

**Response by Portland WorkSkills Incorporated
to
invitation from Minister for Employment Participation to comment on
current employment services and their effectiveness**

A. Portland WorkSkills Incorporated

Portland WorkSkills is a substantial Victorian regional organisation, providing an array of training, education and employment services. Established in 1989, the organisation is guided by a representative and experienced community-based board of management.

WorkSkills operates primarily in Portland, Hamilton and their districts, supplying the following services to Commonwealth and State Governments, to business and industry, and to learners and jobseekers:

- Community Work Coordinator (CWC) for the Western District Employment Services Area (ESA), in the south west of Victoria
- The Victorian Government's Adult and Community Education service
- The Victorian Government's Apprenticeship and Traineeship Training Program
- The Victorian Government's Priority Education Training Program
- Registered Training Organisation training services to government, business and industry
- Sundry fee-for-service training
- WorkSkills has in the recent past delivered the Federal Government's Green Corps environmental program in Portland, Hamilton and their districts on behalf of Job Futures.

B. Organisational statement

Portland WorkSkills exists to provide high quality training, education and employment services to the community, particularly disadvantaged and unemployed jobseekers, in order to assist them find employment and enhance their quality of life.

C. Affiliations

Jobs Australia, JOB futures etc

D. Our involvement in delivery of Commonwealth Government services

- Our primary, current involvement is as CWC for Western District ESA and as a major sponsor of WFD activities. We have been involved in WFD since 1998 as CWC and sponsor.

- Delivered Greens Corps as Delivery Agent for Job Futures 2003-2006.
- Delivered niche Commonwealth Government programs including Australian Skills Vouchers, Vocational Education & Training Priority Places Program, Return to Work and suchlike in our own right or via Job Futures.

E. Observation on operation of Work for the Dole program

- WFD is an evolved and productive Labour Market Program.
- It produces substantial, ongoing community benefit.
- It improves key employability and skills and attitudes in participants.
- Whilst not an employment generating program as such, it achieves sound incidental employment outcomes.
- A key benefit is the raising of participant's awareness of the value of training in improving employment and life prospects. This is in turn facilitated by Training Credits and Training Incentive Fee.
- DEEWR manages and develops the program well. They communicate expectations clearly, reward good practice, and are generally constructive and supportive of our efforts to effectively deliver the program.
- Whilst in Opposition, the new Government tended to criticize WFD as not achieving high employment outcomes. This was not a valid criticism as WFD was not designed to produce direct employment for participants as per Job Network. Our understanding is that WFD is aimed at delivering projects of community benefit, changing the attitudes of participants, instilling a work ethic, teaching them basic skills and workplace procedures, and further improving skills by enabling participants to access Training Credits. Jobs do come out of this process.
- If WFD is expected to be a direct, more immediate employment generator, it would need to be substantially reworked with employment outcomes being rewarded.

F. Alternatives to/variations of WFD

- As a community-based organisation, we have reservations about WFD participants being placed with for-profit businesses or with community enterprises strongly focused on generating profits. Such placements could result in exploitation of participants, with 'revolving' door processes and with little ongoing employment resulting.

- Some fundamental tenets of WFD are that it does not displace paid workers or volunteers and does not do work that would normally be done by paid workers. Likewise, businesses or community enterprises using such participants would have an unfair advantage over businesses paying their workers standard wages. This concept would need to be exposed to much consultation and scrutiny.
- There may be more merit in fine-tuning WFD to include an accredited training component so that participants exit with key modules in transferable, Australia-wide recognised qualifications. There might also be a ‘life skills’ component to further improve the job-readiness of participants.
- During WFD, because of its nature and duration, supervisors and CWCs often identify a range of barriers to employment experienced by participants—particularly Literacy/Numeracy. We need an effective mechanism to ensure that this information is passed back to JN case managers and acted upon.

G. The name

- The name is universally seen as offensive. Participants and sponsors have long expressed reservations about the name, seeing it as negative, stigmatizing and punitive. We suggest that it be renamed. The new name should be positive and not cause confusion with State justice system programs relating to non-custodial orders known in Victoria, for example, as CBOs or Community Based Orders. There have been confusions.
- Our suggestion include: Advance Australia Program, Advantage Australia Program, Develop Australia Program

H. WFD and ‘on the ground’ issues

- Discussions with our WFD program staff and project supervisors indicate that there are a range procedural matters that impact on the optimal delivery of the program. They are essentially ‘fine-tuning’ matters. There would be considerable benefit if both DEEWR and Centrelink seek input from providers regarding such procedural problems. These matters include rogue medical practitioners granting open-ended medical certificates, the need to tighten guidelines for ‘self-employed’ WFD participants, the complexity of participation hours, issues related to participants on continuous partial-rates and suchlike.
- A brief round of consultations between DEEWR, Centrelink and WFD providers would highlight a range of procedural matters that could be modified to enhance the effective delivery of WFD—matters which could be changed relatively easily from the centre.

I. Participant sanctions for non-participation and incentives for effective participation

- There needs to be a hierarchy of sanctions for various levels of non-participation as opposed to massive sanctions such as Participation Reports resulting in eight weeks without benefits etc. Why not start with miss a day without valid reason – lose a day’s benefits etc, as in a normal work place and so on.
- The \$20.80 Centrelink supplement for participants has remained unchanged since inception of WFD in 1997, is inadequate and needs to be increased to reflect increased costs. This would serve as an additional incentive to effective participation.

J. Observations on other Employment Services programs we have had involvement with

- Green Corps – project aims are generally rather high-order and abstract due to demand of Project Evaluation Panels. This reduced project applications to an essay-technical writing competition. It was then difficult for supervisors and participants to translate complex concepts and strategies into achievable reality on the ground. A fundamentally a useful program but probably an expensive way of producing employment outcomes. May be possible to develop urban-based, shorter, environmental or non environmental ‘circuit- breaker’ projects for young people.
- Green Corps should be made available to providers on an ESA basis, not a state-based duopoly basis. Would result in more effective delivery and ultimately better coverage of the nation.

K. Observations regarding other Employment Services

- The Job Network (JN) struggle to embrace the relationship between WFD and Job Network due to high staff turnover, limited staff training etc. JN staff would generally benefit from more targeted staff training as CWCs are expected to provide.
- JN needs to make greater use of participants Training Account to better assist participants achieve job readiness. The Training Account might also include matters linked to employability such as dental, presentation, weight control and suchlike. Unemployed jobseeker Literacy/Numeracy issues also need to be addressed more strongly by JN.

- The plethora of disability-related services would probably benefit from consolidation.
- Job Search Training should stand alone program available to all providers and not be restricted to Job Network providers. Like WFD it could be a step, a measure in the continuum of assisting participants gain employment and be accessed by the JN as they access WFD etc.

L. Summary

- We see WFD as an effective, value-for-money program that could be enhanced even more with a range of relatively minor changes.
- The program is well run by DEEWR, who are generally very responsive to changing needs or the emergence of any structural obstacles to effective participation.
- WFD is not a direct job-generator. If it is if required to be such, elements of program would need to be reworked.
- Alternatives such as WFD with Private Enterprise or with commercially-focused 'not-for-profit' Community Enterprises have great capacity for participant and system exploitation and would require comprehensive consultation and bullet-proof project guidelines.
- We consider that WFD should remain a stand-alone program for a range of good reasons, including its effectiveness in achieving the stated goals of the program.

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