error was fixed in December 2022.

He said they were still checking the remaining 7100 customer records to ensure they were being paid the right amount.

"No one will need to repay any money as a result of this issue," Mr Jongen said.

"We sincerely apologise for any confusion or distress it's caused our customers."

He said a team of specialised staff was contacting affected customers to explain the issue, make necessary changes to their payments and provide any additional support.

For some people who have been reassessed, their future payment rates have changed if it was found their actual income and assets were above the minimum Age Pension

threshold. For each of the 3800 cases assessed to date, overpayments were waived.

Opposition government services spokesman Paul Fletcher said the minister must apologise to affected Australians and be honest with the public about what happened.

"It's deeply disappointing and concerning that it took a

Freedom of Information request to find out about this processing disaster," Mr Fletcher said.

"What we've seen is Bill Shorten avoiding transparency and instead sweeping the problem under the carpet because his agency is in disarray."