



blindness and low vision services

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September 26 2011

## **The administration and purchasing of Disability Employment Services in Australia**

**By Vision Australia**

**Submission to:** Senate Education Employment & Workplace Relations Committee  
**Response Submitted by:** Glenda Alexander

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### **1. About Vision Australia**

Vision Australia is the nation's premier provider of blindness and low vision services and was formed by combining the expertise of several organisations who shared in a common purpose. We are a partnership that unites people who are blind, sighted and who have low

vision. Our goal is that people who are blind or have low vision will be able to access and participate fully in every aspect of life they choose. To help realise this goal, we provide orientation and mobility, employment, information, children's, recreation, independent living, advocacy and dog guide services. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and community groups, to help raise awareness, promote public education and to work towards eliminating barriers for our clients in the community.

Through our combined histories of providing a range of quality client focused services, Vision Australia is well placed to provide a considered voice on a range of public issues affecting people, who are blind, Deafblind, have low vision and have other difficulties accessing print.

## 2. Introduction

Employment is an area of particular importance for Vision Australia. Employment enables our clients to participate as valued members of society and be independent. In 2007 Vision Australia conducted a major research study, regarding the employment of people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. The study found:

- 63% of people who are blind or have low vision and want to work, are unemployed, compared to 14% in the general population.
- Unemployment for people with multiple disabilities (including vision) was extreme - 82.4%.
- Under-employment of people who are blind or have low vision is significant - 46% working part-time compared to 28% of the general population.
- The number of discouraged workers was high with only 13% of respondents who were unemployed not by choice actively seeking work.
- Long term unemployment was significantly higher than in the general population – 50% compared to 33%.
- Level of education had a direct influence on likelihood of being employed, with 66% of people with post graduate qualifications in employment.

Vision Australia Employment Services is a specialist provider under the Department of Education, Employment and Work Place Relations (DEEWR) Disability Employment Services (DES) contract. We offer this service in nine locations across regional and metropolitan Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. As a specialist Disability Employment Service provider, Vision Australia's delivers a holistic suite of services with a particular focus on enhancing an individual's mobility, independent living and assistive technology skills to increase their capacity to maintain their current work role or gain employment. We also work closely with employers to increase their disability awareness and support them in providing diverse employment opportunities for individuals with blindness or low vision. A unique feature of a specialist provider like Vision Australia is the fact that, in addition to accessing dedicated specialist employment services and staff, our employment clients and employers can also access a unique and broad range of other blindness and low vision specific services and expert professionals that are not available through a Generalist Disability Employment Service. This includes;

- Adaptive Technology Consultancy
- Equipment Solutions

- Orthoptics and Occupational Therapy
- Orientation and Mobility
- Braille Literacy/Numeracy
- On Line and Print Information Access

In responding to the Senate Education Employment and Workplace Relations Committee inquiry into the Administration and Purchasing of Disability Employment Services, Vision Australia wishes to principally emphasise the unique nature of Specialist Disability Employment Service providers in the market. In particular, we believe that the proposed DEEWR Disability Employment Service Performance Framework as presented with the required competitive tendering for providers with a level 3 star performance rating or less, does not adequately consider the unique worth and service scope of Specialist Disability Employment Service providers working to achieve the employment outcomes for their client group. We therefore make one principal recommendation to the Committee:

That Specialist Disability Employment Service providers with a Star Rating of 3 and above (rather than 4 and above) be offered a Contract extension until June 2015.

This recommendation is given based on the fact that:

1. The process of market testing does not have the same relevance for specialist providers as it does for generalist providers as specialist providers do not have a field of direct competitors that offer the same level of expertise and range of unique services required to facilitate employment outcomes for their specialist client group.
2. A 3 Star Rating has traditionally been considered a satisfactory Star Rating since the performance measurement system was put in place in 2007. Given specialist providers' expertise and range of additional services not offered by generalist services, extending the contract of specialist providers with a Star Rating of three still fits in with the Government's commitment to lifting performance expectations without putting the unique needs and employment aspirations of our client group at risk.
3. Due to the overall small number of job seekers who are blind or have low vision compared with other disability groups, it is very unlikely a new competitor will establish a specialist service for people who are blind or have low vision. The investment and time required to establish a service that would meet the needs of job seekers who are blind or have low vision would not be commercially viable for an alternative provider to set up over a three year contract period.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to make comment and we do so in light of our position, with a primary focus on section (D) of the terms of reference.

### **3. Response to enquiry -Terms of Reference D**

Firstly, it should be said that Vision Australia does not disagree with the general ideology underpinning the Framework: to maximise the quality and quantity of positive employment outcomes for people with disability, through maximising efficiency and value for money by lifting performance expectations. These are all principles that Vision Australia holds.

However, we do believe that the principle of true market testing cannot be applied to a specialist Disability Employment Service provider such as Vision Australia given the unique

range of services it offers and - a scope of services that are not offered by generalist providers. In all the locations Vision Australia offers Disability Employment Services there are no organisations or services that offer the same level of expertise and range of specialist services for job seekers who are blind or have low vision. Therefore, it is recommended contracts for sites for specialist providers should be extended if the site is 3 stars and above due to the lack of real competition.

Essentially, Vision Australia's entire suite of client focused services for people who are blind or who have low vision, provide a complimentary and holistic approach to achieving positive employment outcomes for our client group. These services demonstrate our unique place within the Disability Employment Services market and the following additional employment specific programs and initiatives further illustrate this point.

### **1. Specialist adaptive technology workplace assessments**

An essential element that is fundamental to the vast majority of our positive Disability Employment Service employment outcomes is worksite assessments and the provision of workplace modifications, adaptive technology and specialist equipment. As mentioned, typically our clients require specialist equipment such as closed circuit TV's, magnifiers, specialist lighting aids and adaptive technology such as computer based magnification (e.g. Zoom text or Magic) and screen reader systems (e.g. JAWS-"Job Access With Speech") to enable them to carry out a work role safely and independently. Assessment of the compatibility of a workplace's information technology/computer systems with screen reading and magnification software is also a key feature of the worksite assessments conducted by our specialist staff in adaptive technology.

In the financial year 2010/11, we conducted 143 workplace modifications assessments and applications. The volume of this work has been steadily increasing over the years and was up 19 per cent on the 2009/10 financial year. It should be noted that the workplace modifications statistics only reflect the services provided to Vision Australia clients through Job Access and do not incorporate the additional service provided to external clients or to other Disability Employment Service providers. These services for Vision Australia Disability Employment Service clients are crucial to achieving a positive employment outcome and require specific expertise and dedicated resources.

### **2. Workbased adaptive technology training and support**

Client training to develop skills and competence in the use of the adaptive technology or specialist equipment is also a unique feature of our employment programs in both the job preparation and job placement stage. As part of a workplace assessment, a Vision Australia specialist will also complete an application to Job Access to have any required equipment funded, supplied and installed at the workplace. Vision Australia also both install and provide training in the use of any adaptive technologies or specialist equipment provided in the workplace through our specialist Adaptive Technology Consultants and Trainers. Generalist Disability Employment Service providers do not generally have the expertise to provide this critical specialist training and follow up services.

### **3. In house accessibility/scripting**

Scripting is another specialist service that may be required when workplace software applications can not be easily interpreted by screen readers such as JAWS. Again Vision Australia is a unique specialist service that has a specially trained Adaptive Technology

Consultant that specifically works on scripting as well as assisting employer Information Technology departments to overcome accessibility issues.

#### **4. Pre placement job analysis**

Vision Australia is currently working with several large national employers to increase their disability confidence and identify suitable job roles for individuals with blindness or low vision via job analysis worksite assessments. The job analysis includes reviewing physical and information access and identifying the specialist equipment, adaptive technology and workplace modifications likely to be required for an individual with blindness or low vision. This approach has opened up job opportunities for our job seekers that may not have been identified had Vision Australia not been involved. It has also eliminated a critical barrier that many of our job seekers face when commencing a job- having the required adaptive technology or specialist equipment available on or before the job commencement date. Vision Australia is conducting these pre placement assessments free of charge as we believe this approach will help increase employer awareness and open up increased employment opportunities for individuals with blindness and low vision.

#### **5. Job In Jeopardy programs**

For people already in employment who are experiencing difficulty, the ability to be able to access assistance from our specialist Disability Employment Service is critical. Approximately 35 per cent of Vision Australia's work under the current Disability Employment Service contract is Job in Jeopardy programs. In many cases, the level of support needed across our entire spectrum of services is drastically inflated, as those who do lose some or all of their vision, require an intense level of contact across a range of support elements to assist them to adjust to their changed circumstance. Whilst this work does not contribute to Star Ratings performance, significant resources and specialist expertise is required to be able to deliver these services to clients and their employers. At a minimum, most Job in Jeopardy programs for individuals with blindness and low vision require specialist workplace assessments and the involvement of a specialist in Adaptive Technology to ensure an individual can remain independent in their work role and retain their job.

#### **6. Services/support to external clients and other Disability Employment Service providers**

Specialist services such as Vision Australia are often called upon to assist other Disability Employment Service providers to assist them in delivering services to clients with blindness and low vision. Vision Australia provided 131 Workplace Assessments under the National Panel of Assessors Program for external clients in 2010/11, which is a 36 per cent increase on the 2009/10 financial year. Whilst worksite assessments are funded via the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF), many consultancy services Vision Australia delivers to other Disability Employment Service providers are not funded. Whilst Vision Australia can charge providers on a fee for service basis, the reality is that providers are either not in a position to pay or are not prepared to pay and this potentially results in poor outcomes for people who are blind or who have low vision. Whilst the assistance we provide in our view, is consistent with the inherent human rights intent of the Disability Services Act, these additional supports provided to other generalist providers to achieve the employment outcomes for their clients who are blind or who have low vision does place significant pressure on our organisational and financial resources and recognition of this specialist

support in the development of future contracts and procurement processes should be considered.

### **7. Employer/co- worker training**

Vision Australia is frequently called upon to deliver education and training to employers in relation to the practicalities of working with a person who is blind or has low vision as well as provide general education and training about the range and types of vision loss and the benefits associated with employing someone from this group. Vision Australia has also delivered education and training on vision loss and its functional impact to other community agencies including Generalist Disability Employment Service Providers.

### **8. Job seeker/community engagement**

Unlike generalist Services who rely largely upon referrals from Centrelink following a Job Capacity Assessment, referrals to specialist services such as Vision Australia typically occur by job seekers directly registering with a service before having a Job Capacity Assessment. The fact that the majority of Vision Australia's Employment Assistance and Job in Jeopardy referrals are direct registrations with few coming from Job Capacity Assessments demonstrates our credibility as a provider of services to people with blindness and low vision. It also demonstrates our ability to engage job seekers with blindness and low vision as well market our specialist services in the community. Such expertise and linkages cannot be matched or likely to be a priority of Generalist Disability Employment Service Providers.

### **3.1 Our DES services in practice**

In summary, there are significant differences in what makes a successful employment placement amongst our client group from other disability groups. As we have demonstrated, people who are blind or have low vision have very different training and support requirements to people with an intellectual disability or mental illness, and services such as Vision Australia have the specialist skills and expertise to best support this group. Jane M's story is instrumental in providing an illustration of a typical service profile for our client group.

Jane M, 25, has a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Literary Studies, is blind and uses a white cane to move around the community independently. She also reads and writes using computer software called JAWS that reads aloud onscreen text using a synthetic voice. Upon joining Vision Australia's Employment Service in late 2010, in addition to job search, Jane M engaged the peer support program and one-on-one sessions, learning general employment readiness skills such as resume building, interviewing, professional presentation and various other programs to build her confidence. After 3 weeks, with direct representation by her Employer Engagement Consultant, Jane M secured an interview with an advertising company to work with one of their campaign teams. Despite achieving a placement commitment from the company's recruitment personnel, the campaign manager expressed reservations about a blind person fulfilling the role, and ultimately offered the job to another candidate. The recruitment personnel were disappointed by this outcome, and arranged for the Vision Australia Employer Engagement Consultant to deliver a presentation to senior managers on blindness and low vision. Resulting from this presentation, two other campaign team managers were eager to give Jane M an opportunity

with the company, and allowed a Vision Australia Adaptive Technology Consultant to test their internal computer systems for compatibility with JAWS. Unfortunately, following much investigation, the systems proved not to be accessible or adaptable with JAWS, causing these opportunities to also fail. Following several weeks of continued contact between Vision Australia and the company, a further opportunity arose with the relocation of a regional campaign team to Melbourne. Vision Australia had previously secured a placement with this campaign team and had largely already adapted their system making it JAWS compatible. On the strength of the previous placement, the campaign manager offered Jane M a position with the company. Upon acceptance of the offer, a full worksite assessment was undertaken, a workplace modifications application instigated and approved and further modifications were made to enable a screen reader to be fully functional with the in-house computer system. Jane M also required Orientation and Mobility training from her home to the office and around the building, and additional adaptive technology training to use the adapted computer system.

The work Vision Australia undertook with this willing employer demonstrates the unique challenges faced by job seekers/ employees with blindness and low vision and the expertise and specialist services required to achieve quality sustained employment outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Vision Australia is strongly committed to improving the employment participation and prospects for people who are blind or have low vision. Funding provided by the Disability Employment Services program plays a key role in our ability to do this and it is critical this industry is given the recognition and resources it requires to flourish and assist as many people as possible. The proposed Disability Employment Service Performance Framework and proposed future procurement processes must take into account the breadth of services and supports provided by specialist Disability Employment Service providers like Vision Australia and its unique position in a service and structure dominated by generalist employment providers.

We appreciate the Committee's public consultation on this important policy issue and welcome the opportunity to elaborate further should the Committee require.

Yours sincerely,

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