

Department of Social Services
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Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the way forward

[REDACTED] welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Social Services' consultation regarding the future of supported employment.

People with disabilities experience lower employment rates and labour force participation compared to those without disabilities. In 2022, the labour force participation rate for people aged 15-64 years with disability was 60.5 percent. The participation rate for people without disability was 84.9 percent. Labor force participation declines with the severity of limitation: 64.6 percent of people with a moderate or mild limitation were in the labour force, compared with 37.2 percent of people with a profound or severe limitation.

Approaches to improve disability employment over many decades have failed. Despite various policy interventions, the gap in employment rates between people with and without disability has not significantly narrowed over the past two decades, highlighting the limitations of previous and current approaches. Australians with disability experience an unemployment rate twice that of people without disability, with little positive change in 20 years. This matters to the wellbeing of people with disability because employment is a pathway to social connection and economic freedom.

Our ongoing advocacy has highlighted the need for a more inclusive, community-led approach to disability employment. We believe that the current employment system must evolve to better reflect the real and diverse experiences of people with disability, and to address the systemic barriers that limit genuine workforce participation.

We feel that there are structural issues with the way policy on disability employment is historically situated and arranged and that specifically there is an underutilisation of the networks, contacts, leverage, hiring capacity and expertise that exists at a state, territory and municipal level to get people into sustainable jobs. We also think that the employment support offer is incomplete and that the remit of job services should be to stabilise, support and activate people in a number of areas of their lives which are conducive to helping people to become work ready and to retain jobs.

About us

[REDACTED] organisation delivering reputable national systemic advocacy informed by our experience in individual advocacy and community and government consultation.

[REDACTED] As a Disabled People's Organisation, the majority of our organisation, including our Board of Management, staff and members, are people with disabilities. [REDACTED] lived experience. It is strongly committed to advancing opportunities for the insights, experiences and opinions of people with disabilities to be heard and acknowledged.

Supporting Employment

Through this submission we highlight the need for more holistic and inclusive employment programs for people with disability. The submission argues that employment policy has been too narrowly held by the Commonwealth, with insufficient roles for State, Territory, and municipal governments – despite their important policy levers and connections to local economies.

We support shifting some funding from traditional specialist providers to Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and Disability Representative Organisations (DROs), enabling them to foster employment opportunities through peer support, self-advocacy, and community development. This broader approach would help individuals build the foundational stability – such as housing, transport, and social connection – needed to pursue employment.

Finally, we support piloting a collaborative, community-led employment model [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

The Role of Targeted Foundational Supports

A significant gap in current employment programs is the limited recognition of the targeted foundational supports people with disability often require to pursue and sustain meaningful employment.

Supports such as stable housing, access to transport, social connection, and development of soft skills (e.g., confidence, communication, and routine) are frequently overlooked. These are not peripheral – they are essential. Programs that do not integrate these supports risk leaving many people behind.

We strongly advocate for targeted foundational supports to be recognised as core components of future employment models. These should include peer-led support, self-advocacy skill-building, and community development approaches that empower individuals well before they reach a point of “job readiness.”

We also think that the role of employment providers should be broadened to encompass wider areas of social activation and skills development that set people up for confident long-term employment.

Broadening the Scope of Employment Policy Responsibility

The current employment framework is overly centralised, with the Australian Government bearing almost exclusive responsibility. This has led to fragmented implementation and missed opportunities to leverage local knowledge and resources.

State, Territory, and municipal governments have important policy levers at their disposal – procurement, taxation incentives, and deep relationships with local employers and chambers of commerce. Their proximity to community also positions them well to deliver tailored employment initiatives.

We support a broader, more integrated approach where all levels of government collaborate to create joined-up, place-based solutions that reflect the lived realities of people with disability.

Funding Reform: Enabling DPO and DRO Involvement

We recommend a deliberate shift in funding arrangements to support the direct involvement of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and Disability Representative Organisations (DROs) in employment program delivery.

Currently, much of the funding is tied to specialist disability employment providers. By untethering a portion of these funds, the government can enable DPOs and DROs to offer peer support, preparatory training, and advocacy that directly complements employment goals.

These organisations are often best placed to deliver culturally safe, trusted support and should be resourced accordingly – not as an afterthought, but as an essential pillar of the program.

Work to change employer attitudes should also be more evidence based and undertaken closer to employers. We support the work of [REDACTED] which is employer lead. DPO's could also have a greater role here [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Pilot Site for Innovation

The ACT, with its single tier of government and track record of policy innovation in disability and economic inclusion, is well positioned to serve as a pilot location for a new model of supported employment.

We recommend that the Department consider a pilot in the ACT that:

- Embeds foundational supports as a standard part of the employment pathway;
- Partners directly with DPOs and community organisations;
- Demonstrates new funding models that shift resources towards grassroots, peer-led support;
- Includes clear intellectual property arrangements when collaborative outputs are produced (e.g. performance works, research reports, or training programs).

We could also trial improved approaches to attitudinal change with employers. There is strong work being done by the ACT Inclusion Council and we also have DPO approaches that are innovative such as our new Transport Transformed Project with Rebus Theatre and Deloitte Access Economics.

Conclusion

For supported employment to succeed, it must start with the person – not just the job. This means investing in the targeted foundational supports that people with disability identify as essential, and enabling trusted organisations to help deliver them.

We are disappointed that the Commonwealth continues persisting with variations on the same service model.

Employment policy for disability is an example of a wicked problem where government has some of the tools to address the problem but is also unintentionally making the problem worse by linking employment policy to income support while sitting remotely far away from most of the stakeholders and levers that might actually create entry level jobs. It is also an example of doing an approach again and again and expecting a different result.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] looks forward to continued engagement with the Department and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to further design and development of a new and better program that actually cuts through and supports more people into jobs.