

13/2/08

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

Dear Mr O'Connor,

I refer to your letter of invitation for feedback on how employment services can be improved, 8 January 2008. Firstly I would like to advise that Open Minds supports National Disability Services 'Future Directions for Employment Services' (June 2007) and 'Policy and Funding Proposals for the New Government' (January 2008) submissions.

Open Minds is a not for profit and charitable organisation providing community based support services to persons with mental illness, intellectual disability or acquired brain injury. Based in Woolloongabba; Brisbane, the organisation (formerly known as the Queensland Wattle League) has been supporting the community since 1912. Open Minds Employment Services is a Disability Employment Network (DEN) and PSP Provider. Open Minds Employment Services are committed to upholding the rights of people with disabilities and mental illness to gain equitable access and opportunity to open employment within the community.

In my experience and on behalf of Open Minds the following issues represent areas of most direct interest. Several suggestions are offered in this submission pertaining to the effectiveness of employment programs and the Governments Social Inclusion and Skills Policies objectives.

Job Seeker Accounts

Currently, Job Network members have access to a Job Seeker Account that functions as a pool of funds for each client to meet critical employment-related needs such as training, uniform expenses, transport expenses, etc. These funds are particularly effective when there is a direct relationship between a client receiving funds to meet a specified employment-related need and the achievement of an employment outcome. These funds are not available to DEN and PSP participants, thereby denying these clients the same entitlements as other Australians accessing Job Network services. Job Seeker Accounts should be made available to all job seekers irrespective of their disability / mental illness to ensure equitable access to open employment opportunities in the community.

Wage Subsidies

Open Minds Employment recognises that many clients require a supportive workplace where training is made available in order to perform their normal duties. In some cases, supportive employers offer additional training to clients with specific support needs in accordance with their abilities and limitations. In order to foster effective and supportive working relationships with employers, Open Minds Employment seeks to recognise the efforts of employers who offer training support to clients at all stages of employment.

Wage subsidies are currently only available for new job vacancies. Clients in employment can only access a wage subsidy if they change roles completely and a new vacancy is available with the same employer. It is recommended that the wage subsidy program be expanded in terms of eligibility requirements to encompass workers in employment, without the requirement to change roles.

DEN wage subsidy guidelines and the administration for new applications should be simplified. It is also recommended that the wage subsidy amounts be reviewed to improve the competitiveness of people with a disability in the labour market.

Training Incentives

(In previous comment on jobseeker account it was recommended that JSKA funds be made available to DEN and PSP clients.)

Current schemes such as Work Skills Vouchers only reach the level of Certificate II which in some cases is too low to meet required skill levels of employers. Additionally, DEN and PSP clients with Certificate II or higher level qualifications are not eligible for the scheme despite needing to update their skills and qualifications as a direct result of their disability or mental illness.

Government funded 'Access' courses are not equally accessible to all jobseekers, in particular PSP clients.

It is recommended that training initiatives and incentives be reviewed and expanded to increase access to training opportunities for DEN and PSP clients, thereby enhancing access to open employment opportunities.

Job Capacity Assessment incorporating DSP review

Every client referred through a JCA must undergo a mandatory review of their Disability Support Pension (DSP) in order to receive DEN services. Many potential Open Minds DEN clients choose to avoid the JCA process for many reasons; in particular the risk of the Job Capacity Assessor failing to capture their support needs accurately with the consequence of losing their DSP. It is recommended that the review of the DSP be eliminated from this process altogether and conducted according to separate timeframes in accordance with earlier Centrelink guidelines.

Streamlining Administration

The current level of administration required by DEEWR for DEN members is excessive, time-consuming, and expensive. In particular, DEEWR evidence guidelines require DEN members to gather extensive documentation from clients which can occupy significant contact time with clients, detracting from actual client service delivery. Thus, much client contact time is spent in ensuring DEEWR funding guidelines and documentation requirements are fulfilled, with less time available to address client barriers to seeking, securing, and maintaining employment. Therefore, it is suggested that the contracts and guidelines be reviewed to reduce the administrative burden, which is detracting from effective and efficient client service delivery.

Yours sincerely

Paul Hethorn.

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