



Community Media Services Inc.
Fire Station Square Suite 3, 10 Hoddle Street
Abbotsford VIC 3067
ABN: 6121 528 8427

SUBMISSION TO

THE HON. BRENDAN O'CONNOR

MINISTER FOR
EMPLOYMENT PARTICIPATION

from

COMMUNITY MEDIA SERVICES INC.

FUTURE DIRECTION OF
EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

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SUMMARY

CMS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Minister for Workforce Participation, The Hon. Brendan O'Connor on the ***Future Direction of Employment Services***.

This submission is limited in its scope to Community Media Services Inc. (CMS) experiences as a Work for The Dole (WfD) sponsor and our contact with the government departments and agencies responsible for the delivery and administration of this policy.

This submission is not therefore intended to be a comprehensive analysis, but some of the issues raised are from actual evidence provided by WfD participants and situations CMS has witnessed over the last 3 years as a WfD sponsor, which have informed this submission.

Some of the issues raised in this submission need further detailed examination and are not within the scope of this submission.

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY MEDIA SERVICES INC. (CMS)

CMS is an Incorporated Association with a not-for-profit status and has acted as sponsor for a number of Work for the Dole (WfD) projects since August 2005. CMS core business is to provide support services for community media groups, mostly but not exclusively to community television. These include subtitling, sponsorship, audience research, technology and licencing.

Currently CMS has four (4) separate projects operating with four (4) separate Community Work Co-ordinators (CWC's). The projects vary in nature and include; Subtitling with AEIC, Research & Production with Echo Australia and Sponsorship Support with Kangan Batman TAFE (KBT) and on the 11th February we commenced a new project with Mission Australia. This is a building project to assist us build and install a studio in the old social club rooms of Collingwood Football Club at Victoria Park. At this venue we aim to diversify into catering, horticulture and arts projects.

In terms of the provisions of employment services, CMS is the last link in the chain as follows; (1) DEEWR (2) Centrelink, (3) Job Network Member (JNM), (4) Community Work Co-ordinator (CWC) and then the (5) Work For the Dole Sponsor.

Although the JNM is the principle agency that the job seeker deals with, the reality is that clients spend more time with the Work for the Dole sponsor than any other agency. Therefore we are privy to the comments that clients make in relation to their individual circumstances.

Our observation is that jobseekers have varied motivations when they arrive for Work for the Dole (WfD), and in it is our opinion WfD has varied levels of success and failure.

CMS aims to address the issues outlined in the Minister's letter to the CEO's of the Job Network Members as follows;

- early interventions minimise the number of long-term welfare dependent Australians of working age (including a review of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument)
- employment services are relevant to the circumstances and needs of the job seeker
- job seekers with higher levels of disadvantage receive intensive assistance
- incentives for training which will improve the employability of job seekers (including incentives for long term training and education to address labour market needs)
- job seekers receive appropriate training
- performance management principles (including star ratings and business reallocation) that support sustainable outcomes and promote quality service delivery and
- the minimisation of time and money spent on administration.



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Early Intervention.

CMS believes that early intervention by Centrelink and JNM's, helps to minimise the number of long-term welfare dependent Australians of working age.

This process should include a review of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). CMS does not believe this is an effective tool in identifying acute needs of job seekers.

This includes job seekers with disabilities, former prisoners, those with little or no recent work experience, job seekers with few if any formal qualifications and skills and those experiencing various forms of disadvantage.

As a sponsor of many WfD projects over a long period of time, we have observed participants who might fall into any one of the above categories and who do not seem to be able to move on from their existing circumstances.

CMS believes that the Welfare to Work measures introduced by the previous Howard Government are nothing more than a compliance measure and provide no value for jobseekers and indeed as described by the ALP previously, it is grossly unfair to many it impacts negatively.

Currently job seekers in such circumstances are on Personal Support Program (PSP), which could be better improved by providing an increase in resources to enable 'on-the job' management of clients.

CMS welcomes the Rudd Government's focus on social inclusion and the appointment of a cabinet level minister to oversee this policy and believes employment and the resultant economic mobility IT provides, is critical in ensuring that marginalised Australian's are re-engaged with mainstream society and make a valuable and ongoing contribution.

Employment Services Are Relevant To The Circumstances And Needs Of The Job Seeker.

The motivations and background of jobseekers are varied. As a business and sponsor of WfD projects, we have observed closely the motives and aspirations of jobseekers.

CMS does not believe that compelling jobseekers to complete work for the dole commitments on a project were they may not have an interest or an aptitude for the work, provides a long-term benefit for the sponsor or job seeker.

The current 'one-size fits all' approach to WfD obligations and work experience for job seekers ie; participants are treated the same regardless of skill level, qualification or intended career path, results in the disenfranchisement of jobseekers, who are forced to participate in an activity they may not be interested in nor have any intention to pursue as a career path.

CMS has witnessed jobseekers with low skill levels and a lack of formal qualifications simply moving from one WfD project to another or short term work (very short in some cases) and are therefore not able to build a substantial skill base and work profile that is consistent with their career aspirations and goals.

Jobseekers effectively remain unemployed for long periods because of a lack of career focus and fluctuate to and from casual positions, as is the nature of the arts, entertainment and media industry in Melbourne.



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The high profile of Melbourne's sports, events and entertainment industries provides regular, but intermittent casual employment throughout any one (1) year. In between these major events, jobseekers are placed in WfD activities, and as our activities continually evolve and change means there is a lack of consistency in training, skills acquisition and project outcomes.

A pertinent example of this is the application of the Training Credits system. In terms of jobseekers accessing training credits upon completion of their WfD obligations, the guidelines are quite restrictive and do not apply to all industry accreditation and training.

A good example of this is that actors cannot access funds for Actors Equity Tickets, nor can a journalist for example use Training Credits to obtain an Australian Journalist Association accreditation (tickets) which enable persons in these industries to obtain ongoing work.

It is well known that actors, artists and those employed in the media face longer periods of unemployment than other professions and without these types of accreditation, the chances of ongoing employment are severely diminished.

The attitude of JNM's in relation to how they are able to access the Job Seeker Fund on behalf of their clients, can best be described as arrogant. This was highlighted some time ago when CMS observed a disadvantaged jobseeker being able to access these funds for self-esteem and personal marketability issues.

In an attempt to address these issues and utilise our business expertise, we developed a 3-5 minute video resume and approached a group of JNM's to source funds for this activity, however this was rejected out-of-hand by all the JNM's we approached.

This is another demonstration of the lack of transparency and accountability of JNM's and the general lack of interest in actually assisting jobseekers.

The time allocated for WfD projects is usually 6 months and does not take into consideration the nature of the business or industry eg; media and film in the case of CMS. The nature of our business is such that film and media related work can take longer than the 6 months to complete.

CMS is continually frustrated by Community Work Co-ordinators (CWC's) who have little or no understanding of our business and the industry in which we operate. CMS believes there is a need for some form of media, film and arts based employment agencies or at the very least an understanding of the nature of the arts, media and entertainment industries by government agencies.

Job Seekers With Higher Levels Of Disadvantage Receive Intensive Assistance.

Anecdotal evidence provided to CMS by jobseekers indicates that Job Network Members (JNM's) are not sensitive to the needs of individual jobseekers and simply enforce their contractual obligations with DEEWR and do not provide real or meaningful assistance to jobseekers.

Responses by JNM's to their clients suggests inflexibility, bullying and intimidation with threats of job seekers being breached by Centrelink for non-compliance of an order given by a JNM. Comments by WfD participants suggest that some JNM's see themselves as a self-appointed government agency and that this somehow gives JNM's the right to act in an aggressive, insensitive, intimidatory manner.

This seems to be a culture that has no doubt developed within various government departments and agencies and indeed seems to have been encouraged by the previous Howard Government, and impacts on the most vulnerable of jobseekers, namely those on PSP support.



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The existing application of WfD seems to assume that participants will simply acquire a new set of skills (in an area with skills in demand) and indeed be able to find employment in that industry. This is a completely misguided, erroneous and ill-informed approach to training and skilling jobseekers.

WfD sponsors receive a minimal amount of funds for training, however the adhoc nature of referrals for WfD projects results in adhoc training and lack of consistency in terms of projects outcomes.

Recently we booked and advertised for editing workshops to be conducted on our premises over four (4) successive Fridays at considerable expense to CMS. The result was that no WfD participants attended because of work commitments and JNM interviews.

Indeed the Skills In Demand requirement simply addresses low skilled and low paid work and does not offer WfD participants long-term job or career prospects and is designed to move jobseekers from welfare to work for short periods of time to enable a federal government fulfil political objectives.

Skills In Demand do not vary greatly from one Employment Service Area (ESA) to another and CMS does not see any value in the Skills In Demand requirement in its current form.

Incentives for training which will improve the employability of job seekers (including incentives for long term training and education to address labour market needs).

CMS can provide two (2) perspectives regarding incentive schemes as an employer and WfD sponsor. We have employed five (5) persons with subsidies in nearly three (3) years. Of those five (5) persons employed, three (3) have completed Work for the Dole with CMS and have demonstrated the required skill and commitment.

Of those three (3), one (1) received a position as a mining company executive in South Australia and is still employed with the company; another has been employed at CMS for 2 ½ years, whilst another former participant resigned his position at CMS. We at present have three (3) former WfD participants employed under the existing job subsidy scheme, which we believe will stay long term.

CMS believes the current level of funding provided to sponsors for WfD projects and wage subsidies is not adequate to meet the long-term needs of job seekers gaining ongoing skills training and work experience and meaningful long-term employment.

CMS believes that the federal government needs to review the level of income support provided to jobseekers. Anecdotal evidence provided to CMS by WfD participants is that many jobseekers are experiencing severe financial hardship, to the point of sleeping in their cars and hostels.

People should be able to live with dignity and economic security without the threat of being left homeless because of circumstances beyond their control. Indeed some jobseekers are on Personal Support Program (PSP) and are already in a vulnerable situation because of other factors including emotional issues.

Job Seekers Receive Appropriate Training.

There is no flexibility in current arrangements for CWC's and Sponsors to 'best fit' participants eg; media professional into a media organisation. Time taken to fully train persons with skills and qualifications outside of a sponsors particular industry is not sufficient.

In addition, a participant may not necessarily complete the requisite 6 months of WfD commitments for various reasons, and therefore does not receive ongoing training, resulting in incomplete training and work experience.



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CMS offers its enthusiastic support for the Minister for Workforce Participation proposed scheme to provide 'real-life' work-experience for persons that are long-term unemployed, and sees this approach to practical, "work-like" conditions as the best way to assist the long-term unemployed.

CMS believes that Skills In Demand need to be addressed, however this should involve suitably qualified organisations (eg; cleaner with training provided by a commercial cleaning company).

Currently, WfD sponsors are required to address the Skills In Demand even though the sponsor may not have skills or qualifications in a particular discipline.

In relation to community television, CMS is able to provide minimal Skills In Demand in many of the areas listed in a particular ESA because of the diverse nature of the industry and multi-skilling required in a variety of sectors within the industry.

Mistakes can be extremely costly for a business such as ours with untrained, unqualified and intermittent WfD participants.

As a business and WfD sponsor, we see too many long-term unemployed with very few skills and an unstable work history - even though they may have completed a number of WfD projects.

We believe a scheme focused on training and involving business is the preferred model as opposed to the existing project based model of WfD.

A 'real-life' work experience can only be of benefit to jobseekers if they are involved with an existing work environment and supported with more formalised training from a tertiary or TAFE institution.

This enables job seekers to have formal qualifications and coupled with their practical work experience makes them more employable and 'job-ready'.

The training opportunities on WfD projects are limited because new participants arrive to a project on a daily basis and requiring a 2-hour induction.

There are 2 issues, which hinder training by a WfD sponsor;

1. the unreliability of attendance by participants due to work and JMN commitments and the length of time it takes to conduct separate inductions of participants erodes valuable time that could be spent with other WfD participants.
2. participants with a lack of basic skills including written, oral and computer skills, with more intensive training required to bring these types of participants to a standard that will enable them to complete tasks and work as required in the project.

Performance Management Principles (Including Star Ratings And Business Reallocation) That Support Sustainable Outcomes And Promote Quality Service Delivery And; The Minimisation Of Time And Money Spent On Administration.

CMS response to this issue is limited given our contact is primarily and contracting relationship is with the CWC and not DEEWR.

CMS believes that the current system of providing employment services is completely dysfunctional, cumbersome, and inefficient and does not serve the best interests of job seekers.

The process is unwieldy and involves too many parties starting with DEEWR, Centrelink, JNM, CWC, and Sponsor - a total of five (5) levels of bureaucracy involved in the WfD process and for job seekers to negotiate.



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CMS has had no contact with any person from DEEWR in the 3 years of conducting WfD projects. There is simply no accountability or transparency from DEEWR's behalf, with little or no information relating to changes in policy and practices. Changes are advised verbally by the CWC in an ad-hoc manner with no formal, written documentation provided to the sponsor by DEEWR.

The process of advising job seekers of changes to reporting requirements is capricious and is not fair eg; job seekers now have to make up the time they spend attending interviews with Centrelink, JNM's and job interviews.

WfD participants are not provided with this information directly which is communicated to them via a CWC or sponsor.

DEEWR do not provide set guidelines to sponsors as to the payment of funds leading to confusion once a WfD project is completed and the acquittal process begins.

CMS has been extremely disappointed with the actions of some JNM's who have not met their contractual obligations and have not paid the agreed wage and training subsidies. CMS cannot take any action, as we do not have access to a person within DEEWR that can assist sponsors with any disputes that may arise with JNM's and CWC's.

This further demonstrates DEEWR's lack of accountability, transparency and is an unsatisfactory and unacceptable situation.

The KPI's for WfD sponsors are directly related to participation rates, and given the lowest unemployment rate on record, it is therefore difficult to sustain, particularly given the seasonal nature of employment in the arts, media and entertainment industry in Melbourne.

In relation to any disputes that have arisen concerning the payment of subsidies, it has become apparent that JNM staff have at best a rudimentary understanding of workplace and business practices specifically relating to ABN's and awards in the arts and media sectors.

An observation we would like to make on this point, is the lack of awareness of services, which is caused by a lack of detailed understanding of the system and environment they are operating which can lead to jobseekers facing financial hardship by having their payments jeopardised.

Most jobseeker and JNM employees are completely unaware of Module F, as authorised by Centrelink. A Module F payment is a payment system designed for jobseekers with an ABN or Registered Business Name.

Under the Module F, a jobseeker at the time of reporting to Centrelink produces a profit and loss statement for that period in which they are able to claim taxable income for ABN holders, thus allowing a jobseeker to be paid Centrelink benefits.

ABN's and Registered Business Names are standard industry practice, however when coupled with intermittent employment and no knowledge of a Module F, JNM's have demonstrated an unwillingness to assist jobseekers in these circumstances.



ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

- CMS does not feel it is appropriate to have older WfD participants, given that many have extensive skills and work experience. Our experience with WfD participants in this category is that all have post-graduate qualifications and sound skill base in their respective industry. They do not require the benefits WfD projects are intended to deliver, to job seekers who need to develop skills and work experience.
- WfD be limited to jobseekers aged between 18-30 years of age, with low skills, poor employment history and be supported with formal training.
- Jobseekers on PSP support should not be compelled to meet WfD obligations.
- Jobseekers should be encouraged to seek voluntary work experience and should not have to participate in WfD when they are already providing support to the community.
- WfD programs can be used to undercut existing wages.
- The need to re-brand WfD, it is negative reinforcement and denigrates jobseekers in the mainstream community.
- Many JNM employees would not have a human resource industry background nor have the awareness of HR industry bodies such as the Australian Human Resource Institute.

CONCLUSION

CMS strongly believes in the need for training and work experience for those persons that are long-term unemployed, however we believe the current provision of employment services is dysfunctional and inadequate in addressing chronic skills shortages, alleviating social exclusion and meeting the needs of job seekers and employers.

CMS is very proud of the achievements of our organisation in assisting job seekers in achieving valuable skills, work experience and assisting them in achieving their goals.

We believe the unemployed have been vilified as a convenient political tool by the previous Howard Government – often described as “dole-bludgers”, “job snobs” amongst various insults.

The current system of employment services is punitive and counter productive to achieving positive long-term outcomes for jobseekers, employers and the Australian economy.

Our experience with jobseekers is quite the reverse to the stereotyping and vilification; with many wanting to move from welfare and into meaningful employment that provides a career path for them and helps them achieve their goals and aspirations in life.

Indeed, home ownership and economic security is not entirely the domain of “working families”, but ALL Australians.

We congratulate and welcome the election of the Rudd Government and hold high expectations of its capacity to deliver positive outcomes for those persons currently on the fringe of Australian society.