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The Honourable Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Employment Participation
Email: brendan.o'connor.mp@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister,

Thank you for taking the time to seek our sector's advice in relation to employment issues for people with disabilities. I am the CEO of the Spectrum Organization a non-profit association registered in the state of Queensland. Our service has been in operation for some 17 years. Sixteen of which I have been the Chief Executive Officer.

The defining feature of Spectrum is that it is **all about people**. It is made up of people, services people, and provides a venue for people. Spectrum is staffed and managed by a group of individuals truly dedicated to improving the services and opportunities available for all in our community, particularly for people with disabilities. The Spectrum Centre is a community venue where people of different life experiences, ethnicities, abilities, disabilities, genders, ages etc. are encouraged to be involved and access available services.

Our ethos is inclusive and focuses on challenging the barriers that often prevent diverse communities from working together. The ongoing goal of the organisation is to provide and facilitate services and opportunities that are accessible and enjoyable for all rather than for small groups within the community. It is our hope that through such inclusive pathways, current divisions and barriers within the community will be broken down. Projects are undertaken in a way that encourages collaboration, focussing on understanding individual differences and rejoicing in those things that make us all alike, human and part of the community. By considering people as individuals and the community as a whole, we avoid defining people through group generalisation.

Many providers unintentionally operate on a model of segregation. Such providers usually do this with good intentions, aiming to protect their clients from the barriers they may face in the community. It is our opinion that this model can often place unnecessary restrictions on people with disabilities by dictating:

- who they will meet, be friends with, love.
- what they will see in terms of different value systems, cultures, types of people, society.
- what is expected of them.
- how they obtain happiness.
- the choices that they can make

It is essential that services for people with disabilities adopt an individualised focus to preserve the rights of their clients and empower them wherever possible to enjoy the full realm of life experience. With an individualised, empowerment focus, services can implement protective strategies only when necessary rather than as standard procedure.

Spectrum is staffed by a group of passionate individuals who have built on this ethos to offer a unique style of service to people with disabilities both independently and within government service contracts.

SPECTRUM - CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY

We operate now and have for the last 17 years a very successful disability employment service funded originally by the Dept of FACS and now currently funded by DEWR.

Over recent years we have been subject to a raft of continuous change which has been difficult and expensive for us as a service to implement. This has inflicted a great deal of stress for my 12 dedicated staff who deliver a much needed service to those who have disabilities. Spectrum is a generalist service assisting people from all disability groups including intellectual, physical, hearing, sight, ABI, psychiatric and many more.

“Performance management principles support sustainable outcomes and promote quality service delivery.”

While we have always supported the concept of cost effective service provision, it seems that the efforts to deliver this type of service, come at a real cost to those who genuinely need additional supports which we are not funded for.

I feel that, as we have been implementing a model that is solely reliant on outcomes and is fact outcome driven, there has been less focus on the people we are supposed to be servicing.

The previous government's focus on specific targets has come at the expense of those that perhaps need a more holistic type of service rather than one focused on statistics. I have always believed that people are not in fact widgets but a diverse group where no two are the same.

While I understand that there is a need to make changes within the industry, we have been operating at an extremely high level of uncertainty since the implementation of Phase 2 of the Case Based Funding trial in 2001. Initially the debate centred around whether or not we would adopt the model and if so what form it would take. As it became apparent that the funding model would definitely change, the concern became about transition and viability. Our very existence is now uncertain.

The uncertainty of star ratings has caused concern not only in my organization but among many of my colleagues. While I have no problem with the expectation that we should reach reasonable targets, it would be nice to know that those that have already reached a star rating of say a 3 and higher would be automatically rolled over without the expense and time consuming exercise of re-tendering.

This would at least give these services some comfort and security for their service, clients and staff. I agree that under performing services that may be below a standard of say a 3 should need to re-tender.

A service that performs well can easily become crippled with poor outcomes as job security is in jeopardy and staff turnover increases. This is not an industry that pays large salaries or that weathers excessive staff turnover well. Most of our dedicated staff are motivated by the desire to support our clients in a positive way rather than by the financial benefits. They do however, deserve a reasonable level of job security and as an employer it is important to me that I be able to provide it.

The star ratings attempt to measure the relative quality of disability employment services. To determine this system's effectiveness as such a measure, you must first reach a conclusion as to what constitutes a good service. The current KPIs are heavily weighted in favour of employment outcomes. It is a relief to see that features such as hours of employment, average wages, and long term results (beyond 26 weeks) have been assigned some value. In our years providing services to people with disabilities, we have identified several other distinguishing features that a high quality service should possess. These features have not been assigned any value in the star rating system:

- Quality of the work environment that clients are placed in
- Client satisfaction

- Quality assurance achievements. There is no differentiation between services that excel and those that pass yet the maintenance of QA is a contractual obligation and a time consuming aspect of service delivery.
- Use or overuse of supported wage and other subsidies.
- Development of self esteem in clients
- Addressing life skills deficits including budgeting, government paperwork (mainly Centrelink), home care, personal grooming etc.

Most services will tell you that we all go out of our way to address a very real gap in service provision to our clients. The main reason that we do this is because we are already involved in the client's situation, they trust us, and it takes too long to get assistance elsewhere. In many cases they are simply in need of a service that is not provided or they cannot afford. We have dealt with homelessness, suicide, divorce, child custody, criminal offences and many more. Our client group have the following experiences at least as frequently as the average person, but in most cases, they lack the skills and support network to deal with it.

The previous government aimed to tighten up this industry in the name of economic rationalism. It is my hope that as a Labour government, you will consider the 'social value' of the extensive services we provide and the potential cost should they be removed. This star rating system, concerned only with outcomes, places no value on the role services like us play in the community. It is highly possible that a service concerned with providing an holistic service to their clients, making a long term difference in their lives may achieve only a rating 3 while a service concerned only with outcomes achieves a rating 5. This does not diminish the achievement of a high rating service but may certainly fail to capture the true performance and value of many services.

It is my hope that a Labour government has the capacity to see the value in the additional services we provide and to accurately assess the cost to the community should we become purely outcomes focussed. Outcomes are extremely important in assessing the quality of a service but they are not the only consideration. A balance between the quantitative and qualitative facets of disability service provision is essential in approaching service delivery for people with disabilities and therefore also in evaluation of service performance.

"Employment Services are relevant to the circumstances and needs of the job seeker" and "Job seekers with higher levels of disadvantage receive intensive assistance".

Many of us spend long hours and offer assistance far above what we are payed to do, and to lose this approach would I believe be catastrophic. DEN services operate best as a careful balancing act between business/outcomes focus and human services. Too much of either component is undesirable and ineffective and I have seen examples of both extremes in my time in this industry.

I ask that you consider the role that services like Spectrum play in our society. We are much more than basic employment services and this is a reflection of the needs of the clients we service. There are currently 254 clients in Spectrum Employment Service and the vast majority of these individuals require a much more individualised, holistic service than they are funded for. By trying to address these gaps, we assist these clients to obtain long-term, high quality outcomes and thereby change their lives. This aspect of our services is difficult to measure and is often overlooked by many but greatly appreciated by our clients.

It is also important to recognise that for many people with disabilities, the relationship with the service provider is an ongoing one. Rather than commencing with a service, finding a job and then leaving the service, many of our clients require ongoing assistance from a service that they have a good relationship with. These clients are often able to work and therefore become less reliant on income support but they have ongoing difficulties with motivation, adapting to change in the workplace, coping skills etc. This group who would otherwise become serial service users are best supported in an ongoing way by a single service to maintain their employment or to transition quickly into another position should it become necessary. Spectrum currently has many clients in this situation though we are encouraged by the funding model and outlet capacity to exit them as independent workers and wait for them to cycle back through the system.

“Job seekers receive appropriate training”

With the exception of apprenticeships, services like ours are not funded to assist clients with training. Unfortunately many people with disabilities, who are interested and capable of skilled employment, require some career guidance and assistance to access training. Our clients are often unsure about what they can do and what is out there and there is little assistance available for this. For those interested in obtaining specific skills or qualifications, a case management system where they receive career guidance and are assisted to identify options would be useful. They would also need assistance actually arranging training in many cases including covering costs, identifying transport options, completing enrolment forms and engaging necessary support services etc. Services like ours are well equipped to offer this sort of service but our contract and funding model encourage prompt employment placement, not training.

Many of our new clients lack the basic skills and knowledge for employment. They have often never worked or are returning to work after a long absence. In response to this need, the state government has funded the Spectrum Organisation to run courses in work readiness and life skills. We have been providing the work readiness course to the majority of new clients for many years now and its success in improving employment outcomes is proven. These state funded courses are available at many locations but this is an issue for many of our clients. They are often nervous, with poor self esteem and unwilling to access another provider for this purpose. We have taken the initiative of offering these courses on-site, through our sister organisation, to encourage clients. Ideally providers should be funded to offer some basic training such as this on their premises. This would encourage more clients to participate and would have the added benefit of allowing the provider to have more intensive contact with the client. Also, by tailoring the course specifically for job seekers with a disability, we are able to ensure that the courses are most relevant and comfortable for the clients.

I ask you to consider that in this time of uncertainty, people like me are still trying to run a service and keep good employees. The longer the uncertainty is prolonged, the more difficult it becomes to improve standards and plan for the future. If it is possible to set an acceptable level of performance, for example Star Rating 3, and allow these contracts to roll over, it would be much easier for us to get on with the business of providing services to people with disabilities. Such a system would allow for the tendering of those contracts where services are not performing at an acceptable level while rewarding those that are.

By empowering quality employment services to offer more individualised services I believe your outcome of providing 'relevant' employment services is likely to be achieved. Services will perform at their best when concerned mainly with achieving appropriate quality and outcomes rather than viability and longevity of contracts.

Thank-you again for the opportunity to provide some feedback.

Yours sincerely,

John Hart
CEO
Spectrum Employment Service