

12th February 2008

The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Employment Participation
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister O'Connor,

Re: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

I write in response to your letter requesting feedback on how employment services can be improved.

Introduction

Psychiatric Disability Services of Victoria (VICSERV) is the peak body for Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation Support Services (PDRSS) in Victoria. We represent over 80 member organisations and some 200 services, providing sector support, co-ordination and advocacy, training and professional development, policy and information services.

PDRS services provide support and rehabilitation to people with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and serious depression. Employment of people with psychiatric disability is a key issue for our member agencies and the people they work with. The sector is well aware of the lack of workforce participation in Australia by people with a mental health problem and the concerning lack of social inclusion that this indicates. These rates of unemployment are not only very high in relation to the rest of the Australian population, but are also higher than equivalent rates for people with other types of disability. People with mental illness often want to work and research from the USA demonstrates that when appropriate support is provided, people with mental illness are successful in obtaining open employment.

This response has been developed through consultation with the PDRSS sector, including several PAGES which are VICSERV members. The common criticism of the current PAGES system is that it does not take into account some of the unique features of psychiatric disability and, as a result, unintentionally contributes to the barriers that people experience in obtaining and retaining employment. This document will describe how this occurs and provide recommendations for improvement.



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Features of psychiatric disability and implications for employment support services.

Although other health conditions and disabilities may exhibit these features, for people with mental health problems, they combine in particularly profound ways.

Mental illness is episodic

People's mental illness often fluctuates over time. Although research shows that there is no direct correlation between symptoms and work functioning, fluctuating mental illness makes it easy for service providers, employers and assessors to under estimate a person's support needs when they are well. Having an episodic illness which has stigma attached then creates a dilemma: do I disclose to my employer when I am well that I have a mental illness and risk discrimination, or do I only disclose when I am becoming unwell when it may be too late to receive the necessary support and understanding? For someone with a mental illness episodic illness, there will always be a concern that they could become unwell and lose their job, particularly if their employer is not well informed about their condition. If losing a job means not only loss of income but also difficulty in accessing benefits, then the fear of becoming unwell creates a profound disincentive to 'risk' seeking a job, even if that person is highly motivated to do so. Any assessment process applied to assist people with mental illness must be done by people trained in mental illness and take into account this episodic nature. Skilled assessment also considers the effects of medication and changes in treatment plans.

Employment retention is often a bigger problem for people with mental illness than actually getting a job. Employment support service design and reporting structures need to reflect this. The current welfare to work system adds to the risks in taking employment by linking Centrelink benefits to assessed work capacity. If you have an episodic illness and you lose your job, you may be punished financially.

Mental illness is often ongoing

Psychotic illnesses can usually be managed with appropriate supports and treatment. There is no 'cure' as such even though someone may go through lengthy periods when their symptoms do not adversely affect the way they present. This means that many people with mental illness will need ongoing support to remain at work and some will only ever be able to work part time. This contrasts with the situations of people with physical illnesses and/or other disability types.



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Employment support services need to reflect the long-term nature of mental illness and their effectiveness be measured accordingly. Current time restrictions on services to place clients in employment and the income support system run counter to this need for continuity.

Stigma

Stigma of mental illness exists throughout our society and leads to many examples of discrimination and misunderstanding. For example, many employers will mistakenly see people with a mental illness as being unfit for work or dangerous. The majority of people (80%) with a mental illness in employment choose not to disclose their illness to their employer. The current employment support system places the onus on people to disclose their mental illness if they are to receive the necessary support even though society has often taught them that it is too risky to disclose this information.

Mental illness affects educational and professional development

Many people develop mental illness in late adolescence and early adulthood. This coincides with the period when most people receive the bulk of their education, qualifications and formative employment experience. What this means is that many people with a mental illness have missed out on these prerequisites to employment and there is enormous variation in employment skills amongst people with psychiatric disability. This is a markedly different situation to that of people with, say, intellectual disabilities. Lack of education is a more accurate predictor of unemployment than having a mental illness. Employment support systems must be able to work with the education system and cater for variations in client skills and abilities.

Importance of Choice

Research about employment for people with mental health problems shows that if service eligibility is based on client choice, then successful employment outcomes are more likely. The current system does not maximise client choice. Indeed, the Job Capacity Assessment (JCA) process determines which service type the client is referred to, what his/her obligations are and which Centrelink payments are payable.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That any assessments related to referral for employment supports, such as the JCA, are independent of any income assessment processes. The current system has built in financial disincentives for people to seek employment, particularly if they have a stigmatised episodic illness.
2. That any occupational assessment of people with mental illness be only undertaken by professionals with occupational health and mental health qualifications and training.
3. That supports and services for people with mental health problems are designed to reflect the ongoing and episodic nature of those problems.
4. That all PAGES which work with people with psychiatric disability are subject to formal Disability Service Standards. Currently, Disability Employment Networks must conform to these standards, but once someone is assessed as requiring support from a Job Network, the service is not assessed against these standards.
5. That an employer providing work to a person with a disability supported by a DEN should receive at least the same level of financial incentive as if that employee was supported by a Job Network.
6. That more capped DEN places are made available for people with mental health problems.
7. That employment support services for people with psychiatric disability are delivered by services with proven expertise in that area.

I look forward to hearing of the outcomes of this consultation process and working with your Department to resolve these issues on behalf of people with a psychiatric disability.

Yours Sincerely,

Michael Cassar
Chief Executive Officer



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