

Monday, 14 January 2008

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NATIONAL COUNCIL ON



DISABILITY
Incorporated in the ACT

The Social Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disability

Dear Deputy Prime Minister and Minister

The National Council on Intellectual Disability (NCID) would like to present a detailed briefing to the government on the critical policy changes that need to occur for the successful work participation of jobseekers with intellectual disability.

In 1985, Senator Don Grimes led the Australian society in a *new direction*, where people with disability were accorded equal rights via the Disability Services Act 1986 (DSA). Up until this time, adults with intellectual disability had few options after leaving school. The two major options were segregated adult day care centres and sheltered workshops. Real work was not considered possible.

The Hawke government provided resources to show through practical demonstration that adults with intellectual disability could work *productively* and be *included* in the open labour market. The Disability Services Act 1986 was primarily targeted at new open employment models for jobseekers with intellectual disability. This put Australia at the cutting edge of an international movement committed to a new set of values.

The Howard government's legacy, after eleven years in government, is that the specialist open employment sector for jobseekers with intellectual disability is in crisis and unsure about its future. We are at a critical juncture. Unless we revitalise the *new direction* we are at great risk of losing the knowledge that currently resides in a handful of people who have dedicated their working lives to this profession.

The good news is that we have the technology and expertise in knowing how to train and support adults with intellectual disability to gain and maintain work in the open labour market. We have unfortunately been operating within a political and administrative environment without leadership and commitment to do this.

Your election statement on an *Australian Social Inclusion Agenda*, however, provides us with hope.

We agree that to be socially included, ALL Australians must be given the opportunity to secure a job.

Our vision is that all school leavers with intellectual disability can choose to access a specialist open employment service that has competency in evidence based vocational practices. While we have some of the best open employment services for people with intellectual disability in the world, they are few and sparse. *We would like to grow this sector so that all school leavers who choose work have access to competent employment assistance.*

We agree that solutions require co-operation and collaboration across different jurisdictions and sectors.

Such political and bureaucratic divides may have been previously thought to be efficient, but they have not always served adults with intellectual disability well. If we are to provide all school leavers with intellectual disability the opportunity to be included in the workforce, solutions will require new models of co-operation across state and federal governments and bureaucracies. *We would like to discuss with you a vision of joint Commonwealth State administrative and funding arrangements for adults with intellectual disability who choose work.*

The “Cap” on restricting the number of clients specialist open employment services can assist must be removed

We cannot, on one hand, have a policy of social inclusion, and then on the other hand, restrict the numbers of jobseekers with intellectual disability who can access specialist open employment assistance.

Specialist open employment services for people with intellectual disability are currently restricted by contract arrangements on how many jobseekers that they can assist. This results in a significant number of jobseekers being denied the opportunity to secure a job, thereby being directed to pathways that increase the likelihood of long-term unemployment. *We propose a removal of the cap for jobseekers with intellectual disability who choose to participate in the open workforce.*

We agree that the previous government’s legacy of Job Capacity Assessments is not conducive to creating job pathways.

An important element of the research is that there is no such thing as a reliable predictive test of job readiness or success for adults with intellectual disability. The best test is to allow jobseekers to try; for our specialist providers to try; and for this “try” to occur without any loss of income support eligibility.

In our sector we are continually reassessing our expectations of what is possible – and our colleagues are continually demonstrating the research finding that people with significant intellectual disability can work in open employment. *We would like to discuss a pathway to employment assistance for adults with intellectual disability that incentivises the choice to work.*

Our solution requires a removal of the job capacity assessment for this client group. School leavers with intellectual disability have already been identified via the education system. It is likely that such students have been identified via negotiated curriculum or individual education plans in both special and regular education settings. Intellectual disability is already manifest, as it is not acquired upon leaving school. We suggest that

these school leavers should be automatically entitled to access a specialist open employment service as a matter of course.

Specialist open employment services already have strong connections with school systems. We envisage that it would be possible for an eligibility schema to be designed that would reflect this relationship and allow a smooth and timely transition from school to work. Most importantly, it permits an effective match between jobseeker and relevant open employment service.

Separate income support eligibility from employment assistance eligibility.

The goal should be to increase the work participation rates, increase the amount of earned income, and decrease the reliance on income support. If we want “pensioners” to seek work, we cannot be waiting to pounce upon them with a review of the pension as soon as they volunteer to seek work. This is counterproductive and fails to understand the decision making that families and jobseekers with intellectual disability consider in choosing work.

We propose that people with intellectual disability in receipt of the pension can choose work without this triggering a pension review. In contrast we should seek to support this voluntary decision by ensuring that the jobseeker receives the best possible employment assistance that encourages the greatest possible outcome in terms of hours of work and wages. Let the pension income and assets test take care of reductions in “dependency” on income support. We should then measure success by increases in work participation, increases in earned income, and decreases in pension income - rather than how many people have been shifted from Pension status to Newstart status.

We want to simplify the current employment assistance funding policy.

The current employment assistance funding system is complex, adds copious amounts of unnecessary compliance requirements on service providers, and is not conducive to evidence based practices.

Our solution requires a scrapping of the current funding assessment tools (i.e. the DPI and the DMI). In its place we are seeking:

- A standard service payment per client for specialist open employment services for jobseekers with intellectual disability.
- A standard service payment could be determined via an examination of the average cost of specialist services that currently achieve above average outcomes under the current star rating data scheme.
- It is our contention that the previous government never considered the cost of good practice and good outcomes. Essentially it is good practice and good outcomes that the government should seek to fund.
- Similarly, the cost of ongoing support should also reflect good practice and outcomes. We again suggest that a standard percentage rate will ensure that current perversions where poor service is rewarded by more funding is no longer tolerated by a sector and government focused on results.

The proposed employment assistance tender process based on the star ratings should not be applied to services that currently specialise in open employment service for people with intellectual disability.

NCID supports an employment assistance contract system that is predicated on “outcomes” and “data”. We are however, mindful, that in a competitive contractual market, people with intellectual disability are at risk of losing equity of access and participation. This client group is already at risk of not having choice or access to relevant and competent open employment assistance.

We recommend that any administrative plans on competitive tendering that effect services to this client group *be put on hold* - to enable time for a considered plan to be negotiated with the new government.

We are interested in outcome performance data of employment services being made publicly available; particularly to schools, parents, and clients who are considering work participation. We envisage a system, not restricted by a “cap”, where informed families and clients looking for open employment assistance are able to select services with successful outcome “report cards”.

For this system to work we would need to consider:

- good data to indicate the outcome of open employment services that provide employment assistance to jobseekers with intellectual disability,
- an indication of the range of outcomes currently being achieved across different regions - city vs. rural,
- an analysis of the current service practices of achieving above average outcome performances (i.e. ‘what works’), and,
- a developmental response (which is industry based) to provide technical assistance to services that are performing in relative terms below average.

We need to consider the future of this sector very carefully. If we are to meet the goal of social inclusion and work participation of people with intellectual disability, then we must have a healthy and competent specialist open employment service sector that is available and accessible.

We wish to meet with you directly. We are in a position to provide you with a briefing that includes the most experienced and successful leaders in this field. These are professionals that NCID hold in high regard. We are also in a position of presenting family, worker and employer representatives who have benefited from specialist service and wish to support the future development of the sector.

I look forward to hearing your response at your earliest convenience. I can be contacted directly on 0407 406 647.

Yours sincerely
Mark Pattison
Executive Officer

Cc.

- Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, The Hon Jenny Macklin, MP
- Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services, The Hon Bill Shorten
- Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion, Senator the Hon Ursula Stephens