

Centrelink

GETTING STARTED



5

This is Booklet 5 in the Getting Started Series.

**Getting Started is a guide
for people leaving prison.**

Booklets

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This Booklet was last updated in September 2010. If any information has changed or you notice an error please contact Corrections Victoria on (03) 8684 6600 or email: corrections@justice.vic.gov.au

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What is Centrelink?

Centrelink is an Australian Government agency that delivers a range of services to the community.

Centrelink can help you if you are:

- Looking for work
- Sick or have a medical condition
- Planning to study
- A parent or caring for someone
- Ready to retire

What payments can I get when I'm released?

There are many different payments you may be entitled to. The most common payments are:

- Newstart Allowance
- Parenting Payment
- Disability Support Pension
- Age Pension

For more details about the types of payments ask the programs staff for the Guide to Australian Government Payments.

Crisis Payments

A Crisis Payment is a one-off payment. It will be up to half your basic amount. The basic amount is what you get each fortnight before extras like rent assistance are added on.

To be eligible for a Crisis Payment you must:

- Have been locked up for 14 days or more (including time in police cells)
- Claim within 7 days of being released
- Be entitled to a Centrelink pension or benefit, and
- Be in 'severe financial hardship' (this means having less money in your account than your fortnightly pension or benefit)

It can be paid into your bank account or given to you on an **Electronic Benefit Transfer card**.

An EBT card can be used to get cash from most ATMs. EBT cards can only be used once so all money must be withdrawn the first time the card is used.

ATMs with a cashcard symbol accept the card but so do some other ATMs.

You will be told that you will be charged \$2.00 for the transaction. The \$2.00 won't come out of your Centrelink payment.

Hardship Advance Payments

You may be able to get some of your first payment in advance.

This is called a 'Hardship Advance'. It won't include add-ons such as Rent Assistance or Pharmaceutical Allowance.

If you are paid a hardship advance, it will be taken out of your first payment. You will then need to live off a smaller first payment for up to 14 days.

You may need help to get through this period. Material aid services might be useful

See Getting Start B: Material Aid.

Centrelink staff can also refer you to local support agencies.

When will I get paid?

If you are eligible, you should get paid your Crisis Payment and/or Hardship Advance on the day you get out.

Your Centrelink “Release Pack” may include your EBT card, a ‘temporary’ Health Care Card and other information relevant for you.

HOW DO I GET ON CENTRELINK?

Before you get out:

Centrelink workers visit all the prisons in Victoria. The workers are called **Prison Liaison Officers** (PLOs). The PLO can give you information about what payments, services and programs are available.

You should see a Centrelink worker 2 - 3 weeks before your release date. Make an appointment through the TAP Coordinator.

If you don't have enough ID you can still claim a day of release payment. Ask Centrelink about what ID you will need to stay on Centrelink and when you will need to show them.

After you get out

If you haven't seen Centrelink before you get out, go to a Centrelink office as soon as possible.

Try to get there on the same day you are released. If you can't make it to an office you should at least call Centrelink on **131 021**. Your payments will normally be backdated to the first day you make contact.

To be eligible for a Crisis Payment, you need to apply within 7 days of release. You also need to have been in custody for at least 14 days.

Centrelink will need to check your release, the length of time you have been in custody and verify who you are.

When you are released from prison or court, you will get a discharge form. It is very important you keep this form and take it to Centrelink. If you lose the form or do not have one, this may delay your payments.

Centrelink may also be able to provide you with a temporary Health Care Card.

Staying on Centrelink

To stay on Centrelink you will have to meet a number of requirements.

You will need to attend any meetings they ask you to and provide them with information about yourself and your family.

You will also need to fill in all the forms that Centrelink send and return them on time. If you don't understand something they have sent, take it to a Centrelink Office and ask for help to fill it in.

What you need to do will depend on your payment type. If you are on certain payments you will need to hand in specific forms and prove you are doing things like looking for work.

You may be eligible for some exemptions, but you will have to ask.

Centrelink may classify you into one of four categories depending on your circumstances. These categories are known as 'Streams'

and there are 4 Streams. Your job hunting requirements and other activities will depend on what 'Stream' you are in. If you are not already on '**Stream 4**', check if you are eligible. On 'Stream 4' you will get more support to find work and there will be fewer expectations.

Check with Centrelink about your other requirements and put the key dates in a calendar.

Tell Centrelink and your Job Services Australia Provider as soon as possible if you:

- Cannot make it to an appointment
- Change address
- If you are unable to lodge a form
- If you are unable to do the activities in your Employment Pathway Plan
- Start or finish work

If you deliberately provide Centrelink with false information you may be penalised or even prosecuted.

Avoiding Centrelink debts

Centrelink debts can happen for a few reasons. They may have kept paying you after you got locked up or they may have paid you extra by mistake. Often people are overpaid because they have not told Centrelink about a change in their circumstances.

The best way to avoid debt is to tell them early about any change that might affect your payments.

You should tell Centrelink if:

- You or your partner start or stop work, or your hours change
- You change your address or the amount of rent you pay changes
- If you marry, start living in a marriage-like relationship or separate
- If children leave or come into your care

Repaying a Debt

If you have a Centrelink debt, you can talk to Centrelink about how to repay it. If you don't talk

to them, they will decide how much to subtract from your fortnightly payments.

You can also ask for your debt repayments to be delayed for 28 days after you get out.

You should contact them after the 28 days to arrange the repayment amount that suits you. Ask them what the minimum amount is.

Dealing with Centrelink

Centrelink are open from Monday-Friday. Centrelink offices can be busy places with lots of people. If you need to go to an office, get there as early in the day as possible.

If you have difficulty with Centrelink staff, try to stay calm. If you think they are treating you unfairly it is better to ask to see someone else than to get angry.

If something isn't clear keep asking questions. Often, the problem is miscommunication.

If you are having difficulties with the worker at the counter you can also ask to speak to a social worker.

Most Centrelink offices have social workers on site.

You can speak to a social worker over the phone, or make an appointment to see one at a Centrelink office.

To make an appointment phone **Centrelink** on **13 1794**.

Appealing a Decision

If you think Centrelink has made a wrong decision, you can ask for it to be reviewed. This means Centrelink will look at the decision again. You should talk to a Centrelink officer as soon as possible because time limits apply.

If you have a complaint you can call the **Customer Relations** line on FreeCALL™ **1800 050 004**

If you feel you need further advice and assistance with Centrelink contact:

Social Security Rights Victoria

They help people to deal with agencies, like Centrelink.

Melbourne **(03) 9416 1111** or **1800 094 164**

Geelong **(03) 5221 4744** or **1800 094 164**

(country callers)

Job Capacity Assessments

If you are going to find it hard to get work and you are applying for certain payments, Centrelink may ask you to do a Job Capacity Assessment.

This appointment will measure your ability to work. They will take your individual situation into account. They will ask about your health and other issues that may make it difficult for you to find or keep a job.

Take any medical information that affects your ability to work.

The worker will also talk about different employment and related services. They may refer you to one that suits you.

Job Services Australia Provider

If you are referred to a Job Services Australia Provider you may be asked to sign an Employment Pathway Plan.

The Plan will include activities such as:

- Studying
- Training
- Applying for jobs
- Going to job interviews
- Keeping appointments with your Job Services Australia Provider

If you are on Parole you should tell the worker making the assessment. They may be able to take this into account with your Employment Pathway Plan.

OTHER CENTRELINK SERVICES

Rent Assistance

If you pay private rent you may be able to get Rent Assistance.

Ask your Centrelink worker how much you are eligible for.

Helping to pay bills

Centrepay is a free bill-paying service.

Regular amounts can be taken directly from your Centrelink payments and used to pay bills such as rent, electricity, gas and telephone.

It can be set up or cancelled at any time.

Referrals

Centrelink can refer you to agencies for the following:

- Accommodation
- Food assistance
- Community support
- Tax File Number

Centrelink can help you get your Tax File Number from the Australian Tax Office.

Centrelink Services and Payments	Telephone Numbers
Abstudy	13 2317
Australian Apprentices	13 3633
Disability, Sickness & Carers	13 2717
Employment Services	13 2850
Family Assistance Office	13 6150
Indigenous Call Centre	13 6380
Multilingual Call	13 1202
Youth & Student Services	13 2490
Seniors	13 2300

You cannot call these numbers from prison. If you need any assistance while still inside ask to speak to the Centrelink Prison Liaison Officer.

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