

Public Trustee unit accused of 'chewing up' estate funds:

The Sunday Mail (Qld) November 01, 2015 12:00AM

STAFF at a unit that searches for heirs of the deceased were encouraged to "chew up" the estates by overcharging for research, an employee has claimed in an official complaint.

The Public Trustee unit, which denies the allegations, is raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year by billing deceased estates for tracing beneficiaries in complex cases in which the deceased did not make a will.

GONE BEGGING: Unclaimed estates top \$20m

The Intestacy Entitlement Unit has 220 investigations under way, **including cold cases from the state's \$21 million trove of unclaimed deceased estates.**

But documents obtained by *The Sunday Mail* reveal the unit's five staff were given "no significant resources" to track people down, **despite charging \$228 an hour for research.**

The unit's genealogists were at one point barred from searching the electoral roll online, initially had social media sites blocked on their work computers and were forced to pay for subscriptions to genealogy sites from their own pocket after waiting years for work accounts to be set up.

Staff relied on private genealogy site subscriptions as late as 2013 and in mid-2012 were told they must stop searching the state electoral roll online.

One genealogist repeatedly emailed his superiors pushing for basic resources. His contract was not renewed at the end of last year.

The employee, who asked not to be named, made an official complaint about "**systemic overcharging**" of fees early last year.

How to sell a deceased estate

An investigator was also looking into other workplace issues in the unit, separate to an investigation into alleged overcharging.

"What was happening was that the (unit) was going completely off the rails with the point (being) that we needed to chew up estates, push these things through," he told the investigator. "(Number) one is to make a lot of money out of every estate that you have been given and, secondly, if there is not nearly enough money left, well, let's chew it up anyway."

The employee was still to be told of an outcome as of last week.

But Public Trustee client services executive director Tony Steinmetz (left) denied staff were overcharging, saying it had a "**duty to make all efforts to locate beneficiaries**", including in small estates.

He said staff had "appropriate computers, software and access to the internet".

"The Public Trustee only charges fees that are reasonable and second, the Public Trustee has a clear system to ensure that fees are not overcharged," he said.

