

The Hon Christian Porter MP  
Minister for Social Services  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am writing in response to the Department of Social Services consultation process to develop the Australian Government's supported employment policy. By way of background the Queensland Mental Health Commission was established by the Queensland Government in 2013, as an independent statutory body, to drive ongoing reform towards a more integrated, evidence-based, recovery-oriented mental health and alcohol and drug system.

It is well recognised that employment has important personal, social and economic benefits for everyone, including people living with a mental illness. Importantly, for people living with mental illness, participating in employment can contribute to and support their recovery journey. Most people living with a mental illness value employment and are motivated to work or return to work.

Importantly, the Australian Government has ratified the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* which under Article 27 includes the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others.

Nevertheless, in 2014-15, Australian Bureau of Statistics' data shows that only 61.2 per cent of Queenslanders aged 16 – 64 years who reported having mental/behavioural problems were employed compared to 79.6 per cent of those who did not report having these problems.<sup>1</sup> Other data shows that for people who are living with severe mental illness, for example psychosis, their employment level drops to around 22 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence-based models of employment support, such as Individual Placement and Support, have been found to be effective in supporting people living with a mental illness to gain work. There is evidence to suggest they are, however, less effective at ensuring the longer-term maintenance of employment.<sup>3</sup> For people living with mental illness, maintenance of employment is impacted by:

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (unpublished) 4364.0 National Health Survey 2014-15

<sup>2</sup> Waghorn, G., Saha, S., Harvey, C. and McGrath, J. (2012) Earning and learning in people with psychotic disorders. Results from Australia's second survey of psychotic disorders, *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 46(8), 774-785.

<sup>3</sup> Waghorn, G., Hielscher, E., and Shield, J. (2015) Planning post-employment support for people with psychiatric disabilities, *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(3), 21-33.

- a lack of evidence about how to best support both the employer and employee once employment has commenced
- issues of personal disclosure of mental illness in the workplace
- the potentially fluctuating and episodic nature of mental illness and accompanying need for treatment
- the nature of the work and sector in which employment is often obtained.

Barriers to people living with mental illness gaining and maintaining employment exist at the personal, interpersonal/community, and systemic levels.

Personal barriers can include the impact of the symptoms of mental illness and their fluctuation over time; the effects of medication; self-esteem and stigma related issues; and intrinsic motivation. Such personal barriers can be reduced through effective clinical and psychosocial support including motivational interviewing and cognitive remediation, which can help people to make positive change in their lives and to learn skills to address the cognitive impact that may occur with mental illness.

The perceptions, expectations and behaviours often displayed by others, including families/informal carers, mental health professionals, employers and other employees can create intrapersonal and community barriers to employment for people living with a mental illness. All levels of government in partnership with services providers, business and industry leaders and employers and people living with a mental illness, families and the broader community need to work together to dispel myths, increase awareness, and improve attitudes towards mental illness, and create environments and workplaces that are both adaptive to, and inclusive of, people living with a mental illness.

A wide range of systemic issues disadvantage people living with a mental illness and impact on their ability to gain and maintain employment. This includes availability of supportive programs to enable people to maintain or re-engage with education and training; access to financial resources to meet the basic needs of life as well as meet the costs associated with 'job hunting' and participating in employment; and the way supported employment services are structured and delivered.

More needs to be done to ensure this right to employment is enshrined in the Australian society. The following provides a short overview of the major issues that the Australian Government and the Department of Social Services should consider in supporting people with a mental illness to gain and maintain employment.

#### Support for meeting people's basic needs first

Many people living with mental illness experience a range of issues and disadvantage caused by co-morbid physical health issues, reliance on social welfare payment, experience of tenuous housing arrangements, social isolation, lack of access to services and transport. These issues can all impact on the ability and capacity of an individual living with a mental illness to actively seek and/or maintain employment. As such, organisations and services need to work together with these individuals to ensure that their basic needs are met prior to identifying and working towards employment goals.

### Social welfare policy

Many people living with mental illness rely on social welfare payments such as the Disability Support Pension (DSP). Reliance on the DSP may mean that people's economic circumstances are such that the cost of seeking or participating in work creates additional financial strain. In other circumstances it may be that the perceived or real impact of deductions and loss of entitlements on commencement of work act as a disincentive for employment. These financial issues need to be considered and responded to both at a societal level and when supporting people living with a mental illness to actively seek and participate in employment.

### Education and skill development pathways

Given that the onset of mental illness often occurs during adolescence or early adulthood, it is not uncommon for people affected by mental health issues to experience disruption to their secondary, tertiary or vocational education. Consequently, many people living with a mental illness need to have access to programs that support maintenance of, or re-entry into, education and work-skill development opportunities.

### Formal support for gaining and maintaining employment

While there are supported employment services working effectively with people living with a mental illness, more needs to be done to ensure that all supported employment services are:

- able to respond to the specific issues that arise with mental illness and psychosocial disability as compared to physical and intellectual disabilities
- evidence-based and tailored to the individual needs of the person living with mental illness
- accessible and available to people living with a mental illness regardless of where they live
- equipped to develop their workforce's capacity to effectively respond to people living with mental illness
- linked into the broader mental health system so that both sectors can work together collaboratively to effectively respond to the needs, goals and aspirations of people living with a mental illness.

### Impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme

As outlined in the Department's discussion paper, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) certainly provides an opportunity for people living with disabilities to work towards employment goals and aspirations. However, employment programs will need to adapt to individuals purchasing services through their NDIS funding packages rather than block funding arrangements. Additionally, there needs to be recognition that most people living with a mental illness, even one which significantly impacts on their lives, will not be eligible for an NDIS package. Any changes to the way employment programs operate due to the implementation of the NDIS, should in no way further disadvantage people living with a mental illness.

### Changing attitudes and changing workplaces:

As previously mentioned, all Australians living with a mental illness have a right to participate in work. Often this right is diminished because of other people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. More needs to be done by governments at every level with mental health professionals, families, carers, the broader community, and Australian workplaces to ensure that stigmatising and discriminating expectations and practices do not negatively impede the motivation and opportunity for people living with a mental illness to participate in employment. The types of actions that continue to need support are:

- changing perceptions and attitudes towards employees living with mental illness
- providing training, support and mentoring to employers, workplace leaders and management to respond to mental illness in the workplace

- introducing programs in the workplace that support everyone's mental health and wellbeing.

In many cases, with reasonable adjustment, people living with a mental illness can effectively participate in employment. Unfortunately, some employers perceive that undertaking reasonable adjustments are difficult and costly. There is evidence to suggest this is not the case.<sup>4</sup> The Australian Government should ensure programs to support organisations undertake reasonable adjustments (for example the Workplace Modification Scheme) are well promoted and appropriately resourced.

Investment in research, evaluation and social enterprise

To ensure that supported employment services are effective in enabling people living with a mental illness to gain and maintain employment there needs to be continued investment in research to understand best practice approaches and to evaluate service effectiveness.

Additionally, government should consider ways to increase the social value derived from its spending through supporting social enterprises that particularly focus on employing people with mental illness and other disabilities. In Queensland, the Commission is working in partnership with the Department of Housing and Public Works to build capability and awareness among Queensland Government buyers about social procurement policy and practice, particularly as it relates to social enterprises; and support the Queensland social enterprise sector to build capability and capacity as suppliers to government.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this consultation process. I call on the Australian Government and the Department of Social Services to give close and careful consideration to the specific needs of people living with a mental illness to effectively participate in employment. With appropriate supports, people living with a mental illness can share in the benefits that employment brings for individuals, families and the community.

Should you require further information in relation to this submission please contact Josephine Peat, Principal Policy Officer on 07 3033 0312 or via email at [Josephine.peat@qmhc.qld.gov.au](mailto:Josephine.peat@qmhc.qld.gov.au).

Yours sincerely



Ivan Frkovic  
**Mental Health Commissioner**  
**Queensland Mental Health Commission**

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<sup>4</sup> Lengnick-Hall, M.L., Gaunt, P.M., and Kulkarni, M. (2008) Overlooked and underutilized: People with disabilities are an untapped human resource, *Human Resource Management*, 47(2), 255-273.