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Royal Society *for*
the Blind of SA Inc.

Mr Brendan O'Connor
Minister for Employment Participation

Re: How Employment Services could be Improved

I refer to your letter seeking views on how current Commonwealth Government employment services can be improved.

The Royal Society for the Blind of S.A. (RSB) is the primary provider of services to people who are blind or vision impaired in South Australia, currently delivering a full range of vision rehabilitation services to over 10,500 South Australians and shares your passion with regard to an inclusive society.

The RSB provides the following open and disability employment services:

- Job Network and Disability Employment Network (DEN) contracts with DEEWR; and
- a Business Services Employment contract with FAHSCIA.

In providing comment I do so on the basis of experience with the above contracts which services over 300 people currently.

Operation of JN and DEN Contracts under DEEWR

The transfer of the DEN contract management from FAHSCIA to DEEWR in July 2006 has been a positive move in that it has assisted operations by only having to liaise with one contract manager.

The RSB, has experienced no negative impact on the Job Seeker or the overall operation of the contracts. In practice it has found DEEWR to be very responsive in respect to both contracts and professional to any approach for assistance on contractual matters.

The Cased Based Management system for the DEN Contract after many trial programs is sound as it rewards organizations for performance as distinct to registration.

The Job in Jeopardy component of the Disability Maintenance Instrument in the DEN contact is extremely effective to the RSB's services. The Direct Registration in EA3000 System also allows Case Managers to commence intervention strategies without delay.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions are provided in relation to the objectives identified in the Government's Social Inclusion and Skills policies, in particular the points listed in your letter:

- **Early Intervention**

There is no doubt that early intervention is one of the keys to individuals obtaining and/or retaining employment. In this respect:

- It is important for all people seeking employment, whether they be school leavers or the short or long term unemployed that they are able to actively participate in the employment market as early as possible. It should not be assumed that an individual who has been employed for a lengthy period of time does not require intensive assistance or will gain another position in the near future.
- There is a need to ensure that students are able to engage in 'real' work experience in the one or two years prior to their seeking to leave school and seek employment.

In this respect the RSB has a very active Student Transition Employment Program (STEP) which enables students who are blind or vision impaired to be provided work experience in 'open employment'.

This program is delivered by the RSB using its limited resources and, provides an essential service creating a linkage from education to employment.

The RSB believes that Providers of Government Employment Services (PAGES) should receive some financial recognition for work experience provided to students.

- In order to encourage job seekers and create a positive outlook that the Commonwealth create a funded mentoring system and in addition consider the establishment of a website highlighting individual "success" stories.

- **Relevance of Employment Services to the circumstances and needs of the job seeker**

The current JN and DEN contracts are in the main relevant to the needs of the job seeker and those seeking to retain employment.

The following suggestions are however offered to improve the service:

- The job seeker account facility (JSKA) under the JN contract should be able to be offered under the DEN contract. This would assist PAGES and job seekers where the extent of training required is significant. A minimum contribution by the PAGES could be set to ensure that they utilise the 'training' component of the Cased Based Funding fee.
- At the moment there is no incentive for PAGES to encourage and/or assist a Business Services employee to seek and obtain 'open' employment, due to the lack of opportunity to obtain 'dual' funding to transition from Business Service to open employment.

In the instance of the RSB, we actively assist our Business Services employees to engage in 'open' employment, despite the fact that our open employment (JN and DEN) services receives no funding or recognition for their efforts or any outcomes achieved.

It is strongly recommended that there needs to be some support and/or recognition to encourage PAGES in this area.

- The introduction of the Job Capacity Assessment (JCA) process in December 2006 resulted in a further unnecessary barrier to gaining referrals for job seekers in receipt of the DSP – Blind, namely the introduction of a DSP review.

It has been accepted that DSP review is not normally warranted for people who are in receipt of the DSP - Blind as their eye condition in nearly all cases is not treatable.

- **Job seekers with higher levels of disadvantage and intensive assistance**

- Most RSB clients fall in to this category due to severe vision loss and in general their needs are currently being met by program arrangements e.g., workplace modification funding, wage subsidy assistance and the Disability Maintenance Instrument for placement support.

However, as already stated the availability of J.S.K.A. funding in the DEN program would further enhance client skills, training and placement outcomes.

- **Incentives for training to improve the employability of job seekers**
 - Education outcomes for clients referred to extensive TAFE or similar courses under the DEN program need to be recognized as an outcome similar to JN.

- **Appropriate training for job seekers**
 - As is the case with many RSB clients training in specialist equipment and software programs can only be facilitated by specialist PAGES. Financial Recognition for short term funded courses is required to overcome existing barriers eg screen reader training.

- **Performance management principles**
 - Recognition of services and outcomes achieved for Jobs in Jeopardy are not considered in the current Star Rating Model for DEN.

To recognize the success of PAGES in the provision of the Job in Jeopardy service there needs to be a weighting included in the DEN Star Ratings Model. The DEN program needs to be altered to recognize the service provided by PAGES in this area, including the fact that individuals are retained in their current employment as distinct from losing a position and having to seek employment.

- **Minimisation of time and money spent on administration**
 - The monthly claiming for PAGES services provided has increased administration costs and staff hours however the overall funding system is seen to fair and equitable.

- **Other Comment**

One of the critical elements of ensuring that all Australians are economically and socially included is leadership and in a manner that demonstrates and encourages others to follow.

In this respect, it would be of the utmost assistance if the Government was to ensure that 'real' opportunities are made available in the Public Sector for the employment of people with a disability, in particular those with a sensory disability.

It is recognized that as far back as the 70's there were affirmative targets for the employment of various disadvantaged groups however these have never eventuated in to reality as far as ongoing sustainable employment of persons with a disability.

It is also essential that any drive to employ persons with a disability, particularly those who are blind or vision impaired must be done with a positive approach and a 'real' commitment to achieve success in this area by the various arms of Government and the Public Sector. This will also require the development of mandatory inclusive procurement policies for all facilities, equipment and consumables.

In addition there is a need for education in Government and the community on the benefits of employing people who are blind or vision impaired. This can include examples of best practice of optimising the benefit of the employee.

I trust the above comments and suggestions are of assistance. Should any additional information be required please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

ANDREW DALY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR