



Australian Government
**Department of Education,
Skills and Employment**

**Deputy Secretary
Nathan Smyth**

Dear Chief Executive Officer

COVID-19 – Gradual Return to Mutual Obligation Requirements

Today, Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash, Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business and Senator the Hon Anne Ruston, Minister for Families and Social Services, announced that from 28 September 2020, a further phase in the return of mutual obligation requirements will be introduced.

The Government is committed to ensuring the mutual obligation settings are flexible and appropriate and has taken a phased approach to the re-introduction of mutual obligations to support job seekers through COVID-19. The re-introduction of mutual obligation requirements remains subject to health advice, physical distancing requirements and biosecurity measures. Mutual obligation arrangements will remain suspended in Victoria during the COVID-19 lockdown period. These arrangements will be adjusted when advice from Victorian authorities indicates it is appropriate to do so.

From 28 September 2020, job seekers will be required to participate in appointments with an employment services provider, agree to their Job Plan, undertake eight job searches a month, attend agreed activities (where it is safe to do so), and accept any offer of suitable work. Work for the Dole will resume where activities are available, it is safe to participate and all health and safety requirements are met.

Job seekers will now have the option to opt in for face-to-face servicing, in addition to the alternative servicing methods (over the phone, online, by video conferencing) currently available. The option to opt in for face-to-face servicing is designed to provide job seekers and providers with the flexibility to adapt servicing to the job seeker's personal circumstances and preference. These requirements are further detailed in the Department's new *Direction on return to Face-to-Face Service Delivery* to take effect from 28 September 2020. More information on the flexible ways that services can be delivered across all programs will also be available on the provider portal.

As you work with job seekers to enter into or update their Job Plans, please ensure that Job Plans are tailored and appropriate to a job seeker's personal circumstances. We want your frontline staff to exercise flexibility and diligence when tailoring Job Plans to a job seeker's circumstances and local labour market conditions to ensure any requirements being set are achievable. The department will continue to monitor the appropriateness of Job Plans to ensure they are tailored and suitable.

The changes to JobKeeper Payment, will mean that some job seekers on your caseload will be concurrently receiving JobKeeper Payment and JobSeeker Payment. Job seekers in receipt of both payments will have mutual obligation requirements. We request that your organisation be flexible and ensure the job seeker's Job Plan reflects their circumstances, including existing work arrangements, consistent with the arrangements for other job seekers in receipt of income support payments who are undertaking part-time work.

When entering into and updating Job Plans, and when assessing whether there is a valid reason for a mutual obligation failure, we want you to take into account the impact of COVID-19 on job seekers including to their health. This includes considering any specific impacts to the job seeker's personal circumstances (such as if they have lost loved ones or have loved ones who are sick), the impact on the local labour market and the availability of jobs and activities in the local area.

We also request your organisation advise job seekers affected by COVID-19 on the possibility of seeking an exemption from their mutual obligation requirements from Services Australia, and to proactively support them in doing so. We ask that you refer job seekers who would benefit from further support, including mental health services, to other programs and services provided by government and community services. The Employment Fund can be utilised for this purpose.

The Government is also increasing opportunities for job seekers to train and upskill by providing additional flexibility for job seekers to count education and training towards their mutual obligation requirements. This will encourage job seekers to undertake eligible courses that are under 12 months in duration and provide skills that are in demand. This includes courses subsidised by each state/territory's vocational education and training system and those funded through the Government's JobTrainer program. I will write to you separately about this shortly.

To ensure job seekers understand their mutual obligations requirements prior to 28 September 2020, the department will distribute a suite of communication material via website updates, SMS, email and inbox communications. For more information about this phase of the gradual return of mutual obligations, please visit <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/job-seekers>

The Government continues to monitor and respond to the COVID-19 situation and any further mutual obligation requirement changes will be informed by advice from health authorities and the status of the Australian labour market.

I will be hosting a CEO livestream about these changes at 2pm on Tuesday 22 September 2020. You can also contact your Account or Contract Manager if you have any questions.

I would like to thank you for the work you have done to date to support job seekers during COVID-19.

Yours sincerely



Nathan Smyth

18 September 2020