

Submission to The Hon Brendan O'Connor Minister for Employment Participation

Although the current employment services system has assisted many people back in to work there are a number of populations facing barriers to work who need more specific support than is generally provided. The additional support can include particular modifications to the workplace as well as appropriate assistance from support services.

People with a psychiatric disability face many barriers and are among the most disadvantaged in the labour market, globally and in Australia (Waghorn & Lloyd, 2005). Both illness related challenges and systemic barriers mitigate against successful vocational outcomes for this population. One of the barriers faced is the stigma associated with mental illness. Creating mainstream workplaces in which employees with a mental illness can talk about their support needs without fear of stigma is critical to supporting this population back to work. Disclosure enables the appropriate on and off site support to be provided with modifications to the workplace and job description made where necessary.

Social firms are a model of employment which specifically addresses these challenges. They are not-for-profit businesses which dedicate up to 50% of positions to people with a disability. Any modifications required for the employee in need of support are built into the design of the workplace. The model is in widespread use throughout Europe and is being introduced to Australia by Social Firms Australia (SoFA) in partnership with Social Ventures Australia (SVA).

SoFA is a not-for-profit organisation committed to improving the quality of life as well as the social and economic integration of Australians living with a disability, particularly people with a psychiatric disability. This is being achieved by creating accessible employment opportunities through the establishment of social firms.

A social firm has a supportive, commercially-viable work environment that:

- Employs between 25% and 50% of employees with a disability.
- Pays all workers at award/ productivity-based rates.
- Provides the same work opportunities, rights and obligations to all employees.
- Generates the majority of its income through the commercial activity of the business

Support for the ongoing establishment of these accessible workplaces enables many people excluded from the workplace to get and keep a job.

SoFA therefore strongly urges the Rudd Labor Government to support establishment of social firms as a strategy to promote employment of disabled and marginalised Australians who wish to work, but currently find it difficult to enter the workforce.

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