*I want to emphasise this is a general view of the APS, not a criticism of any particular agency. Unfortunately, my employment with a well-known APS agency could reframe this submission as a criticism of this agency. For this reason, this is an anonymous submission.*

**APS agencies aim to provide ‘barely sufficient’ services. Because of pressures on the APS, this provides the best balance between meeting our responsibilities and being as efficient as possible.   
Unfortunately, it’s the worst possible position to place staff in – battling to help desperate and frustrated people who need your services, knowing it could be easier (and suspecting your pain and customer pain is by design).**

Unlike companies who need to compete for customers, agencies are assigned sections of the community. These assigned customers have no value because funding is not tied to keeping them as customers. Instead, effectiveness and efficiency is based on providing the least amount of service possible to only the most persistent. The only criteria working in the other direction is whether the agency is perceived as incompetent.

The best way I can describe this is aiming for ‘barely sufficient’. Services are provided sufficiently well to justify continued funding, but just barely.

As a practical example of this, if customers drop out of the process or refuse to even engage with an agency, their absence is poorly quantified. This leads to their efficiency being artificially improved. “Look at how our call volumes have dropped. And look at how few delays we have processing applications. We must be doing something right!”

Customers in crisis (such as fleeing domestic violence or struggling with mental health issues) and from vulnerable communities (such as refugee communities with poor English literacy or seniors with poor digital literacy) are the worst affected by added complexity and frustration. To use complexity and frustration to trim down customer numbers is not effective in providing services to those who need it most. This has flow-on effects to communities and to other agencies as customers do not get what they need and communities feel the impact.

Needed services are needed specifically to avoid negative outcomes for communities that then require action by another agency.

I think all APS agencies contain rumours that services can’t be provided too efficiently, processes can’t be too easy, information can’t be presented too clearly. To do this would encourage more customers to contact us. This would then blow out budgets and upset bosses (who worry about upsetting elected officials). But these rumours are only a symptom of the dissatisfaction of staff at the status quo.

The APS of the 21st century cannot continue to aim for ‘barely sufficient’ and cannot be rewarded for trimming down our customer base when we are here to provide essential services.

In short, agencies need clear guidance from the government to aim higher and permission to advocate for better outcomes for their customers.

Bipartisan support (I know, I’m aiming high here) is required to give agencies permission, openly and in action, to provide effective and efficient service, and to fund agencies to provide this service. Agencies also need feedback mechanisms to government to push back on needless complexity aimed at reducing customer claims.

If the public needs a service, it should be provided in a minimally complex way. Need should be clearly defined and should not be limited by access issues. If too many people are claiming essential services, this issue should be looked at, then well-considered action taken. Not just making claiming harder.

Finally, with so much data now available, we can determine (with reasonable accuracy) how many people need our services. We can use this to judge success of agencies – what percentage of customers that need services are actually getting them.

**Summary**

* If a service is essential, it is likely to be essential to improve the community and avoid a negative result.   
  (An example of this is Medicare making medicines cheaper for concession card holders. This encourages proper use of medicine, even when money is tight. This, in turn, stops medical problems becoming worse and more expensive.)
* So, logically, not providing essential services increases negative results.
* These negative results affect individuals and communities, which (after much pain) then need handling by other agencies.
* We have access to more data than ever before. It is now possible to determine how many people are eligible for an essential service.
* Agencies should be openly encouraged, and have their funding based on, providing these essential services to an appropriately high percentage of eligible customers.
* This will provide
  + the best staff motivation
  + the best individual and community outcomes, and
  + the most efficient use of government money when considering broader funding.