



Submission:

Response to the National Disability Employment Framework Issues Paper

Submitted online: <https://engage.dss.gov.au/disability-employment-framework/make-a-submission/>

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National Disability Employment Framework

This submission has been prepared by the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network in response to the Issues Paper released by the Department of Social Services.

The ACT Mental Health Consumer Network is a consumer-led peak organisation representing the interests of mental health consumers in the ACT in policy and decision-making forums. The Network is committed to social justice and the inclusion of people with experience of mental illness. Run by consumers for consumers, our aim is to advocate for services and supports for mental health consumers which better enable them to live fuller, healthier and more valued lives in the community. The Network has held a forum for members to discuss the Disability Employment Framework Issues paper. This submission also draws on the experiences of our members in recent years.

This submission discusses issues raised under the topic areas specified on the DSS website. It addresses some, but not all, of the questions raised in the Issues Paper, as relevant to mental health consumers.

Overall comments

Many mental health consumers are among the most disadvantaged in our society, often without stable or safe accommodation and living on very low incomes. We were therefore disappointed that basic principles of social justice and inclusion were not mentioned or discussed. The Issues Paper briefly recognises that employment services are not the only element of support that affect employment outcomes for people with disability. However, services in areas such as education, health and income support are only a small part of the context in which employment outcomes should be considered. The Issues Paper made no mention of social issues such as housing availability, social exclusion and stigma.

The paper also does not appear to take into account the many financial barriers that can prevent people from commencing employment. In our experience, many consumers express their intention to be involved in paid employment, however, they are unable to manage many hidden costs associated with seeking and maintaining employment such as transport, clothing, childcare to name but a few. We think these issues are important to take into account when considering access to employment for mental health consumers.

The workforce participation data provided is out of date and we question whether this is reflective of the current landscape.

Workforce Participation of People with Disability

It is widely acknowledged that people with a mental illness are more likely to manage their illness and maintain a contributing life when they have secure employment and appropriate housing. Paid employment opportunities for mental health consumers need to involve best practice human resource management. Employees should be able to access support when they need it and should not be discouraged from taking sick leave to deal with their mental illnesses. Employment opportunities should be

fulfilling and based on the person's interests, abilities, skills and previous experience; it can be empowering for consumers to know that their employment is not simply about obtaining income or ticking a box.

Different needs of People with Disability

The needs of people living with mental illness may be very different to those living with other forms of disability. In our view, the most critical issue to address in order to improve the services offered to support mental health consumers to obtain and maintain employment is the need to provide services with specialised expertise in supporting mental health consumers. These services need to provide individualised support, and work together with other supports and programs assisting the person to manage their illness and participate fully in the community, including through employment.

Members of the Network regularly point to the challenges associated with securing and maintaining employment while living with mental illness. A large number of mental health consumers rely on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and are therefore expected to survive on very low incomes. This creates significant difficulties for consumers juggling essential costs such as rent, utilities, groceries, child care and medical treatment whilst also trying to seek employment with limited resources at their disposal. In addition many consumers are fearful of losing their pension safety net if they become unwell after securing employment. The recent tightening of DSP eligibility creates a substantial risk and disincentive for people to move into the paid workforce.

For mental health consumers, paid employment often fails to provide flexible environments whilst managing their life with mental illness. Taking sick leave tends to be perceived as meaning that the employee has a low work ethic. It is difficult for workers with mental illness to hold down casual or part-time work because employers are often less inclined to continue employing people who have difficulties in filling their shifts. Most employment opportunities require regularity and stability, leaving little room for flexibility in case of relapse of mental illness or side effects of medication.

Principles for Changes to Disability Employment Services

Our members regularly inform us that as mental health consumers, they are constantly stigmatised, discriminated and treated without respect when accessing disability employment services. In our view, consumers need to be treated with respect and their thoughts and choices actively listened to for them to achieve their employment goals. Not surprisingly, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) found that the most positive feedback came from people who felt they were treated and respected as an individual.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

Then NDIS is a major reform initiative which is bringing significant changes to the delivery of services and support to people living with permanent and significant

disability. We expect that mental health consumers who receive a package will have access to supports of their choice to enable them to participate in employment. Therefore, we are happy that mental health consumers will have more control and choice over the services they use to support them in seeking employment. However, not all mental health consumers will receive a package, consequently those without a package may still require good support to find and maintain employment. In addition the recently announce Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Framework has little reference as to how those who do not receive a tier 3 package will access vocational services they are currently receiving.

Personal Helpers and Mentors

The Personal Helpers and Mentors Service (PHaMS) is very popular with our members, however with the funding limitations, there are currently not enough PHaMS workers to meet the needs of the community. Therefore, whilst consumers who do have a PHaMS worker do receive support to find and maintain employment, we are concerned that those who don't have access to PHaMS are missing out. The issues paper outlines that PHaMS is available to all people with a disability in each stage of the continuum of current services and supports available to people with disability. We would like to highlight that this is only true for mental health consumers who qualify for the service. We think it is misleading to suggest that PHaMS is available to all Australians with a disability when the reality is that they are only available to mental health consumers whose lives are *severely* affected by mental illness. For example, a person who is "able to work in mainstream with no support" is extremely unlikely to qualify for PHaMS.

Australian Disability Enterprises

Although we have heard a lot of good feedback regarding well managed disability enterprises here in Canberra, we have also heard that the lack of continuity and certainty of funding is a real concern. It is clear from our members' experiences that the benefits of being employed by a disability enterprise are grossly undermined in the face of uncertainty. Therefore, central to the success of the enterprises and therefore the employment outcomes for consumers is continuity and certainty of funding.

Disability Employment Services & Job Services Australia

While our members have accessed various employment services, we would like to repeat that mental health consumers need to be treated with respect and their thoughts and choices actively listened to for them to achieve their employment goals.

One way in which employment supports could be improved would be greater commitment to ongoing support to maintain employment. For example, some mental health consumers may need infrequent but long term support to assist them to manage their participation in the workplace.

Support for Employers

We appreciate that there are currently a number of supports available to employers; our worry is that employers themselves are not aware of these supports. We would therefore recommend that more resources should be utilised to inform employers of the available supports and encourage them to access them. The Network agrees that short-term training and/or employment in the workplace can be a pathway into regular employment. However, when there is financial support to employers attached to short-term training and/or employment with an expiry period, for example once a worker reaches 26 weeks in their employment, usually the employment opportunity stops. Therefore, although consumers may have developed valuable skills through the process, the lack of continuity and certainty of employment erodes the benefits. There needs to be support and a clear pathway if these time-limited opportunities are to translate into ongoing employment.

There is also a need for employers, in particular government agencies both state and commonwealth to recognise that employment is not simply an economic imperative. The Network asserts that employers have a social and community responsibility to provide employment opportunities to people with disabilities. This is consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which has ratified.

Conclusion

The Network agrees that the proposed principles should be the underlying set of principles for change and should underpin the new disability employment framework. We agree that there is a strong need for individualised approaches to increase choice and control for jobseekers. As we have mentioned, some mental health consumers need ongoing support to maintain their employment even after the prescribed timeframe. Lastly, we concur that there is a real need for a holistic approach to service provision which works across people's lives.