



RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY UNIT

POLICY REPOSE

EMPLOYMENT AND A LIFE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION FOR ALL

**Jesuit Social Services submission to the
Australian Government's National Mental Health
and Disability Employment Strategy consultation**

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Introduction

“When I got depressed and involved with drugs, I didn’t care about anything. I was in real trouble for a lot of years. After I got referred to the arts studio, I was feeling so bad I could hardly even talk to anyone, let alone do any work. But gradually I found myself feeling motivated to try a few things and looking back now, I realise how lucky I am that those people in the arts studio were there to help me out. They seemed to understand where I was at and they didn’t push me to do things before I was ready”. Anna, aged 22, who is now doing a course in multimedia and has a part-time job.

At Jesuit Social Services, we work in some of the most difficult and demanding areas of human service, including crime, addiction, mental illness, suicide bereavement, long-term unemployment and entrenched social disadvantage.

In addition to our well known services for young people (including Connexions, Gateway and Brosnan Youth Services), we are involved in supporting local communities in various parts of Victoria and Western Sydney. We also have a longstanding involvement with the Vietnamese community and a strong partnership with communities from the Horn of Africa.

Our services engaged with disadvantaged young people

Through our Connexions dual diagnosis service (mental health and drugs and alcohol), the ‘social enterprise’ kitchen, arts studio or any of the other employment and training programs of our Gateway service, and the various justice focussed programs of Brosnan Youth Services, we engage with young people with a range of inter-related, complex needs. These tend to include a history of interrupted schooling, little or no positive experiences of employment, substance abuse, mental health difficulties and/or other disabilities, and in many cases, involvement with the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, very few of the young people we see have family support readily available. Indeed in many cases, family experiences such as domestic violence or sexual abuse have been significant contributors to the young person’s current difficulties.

By any measure, the young people we support are amongst the most disadvantaged citizens of our society. Our submission is guided by their experience.

A ‘joined-up’ approach focussed on ‘whole-of-life’ needs

A key aspect of our approach to working with people experiencing disadvantage is a commitment to understanding and appreciating the totality of every individual.

Rather than thinking about support from the perspective of separate issue ‘silos’ eg. employment, mental health, disability, drug and alcohol misuse, housing, criminal justice etc. we work in partnership with people to build a ‘whole-of-life’ approach to the way services and support are provided. Our holistic approach to supporting people is sometimes referred to as a ‘joined-up’ or ‘wrap around’ approach.

The Australian Government’s recent ‘Which Way Home?’ Green Paper on homelessness rightly identifies that a key challenge for government is how to implement ‘joined-up’ service delivery backed up by ‘joined-up’ policy: *“Program and funding program boundaries must allow governments and funded organisations to take a multidisciplinary approach to addressing people’s needs” (FaCHSIA 2008: 63).*

It is imperative that the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy takes up the challenge to be part of the movement for a ‘joined-up’ approach to assisting our most disadvantaged citizens. For example, where a person with a mental health difficulty and/or disability needs assistance with drug and alcohol issues, housing, general health or criminal justice issues, the employment services system should include a commitment to actively address these needs as part of a holistic approach to employment support.

Submission Structure

This submission is organised according to the structured submission format (Form 2a) included in the to the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy discussion paper, namely:

- Identification of barriers/issues that make it more difficult for a person with a disability and/or mental illness to find and keep work and develop their career;
- An outline of goal/objective(s) to address each barrier
- Recommended solutions and actions

Key Priority Areas

Reflecting the key barriers we have identified, our suggested priority action areas for the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy are:

1. Better policy and program support for whole-of-life 'joined-up' approaches to helping the most disadvantaged young people
2. More creative thinking about the right environments for disadvantaged young people to gain skills and work experience, including the value of social businesses to 'fill the gap' in the transition to training and employment
3. Better ongoing 'post-placement' support to assist retention in training and employment
4. Improved literacy and numeracy support for young adults who have left school
5. Improvements to the Centrelink income support system to eliminate penalties for 'having a go' at employment or training

Priority Area 1: Better policy and program support for whole-of-life 'joined-up' approaches to helping the most disadvantaged young people

"It all just got too much. Everyone was talking at me, and nobody seemed to have time to listen to what I wanted to say. At one stage I had five different workers (from five different organisations) trying to look after me, one for housing, one for psych stuff, one for court stuff, one for drugs, and then the employment people. They didn't seem to co-ordinate with each other much and in the end I just gave up on all of them and stopped turning up." Gareth, aged 23.

Barrier/issue/problem

The separate issue 'silo' based structure of government funding tends to discourage the provision of flexible 'whole-of-life' support to address the full range of barriers to economic and social participation in a co-ordinated way.

The employment services system tends to underestimate the impact of severe and multiple disadvantages experienced by many young people with mental health issues and/or disability. As a consequence, the value of taking the time to engage with young people through 'pre-employment' relationship-based interventions to build personal skills and social connectedness is often overlooked.

Both within the disability and mental health employment sector, and the broader employment services system, there is insufficient commitment at the policy and program level to assist the 'most disadvantaged'. There is a tendency to focus exclusively on the 'most employable' without due consideration to what can be achieved if appropriate support is also provided to the most disadvantaged. Note: within the mental health and disability employment field, assessment of disadvantage needs to include a holistic assessment of all areas of disadvantage, ie. not be confined solely to assessments of the level of disability.

Goals

Employment support services for disadvantaged young people should occur within a holistic framework based on understanding and appreciating the totality of every individual, including the full range of issues and disadvantages they are experiencing and their particular strengths and abilities.

The value of taking the time to engage with young people through 'pre-employment' relationship-based interventions to build personal skills and social connectedness should be incorporated into models of employment support for people with a mental illness and/or disability.

The continuum of support available through the disability and mental health employment system, and the broader employment service system, should include a commitment to assisting the most disadvantaged. Anybody who expresses a wish to engage in exploring employment and other economic and social participation opportunities should be provided with support that matches their level of need.

Recommended Solutions and Actions

1. The models of employment support for people with a mental health issue and/or disability should be expanded to incorporate whole-of-life, 'joined-up' approaches that have the capacity to provide holistic assistance with employment and the full range of barriers to economic and social participation for the most disadvantaged, including: social and family connectedness; drug and alcohol issues; housing; criminal justice issues. These models should include an acknowledgement of the value of taking the time to engage with disadvantaged young people through 'pre-employment' relationship-based interventions to build personal skills and social connectedness.

Priority Area 2: More creative thinking about the right environments for disadvantaged young people to gain skills and work experience, including the value of social businesses to 'fill the gap' in the transition to training and employment

Barrier/issue/problem

Reflecting the tendency of the employment services system to underestimate the impact of severe and multiple disadvantages experienced by many young people with mental health issues and/or disability (see Priority Area 1 on previous page) there has been insufficient attention to creating the right environments for disadvantaged young people to gain and practice 'pre-employment' social skills and vocational skills. In many instances, young people are not well suited to traditional learning and training environments (and/or are forced to consider these options before they are ready) resulting in high rates of drop-out from training courses.

There is a large gap in existing employment and training opportunities for young people whose preferred method of learning is through 'hands-on doing' of work related tasks.

There has been insufficient recognition by government of the value of social businesses (sometimes referred to as social firms or social enterprises and/or the intermediate labour market sector) in providing disadvantaged people with work experience as a stepping stone to mainstream training and employment.

Goal

The range of training and work experience opportunities for disadvantaged young people should include a variety of flexible environments designed to engage young people in the development of a combination of 'pre-employment' social skills, vocational skills and work experience.

Recommended Solutions and Actions

2. The Australian Government should provide increased support for a wider variety of training and employment programs designed to engage young people with mental health issues and/or disability in the development of a combination of 'pre-employment' social skills, vocational skills and work experience. This should include increased support for social businesses to 'fill the gap' in work experience opportunities for people with a mental illness and/or disability and others experiencing disadvantage.

Priority Area 3: Better ongoing 'post-placement' support to assist retention in training and employment

Barrier/issue/problem

The design and delivery of employment support services places doesn't sufficiently acknowledge the importance of 'post placement' support required by many people to successfully maintain their employment or training activity.

Goal

People who require 'post placement' support to successfully maintain their employment or training activity receive the support they need.

Recommended Solutions and Actions

3. Revised models of employment support for people with a mental illness and/or disability should include increased capacity for 'post placement' support, with variations in the style and length of post-placement support to be determined by individual circumstances.

Priority Area 4: Improved literacy and numeracy support for young adults who have left school

Barrier/issue/problem

Amongst the population of disadvantaged young people who leave school before completing Years 11 or 12, there are many who have undiagnosed learning or language processing difficulties. This includes many young people who require additional support to meet the functional literacy and numeracy requirements expected in the majority of workplaces.

Goal

In addition to improved approaches to school-based support for young people with learning or language processing difficulties, every young person who leaves school before the completion of Year 12 should have access to opportunities to address any issues associated with a learning or language processing difficulty, including literacy and numeracy issues.

Recommended Solutions and Actions

4. Within the context of a holistic approach to supporting disadvantaged young people (see also Priority Area 1), the employment services system should promote opportunities for every young person experiencing difficulties with literacy and numeracy to be provided with individually tailored support to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. This support should be flexible and designed to take into account different individual learning styles and the impact of any specific learning or language processing difficulty an individual may have.

Priority Area 5: Improvements to the Centrelink income support system to eliminate penalties for 'having a go' at employment or training

Barrier/issue/problem

The structure of the Centrelink income support system (unemployment payments and the Disability Support Pension) does not sufficiently encourage people with a mental illness and/or disability who want to 'have a go' at pursuing an employment or training option. Fear of penalties or other loss of Centrelink entitlements due to 'failure' can be a significant disincentive to pursuing employment or training opportunities.

Goal

All efforts by people with a mental illness or disability to pursue work or training opportunities should be rewarded by the Centrelink income support system. Under no circumstances should the Centrelink system impose penalties on people who 'have a go' at work or training. People should be allowed to try and 'fail' without the prospect of penalties overshadowing their decisions.

Recommended Solutions and Actions

5. The income test and eligibility criteria for Centrelink unemployment payments and the Disability Support Pension should be reformed to ensure that all recipients are appropriately rewarded (and not penalised) for pursuing employment or training opportunities.