Speed vital to ‘stolen wages’ class payouts

EXCLUSIVE

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The administrator of a $190m “stolen wages” class action says he is working as swiftly as possible to distribute the landmark settlement to thousands of elderly indigenous people before it is too late.

Cairns-based Grant Thornton partners Anthony Beven and Tony Jonsson have the mammoth task of doling out Australia’s fifth-largest class-action payout to nearly 20,000 indigenous people across Queensland.

Federal Court judge Bernard Murphy signed off on the Queensland government’s settlement late last year, recognising thousands of indigenous workers effectively forced to work as slaves or for meagre wages between 1939 and 1972.

It is estimated 12,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland were employed under the regime, but 70 per cent of those have died, leaving their spouses or children to claim for them.

Mr Beven told The Australian he recognised that many of the claimants were ageing, making it essential the money was distributed as quickly as possible. “The remaining 30 per cent (of claimants who are still alive) are elderly, given when this practice occurred, so we’re fully cognisant of the need to have this scheme administered and ... resolved as quickly as possible, so we can get the funds to affected people as quickly as possible,” he said.

“There’s tight time frames to ensure this process isn’t going to take years (but) months to have the compensation delivered.”

Once the appeal period ends on March 6, the administrators will have six months to calculate each claimant’s compensation, based on whether the worker is alive or dead, their date of birth, race and gender.

The Queensland government ran a limited reparations scheme that paid some compensation to about 10,000 people from 2002 until 2018. Mr Beven said to cut down on the enormous amount of work, the administrators would pay out those who had already been verified by the government.

New claims would be run through fraud-detecting software to ensure fakes were weeded out.

Estelle Sandow, who was treated as a slave in the Cherbourg dormitory from age five to 14, and is now in her 60s, said she hoped compensation would be delivered quickly.

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