

12 February 2008



Mr Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Workplace Participation
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your invitation to comment on delivery of employment services and how they can be improved.

Outcare is the only provider of specialist services to ex-offenders in Western Australia, we offer a wide range of services including accommodation, drug and alcohol counseling, counseling, financial support, career counseling and job placement.

Ex-offenders face many barriers to re-integration into the general community after release from prison. To have a good understanding of these barriers and how to address them needs the knowledge and resources of a specialist provider service.

Other agencies including Job Network Providers and Rehabilitation Service Providers are constantly referring clients to Outcare for its specialist services. This financial year Outcare has assisted 120 clients from other agencies with specialist advice and assistance to improve their employability status.

Outcare supports the establishment of specialist Job Network Providers to work with ex-offenders. By engaging with this client group prior to their release from prison working with them to develop strategies at overcoming barriers to employment and offering a holistic seamless approach to re-integration with the community.

Our responses to points raised in your letter are as follows:

Early intervention

Centrelink currently complete the Job-seeker Classification Instrument for prisoners preparing for release from prison. The issues that we encounter are that the instrument is often completed with little time for the client to consider their responses to questions and as such questions related to their ability to engage in the workforce are not adequately explored. Many recently released prisoners suffer from depression and social anxiety in the weeks following release and are not able to communicate this in a short interview whilst still in prison. Accommodation is also a serious issue with prisoners not wanting to disclose that they face the possibility of being homeless post-release as this may jeopardise their chance at gaining parole.



Employment and Training

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Outcare fully supports and encourages Centrelink to engage with prisoners prior to release to complete necessary paperwork however we feel that more resources should be allocated to this procedure so that the outcome reflects the real situation of the client.

When a prisoner is released they are often in an emotionally fragile situation and have reporting requirements to the Department of Corrective Services for parole as well as Centrelink and Job Network. Whilst most can deal with these requirements there are some who cannot and as such they breach their reporting requirements often ending up with no income or at worst back in prison.

Relevancy

Ex-offenders face many barriers to finding employment, it has been our experience that the current services provided to this client group do not meet their needs in resolving these barriers. The major barriers being access to accommodation, substance abuse, family issues, self esteem and motivation and drivers licence issues. It is essential that a holistic approach be made with one service provider, the current situation where the client has to engage with a number of providers and constantly having to re-tell their story is not satisfactory.

To be relevant to the ex-offender client group providers must be able to deal with the complex issues faced by them, it is unreasonable for generic providers of employment services to be familiar with these issues, therefore ex-offenders should be considered as a discreet group and be referred to specialist providers.

Intensive Assistance

It is our believe that ex-offenders be assessed for eligibility for intensive assistance prior to release from prison and that they be eligible if imprisoned for 6 months or longer. Currently we find that our clients are not assessed for weeks after release from prison and are often only assessed as being JSSO when Intensive Assistance would be more appropriate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ex-offender clients receive only minimal assistance in addressing non-vocational barriers to employment.

For Intensive Assistance to be successful it needs to be targeted to meet the needs of the client, flexible in its approach and timely so that there are not lengthy time lags in service delivery.

Training

Training is often seen as the panacea to all employability barriers. It is imperative that any training provided is part of an employability action plan and that professional career counseling is provided to ascertain appropriateness of any training provided. We have seen a lot of training provided only for the job seeker to follow a completely different path in employment. Training for training sake needs to be addressed; this is a huge waste of resources.

The model best suited ex-offenders clients would include vocational training, employability training as well as on the job training. Having a structured day is an essential part of re-skilling ex-offenders to become job ready.

Performance Management

The star ratings do not accurately reflect the level of service provided to clients. They are outcome driven and result in job network providers making commercial decisions rather than the right decision for their clients. A system that measures improvement in a client's employability status as well as actual employment outcomes would be preferable to the current situation.

If any further information is required please do not hesitate in contacting me.

Yours faithfully

Peter Sirr
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