



National Disability Employment Strategy

Mental Health Victoria's response to the consultation paper

May 2021

1. About MHV

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) is the peak body for the mental health sector in Victoria. Our members include consumer and carer groups, community health and mental health services, hospitals, medical associations and colleges, police and emergency services associations, unions, local governments, and other bodies across the health and related sectors.

Our aim is to ensure that people living with mental illness can access the care they need, when and where they need it. Our view is that all Australians should have access to a core suite of services that they can choose from – be they delivered in the home, community, or hospital.

Our vision is for a mental health system that:

- involves people with lived experience, including unpaid family and friend carers, in decisions which affect their lives
- provides tailored, high-quality supports to people with different care needs and at different life stages
- wraps around a person, ensuring all of their needs can be met
- is easily navigable, providing continuity of care
- is outcomes-focused
- is adequately and sustainably resourced to meet current and future needs including demand.

2. Introduction

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) welcomes this opportunity to provide input into the DSS consultation paper¹ on the National Disability Employment Strategy (the Strategy).

The Strategy presents a considerable opportunity for people with psychosocial disability to better access the social, financial, and overall quality of life outcomes that gainful employment offers. Addressing the particular needs of people with psychosocial disability is critical because, despite having some of the lowest rates of employment when compared with other disability types, we know that when provided with the right supports people with psychosocial disability have very good employment prospects.²

This submission outlines MHV's response to each of the priority areas outlined in the consultation paper, with further recommendations to ensure the Strategy achieves its intended outcomes and ensures people with psychosocial disability can meet their full potential as contributing members of Australian society.

3. Background

People with psychosocial disability constitute a significant proportion of people with disability, with more than 9% of NDIS participants living with a primary psychosocial disability.³ When accounting for the costs of service use, unemployment benefits, lower social cohesion, and lost productivity,⁴ mental illness has been estimated to cost the nation \$60 billion a year.⁵ Addressing the unique barriers to employment experienced by people with psychosocial disability has the potential to unlock great personal, social and economic potential.

People with psychosocial disability can face multiple, often complex and unique barriers to employment related to having a mental health condition, including:

- structural barriers: poor access to quality employment programs and a lack of aligned mental health supports
- attitudinal barriers: stigma and discrimination in both the community and workplace
- personal, health and/or social barriers: a higher likelihood of poorer physical health, substance misuse, experiences of violence, homelessness, previous interactions with the criminal justice system etc.
- work-related barriers: such as interrupted/low level of skills/experience, interrupted/low level of education, limited social networks, poor literacy or numeracy, and lack of access to transport.

As a result, current employment rates for people with psychosocial disability remain exceptionally low. In 2015, just one in four people with a psychosocial disability had any form of employment, compared with just over half of people with another disability type, and 78.8% of people with no disability. Very few people with psychosocial disability were employed full time (8.1%) compared with 34.4% of people with other disability types and 53.8% of people with no disability.⁶

Despite these figures, approximately two thirds of people with serious mental illness want to work and tailored programs have been effective in assisting people into employment. For example, across 28 studies, the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program showed an average competitive employment rate of 55% compared to 25% of controls. Similarly, 17 randomised control trials found that people receiving these services were 2.4 times more likely to be employed.⁷

4. Summary of recommendations

To support people with psychosocial disability to have greater access to clear and supported pathways to employment, MHV recommends adoption of the following recommendations:

1. Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand

- 1.1 Provide specific information to employers about psychosocial disability*
- 1.2 Provide training and support to employers to address stigma and discrimination and to provide safe and inclusive workplaces*
- 1.3 Provide support to employers and jobseekers to ensure successful job placements*
- 1.4 Ensure on-the-ground collaboration to drive innovation and improvement*

2. Building employment skills experience and confidence of young people

- 2.1 Adopt a whole-of-working-life approach to unemployment and employment loss/disruption*

3. Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers

- 3.1 Develop clearer and more appropriate pathways to and through employment services*
- 3.2 Expand programs that support people with psychosocial disability, including by making the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program available nationwide through headspace and Adult Mental Health Centres*

4. Changing community attitudes

- 4.1 Include consideration of mental health stigma and discrimination, and connect with efforts in these areas*

5. Ensure the Strategy achieves outcomes

- 5.1 Require the development of an ambitious outcomes framework to drive strategic action*
- 5.2 Ensure all planning and action is co-designed and implemented by people with psychosocial disabilities, their carers and families*
- 5.3 Align with other relevant local, state and national plans, strategies, and reform processes, including cross-departmental and cross-sectoral work*

6. Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand

Recommendation 1.1: Provide specific information to employers about psychosocial disability

MHV welcomes the consultation paper's focus on interventions to improve employer engagement, capability, and demand. To support the employment of people with psychosocial disability, we encourage the provision of specific advice for employers on:

- psychosocial disability, its impacts and recovery
- ways to support people with psychosocial disability to return to and sustain work
- the external systems available to help and how to access them (noting these may change significantly due to mental health reforms).

Recommendation 1.2: Provide training and support to employers to address stigma and discrimination and to provide safe and inclusive workplaces

Given the stigma that still exists in the community around mental health issues, job outcomes for people with psychosocial disability are more sensitive to employer attitudes.⁸ These attitudes impact the availability of work and treatment of people with psychosocial disability in the workplace. Therefore, a mental health education strategy for employers should address stigma towards mental health issues and the discriminatory treatment of people experiencing mental health issues.

Employers must also be educated and supported to ensure that their workplace practices, policies and procedures (including procurement) are suitable for all people, including people with psychosocial disabilities. Training, guidance and auditing of all workplaces should ensure workplaces are safe, inclusive and equitable.

Education and training programs for employers would need to cover topics such as:

- workplace mental health and wellbeing
- recovery-oriented practice and policy
- trauma-informed practice and policy
- cultural safety
- disability planning.

Additional resources and supports should be provided to implement this work, including best-practice standards and guidelines.

Recommendation 1.3: Provide support to employers and jobseekers to ensure successful job placements

Employers must also be supported to provide successful job placements which allow people with psychosocial disability to gain vital work experience. To better assist both employers and employees, there is a need to provide for:

- a centrally coordinated agency to support job placements⁹
- fair and appropriately timed financial incentives for employers, including allowances for the episodic nature of mental illness
- simplified contract compliance burdens for employers
- fair wage subsidies for employees
- discretionary funding to cover the financial costs to employees of finding and starting a new job.

Recommendation 1.4: Ensure on-the-ground collaboration to drive innovation and improvement

A recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers recently found that flexible and collaborative approaches work best to reduce structural barriers to employment.¹⁰ The Inquiry found that the co-design and co-delivery of employment interventions has the potential to better meet labour market needs, create work-ready candidates and support employers to recruit disadvantaged jobseekers.

The Strategy therefore has an important opportunity to develop engagement mechanisms that support routine collaboration between:

- jobseekers with a disability, including those with a psychosocial disability
- community service providers with knowledge and experience supporting jobseekers with specific disabilities
- industry/employer representatives
- education providers.¹¹

Examples of some collaborative models that are achieving successful outcomes for people with psychosocial disabilities are included in the appendix.

7. Building employment skills, experience and confidence

Recommendation 2.1: Adopt a whole-of-working-life approach to unemployment and employment loss/disruption

The strategy should adopt a whole-of-working-life approach, identifying and taking action at key points across the lifespan. Although we support the Strategy's focus on the support of young people with a disability, we also recognise the importance of working to prevent the loss or disruption of employment at any working-age and intervening early to support people back to work.

Any approach to skill building and employment support should be broad and comprehensive whilst recognising the need for supports that are tailored to individuals' unique, and sometimes complex, experiences and situations. For example, a young person who has been recently diagnosed with a mental health condition may still be coming to terms with this diagnosis and may not necessarily identify with having a 'psychosocial disability'. Tailored supports delivered by the IPS has been proven to triple workforce participation rates of people with serious mental illness, from 20 per cent to 60 per cent.¹²

In addition, a whole-of-working-life-approach is important to address employment issues at all ages. Although youth is a particularly critical period for people experiencing severe mental health issues, the episodic and variable impacts of mental ill health and psychosocial disability also have devastating and potentially preventable impacts on people's lives throughout adulthood. Older people often miss out on mental health¹³ and employment supports¹⁴ and are particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of disadvantage.

8. Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers

Recommendation 3.1: Develop clearer and more appropriate pathways to and through employment services

We commend DSS for committing to improving the systems and services for jobseekers and employers. Making it simpler to navigate and use government services and ensuring service providers deliver safe, quality and effective services are vital to improving employment outcomes for people with psychosocial disability.

Currently, it is difficult for people with psychosocial disability to access and navigate disability employment supports. Many do not pursue employment support because they don't know where to go or they find the eligibility and assessment processes too difficult (especially in combination with other complicated processes associated with the NDIS and Centrelink). Others who do enter the system often end up with the wrong support or job placement because their needs were not accurately assessed.¹⁵

There is a need for clearer and more appropriate pathways to and through employment services for people with psychosocial disability including streamlined assessments (using more appropriate work readiness assessment tools) undertaken by skilled professionals with an understanding of mental health.

Recommendation 3.2: Expand programs that support people with psychosocial disability, including by making the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program available nationwide through headspace and Adult Mental Health Centres

Most people with disabling mental health issues do not get the intensity or type of support they need through the NDIS or DES.¹⁶ A broader range of employment supports are needed. The focus of these supports should be broad enough to encompass the prevocational rehabilitation and intensive, integrated support that many people with psychosocial disability need to participate in their communities and work towards job-readiness.

The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program has demonstrated success in improving employment outcomes for people with severe mental illness and psychosocial disability. MHV has welcomed the Government's expansion of IPS services at headspace sites. However, there is scope to expand IPS further to include people of all ages who are experiencing unemployment. To achieve this, IPS should be available nationwide through all headspace and Adult Mental Health Centres.

In addition, other employment services that support people with psychosocial disability should be scaled up, including the case studies in the appendix to this document. Each has been successful in supporting people with psychosocial disability into employment and other forms of participation. Integral to the success of these programs is that they are:

- longer-term
- delivered by skilled and experienced mental health practitioners
- recovery-oriented
- trauma-informed
- culturally safe
- collaborative
- inclusive of families and carers
- holistic
- coordinated with mental health, NDIS and other supports.

9. Changing community attitudes

Recommendation 4.1: Include consideration of mental health stigma and discrimination, and connect with efforts in these areas

MHV supports the inclusion of community attitudes as a guiding approach for the Strategy.

Stigma and discrimination around mental health and disability can affect every aspect of a person's life, from their access to services to their social connections, relationships and especially their employment prospects. By contributing to social isolation and trauma, community attitudes may also contribute to the development of new, and the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health challenges.

It is therefore critical that attitudes be addressed across all communities, with consideration given to stigma and discrimination around mental health, including connecting the Strategy with other anti-stigma projects and initiatives, noting significant recommendations in this area from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

10. Operationalising the Strategy

Recommendation 5.1: Require the development of an ambitious outcomes framework to drive strategic action

Achieving meaningful change requires a shared understanding of the outcomes to be achieved. As well as setting the vision and key priorities to focus action, the Strategy should require the development of an outcomes framework to support this shared understanding and to ensure accountability.

An outcomes framework should be co-designed and evidence-based, and should establish:

- clear intended outcomes across each of the priority areas and actions
- specific targets relevant to different population groups and sub-groups
- a mechanism to measure success
- a means to publicly report on the outcomes.

Recommendation 5.2: Ensure all planning and action is co-designed and implemented by people with psychosocial disabilities, their carers and families

People with a lived experience of psychosocial disability, their carers and family should play a key role in the development and operationalisation of the Strategy. Targeted co-design and consultation approaches are required for people with psychosocial disability as well as diverse groups to ensure systems are designed with their needs in mind. Self-determination and cultural safety must be assured for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We recommend the Strategy ensure co-design is underpinned by the following core principles to ensure participation is genuine and meaningful:

- **Partnership** – People must be treated as partners in the process, including participation in leadership roles and equal access to relevant information.
- **Purpose** – There should be a clearly defined purpose from the outset which should be revisited regularly to ensure work is undertaken in a meaningful and productive way that avoids the risk of tokenism.

- **Power** – Power differentials should be acknowledged and addressed, including with regard to lived experiences, identities and cultural backgrounds, to ensure processes do not reinscribe pre-existing power structures.
- **Capacity-building** – There should be a focus on supporting the wellbeing and building the capacity of participants, including through appropriate remuneration to reflect the expertise being shared.

Recommendation 5.3: Align with other relevant local, state and national plans, strategies, and reform processes, including cross departmental and cross-sector work

Sustainable employment for people with psychosocial disability often depends on the coordination of multiple supports from across different program areas, funded by different government departments and levels of government. Some of the most powerful barriers to employment commonly experienced by people with psychosocial disability relate to associated issues such as other disabilities, physical health issues, housing issues, family violence, low income, harm from alcohol and other drugs, legal issues etc.

The complex relationship between these social determinants of health, psychosocial disability and employment requires an integrated or at least coordinated response spanning multiple funded agencies and service sectors. To achieve this integration and collaboration, MHV recommends the Strategy align with relevant local, state, national disability, mental health and other relevant plans, strategies, and reform processes, including those covering relevant workforces, including:

- Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
- Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health
- Australian Department of Health trial of Adult Mental Health Centres
- Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety
- Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability
- Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers.

It is vital that the Strategy consider the levers present in these parallel reform process to ensure strategic alignment of actions, effective use of government resources and the long-term efficacy of the initiatives.

11. Conclusion

MHV commends the Australian Government for responding to the need to address vocation and employment for people with a disability. The Strategy has a considerable opportunity to address the very high unemployment rate of people with a psychosocial disability by driving strategic action that:

- is led by outcomes
- is co-designed with people with psychosocial disability, carers and family
- is integrated and aligned with other relevant work
- supports collaboration and integration.

In this submission we have outlined recommendations that build on the four priority areas outlined in the consultation paper to provide for:

- a comprehensive, whole-of-person and whole-of-working-life approach which includes prevention and early intervention
- vocational and pre-vocational support, as well as employment support
- an expanded range of tailored employment programs for people with severe mental illness and psychosocial disability that are easy to access and navigate
- increased education, training and support for employers

By following these recommendations, the Strategy will be more able to meet the needs of people with psychosocial disability and allow people to reach their potential as contributing members of the Australian community.

MHV again thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to contribute to this vital piece of work and welcomes any further opportunity to discuss any of the points raised in this submission.



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12. Appendix: Psychosocial employment support provider case studies

McAuley Community Services for Women, McAuley Works¹⁷

McAuley Community Services for Women is an integrated service for women who want to be safe from family violence. It provides 24/7 crisis support, temporary accommodation and a range of services for women and their children, including housing, employment, mental health, legal, family/parenting and other supports.

As part as a suite of services, McAuley Works offers women employment supports to assist them to find and maintain employment. Workforce participation can help women to gain financial independence as well as confidence and self-esteem, which are vital to prevent women from returning to unsafe or violent relationships. The program assists these women to overcome the unique barriers they face to achieving these goals.

The importance of the program is illustrated in this story from one of the participants:

'The McAuley House was a God-sent help for me. I left Wodonga [regional Victoria] due to family issues and not being able to find employment there. I came to Melbourne in search of employment which I found within a week. However I had no stable place to stay as I was jumping from couch to couch.

One night I was unable to find a place to stay as my plans had fallen through that night and I was stuck in Footscray. As I was walking and crying out of defeat I stumbled across a green house that offered refuge for women without a place to stay. I hesitated to ring the bell because I wasn't an Australian citizen so I thought they wouldn't help me and I was also embarrassed of how bad I had let my situation get.

As I hesitated to ring the bell a lady came out ... I told my story and in my mind I really didn't know how she could help me, but she really listened to what my urgent needs was, and not wants. She organised a two-way return ticket from Melbourne to Albury-Wodonga and money to buy clothes as I was wearing ripped clothes.

...With that act of kindness I was able to settle in Melbourne the next week, I had more time to sort out my stay when I returned to Melbourne.

I sadly lost my job and I felt helpless again.

I called the McAuley House and they set up a meeting with me the same afternoon. They drove to my location and they bought me hot chocolate and made me feel comfortable. They gave me hope knowing that I wasn't doing this by myself and that they would support me with getting my CV up and running to attract more jobs.

Within a week I retrieved a full time job and six interviews from the CV they assisted me with. The McAuley House was my support system, and with their help I was able to become independent and stable.

My new job was with an interpreting company. While I was there I received numerous calls from McAuley House booking interpreters to help other women get on their feet. It was always emotional speaking with them because that's where I started off as well. I am and will be forever grateful to McAuley for helping me get my life back on track."

WISE Employment, WISE Ways to Work¹⁸

WISE Employment is an employment support provider, providing services under Disability Employment Services and JobActive.

WISE Ways to Work is WISE Employment's vocational rehabilitation and employment support program for people experiencing mental illness. It is a capacity-building, skills training and employment support program which provides opportunities for participants to gain exposure to work and to work towards open employment.

All participants start with WISE's six-month vocational rehabilitation program, Employ Your Mind, which helps build key skills for work and confidence. It has a particular focus on improving cognitive functioning skills and includes a work orientation placement to gain exposure to work. Participants can also take part in the Optimal Health Program, an 8-week program that helps participants to manage their mental, physical, emotional and occupational health. The program's vocational coaches and occupational therapists support participants on an individualised graded vocational pathway that builds success at each stage.

WISE Ways to Work's network of partner employers provide work experience, training, and job opportunities to participants. Vocational coaches work with employers to identify and adapt positions and provide training in best practice mental health workplace support.

Comments from participants illustrate the effectiveness of this approach:

"The program has given me purpose and happiness in myself. I used to be too introspective, but now I'm not too focused on myself ... I'm using my mind again and my memory. Routine and planning has given me purpose. I feel inspired."

"The program has made me feel more capable. I have realised that skills that I learnt ... can be generalised."

"Through this program, I have rediscovered my skills and attributes . . . I have become more reflective, able to receive feedback, aware of my strengths and areas I need to work on. My interest in learning new things has increased, and my ability to concentrate, organise, and problem-solve have improved."

Employer feedback:

"I could work with the [WWtW] team all day every day of my job allowed it. They really know what they are doing and have designed the employer support approach really, really well."

"The [WWtW] team are great, the occupational therapists really know their stuff and will work alongside you to ensure the placement is a success. That is what drives them."

Kindred Clubhouse¹⁹

Kindred Clubhouse Inc. is a mental health support organisation which operates as a community-based centre in Hastings Victoria. The centre is a safe, welcoming space that aims to create a strong community, network of support, and lasting friendships for people experiencing mental health issues, as well as access to employment and educational opportunities.

The Kindred Clubhouse operates in-line with the internationally recognised Clubhouse model – an evidence-based model for mental health recovery. The model comprises 36 accreditation standards guided by 4 principles:

- The right to a place to come
- A right to meaningful work
- A right to meaningful relationships; and
- A right to a place to return.

The centre is run by and for members, which means members work side-by-side (as peers and partners) and with the staff, to run every function of the centre.

Lynne has regularly attended the Clubhouse since it opened in 2016:

“I like coming down (to the Clubhouse) because the guys are great. I came in with a friend one day and started helping in the kitchen. I just taught them a few things – health, safety and stuff. I enjoy doing it. It gives you a purpose in life, creates a schedule for your week and, for me, I don’t see anyone until next Saturday and I really look forward to it. It might take me a few times to get out of the door, but when I do, I love it.”

Kindred Clubhouse really gives me a purpose. Kindred Clubhouse teaches us life skills too. Cooking is something that we really enjoy, the barbecue in particular. This is a place where people come and go, you can’t hold them to coming. Part of Kindred Clubhouse is understanding that you should not force people to attend.”

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