

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE PURCHASING AND ADMINISTRATION OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Firstly, I would like to thank the Senate Committee for giving me the opportunity of making this written submission as I was unfortunately not able to appear in person.

I, together with my husband , are the parents and fulltime carers of our children and . is years old and has Down syndrome. is and has an intellectual disability.

and were educated in mainstream Catholic primary and state technical schools with additional teacher support. Both attended Work Education programs at Kangan TAFE and were then referred to Distinctive Options (at that time known as Able Employment Services), now a DES provider. and have been with this organisation since 1993.

Through Distinctive Options both our children have been successful in getting (and keeping) jobs in 'open' employment. has worked for KFC for 17 years and at KFC for nearly 9 years. also worked in a supermarket for a few years prior to getting her job at KFC. They are both employed under the Supported Wage System.

Employment has played a huge part in developing and 's self confidence and skills, not just at work but also in their daily living. Employment has given them opportunity to be included and connected to the broader community and to contribute in a way commensurate with their capacity. They have "blossomed" over the years, enjoy their jobs tremendously and have a good rapport with their fellow workers.

The case management, training and ongoing support provided by Distinctive Options over the years has been absolutely invaluable. They negotiated the jobs and liaised with the employers; they provided many months of on-site training to ensure that both and were trained appropriately to fulfil their job roles; they advised us of the Supported Wages System, arranged access and were present at assessments. They also held social events (like the Annual Community Dinner Dance) that gave and opportunity to be involved in community activities involving a range of people. We have been appreciative of the 'holistic' approach taken by Distinctive Options. As parents we are concerned about the social development of our children as well as their vocational development.

Earlier this year and were exited as clients of Distinctive Options. They were deemed to be independent workers having received only intermittent support on-site in recent years. This exit was agreed to by all parties (, and their individual employers) and we were all reassured by Distinctive Options that should any issues arise for or that we would be able to access their assistance immediately. It's just as well that this was the case because issues with both and 's recent Supported Wage Assessments have arisen. Distinctive Options are now in the process of re-starting and .

In the last couple of years we have expressed our concerns with the SWS assessments. The inconsistencies, apparent lack of experience in dealing with employers, and lack of knowledge of disability of the "new age" assessors is worrying, particularly as these assessments are crucial in affecting the employee's ongoing employment prospects. We are appreciative of the assistance we

receive from Distinctive Options in understanding the SWS and in helping us negotiate the maze of bureaucracy involved with most government systems and programs.

Over the years my family has developed an excellent long-term relationship with this organisation. It has been very reassuring for [redacted] and I to know that they are available to access for information and assistance. We feel confident in their capacity to understand our situation and our children. We have a 'history' with them. This consistency in our relationship has been critical to [redacted] and [redacted]'s success. It is very concerning for us to learn that our relationship with Distinctive Options could be placed in jeopardy as a result of a tender process. If this organisation were to not win a contract then an almost 20 year relationship would be severed.

Dealing with Government Departments and agencies in the disability area is very frustrating for families with a member who has a disability. This frustration is compounded by the constant turnover of staff and other changes within government departments/agencies. No sooner do you start to build a rapport with someone, than they disappear, or changes are made and you have to start the process over and over and over again!! Very frustrating indeed!

It is a refreshing change for us, to be able to have a consistent and positive relationship with an organisation and their staff over nearly twenty years. [redacted] and I hope that this relationship can continue into the future for the benefit of our children but also as a means of reducing our personal isolation. For these reasons we question why government feels to need to 'fix something that isn't broken'. Why spend so much time, energy and money on a tender process that has the potential to sever relationships that have been developed over years. Surely this money can be better spent on direct service provision.

I would be very happy to be contacted should you wish to discuss any aspect of my submission.