

House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

waes.reps@aph.gov.au

10 May 2023

To the Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services

Please find enclosed the Antipoverty Centre submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services.

Thank you for giving us the time to prepare our submission and we look forward to working more with the committee in the lead up to the release of the final report.

This committee has been tasked with a very important role in assessing the future of social security compliance and has been given the capacity to set the principles for a universal, supportive service.

The failure of employment services since their degradation to a make-busy program for poor people since the early-90s must be fixed and transformed over the coming years to reflect changes of inequality in our economic system and changes to the nature of our labour market.

This is why everything we're proposing in our submission cannot work if it is in a compulsory based system. You cannot trust a system that punishes you, harming is not helping and the lack of trust built into these systems is a barrier to participation in the program and ultimately a barrier to work.

We encourage the committee to use this report to call for a suspension to mutual obligations and to end work for the dole, and to do a thorough audit of the onerous aspects of this system to eliminate them.

It is a system designed to punish people who have the least in our society, it is kicking people while they're down. We need to make sure that we're giving people the resources to exist and thrive and supporting our communities to take the lead on that.

Antipoverty Centre Inc

Suite 26, Level 1, 285a Crown St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

team@antipovertycentre.org

Social policy on our terms.

ABN: 98 937 008 622

The federal top-down approach is a proven failure, it's time to end the system of punishment and build better networks of independent cooperatively owned localised supports.

We believe that service providers should be removed from the decision making altogether, they're not a good source of evidence to base any findings off as they benefit from a compulsory system and the current arrangements.

We know, and so should you, that getting between an employment service provider and a bucket of money is a dangerous thing to do, but we're going to do everything to make sure that we don't let them profit from poverty.

Regards,

Jay Coonan

End the failed system: there can be no quality service without a humane design that is dedicated to the people it is meant to serve

Table of Contents

<i>End the failed system: there can be no quality service without a humane design that is dedicated to the people it is meant to serve</i>	1
Introduction:	2
Approach	2
Recommendations:	3
To address this while we design a better system the government must:	3
Employment services must end to make room for a voluntary employment services and employment programs	3
Remove service providers from the decision-making process	5
Mutual obligations are wrong and harmful	6
Community led programs for the public good	10
Principles for the community response	11
Aim	12
Implementing a better system – localised employment services and social services to support long-term unemployed people	12
Social services back in public hands	13
Industry connections for employment services operating out of TAFE and Universities	14
Conclusion	18

Introduction:

The Antipoverty Centre exists to break down systemic barriers affecting people in poverty by giving us a voice that is by and large silenced by the organisations and groups that purport to represent us.

Processes like this have long given organisations who do not have our interests at heart write the rules and continue paternalistic practices that are harmful and damaging for our communities.

Creating better process for people in poverty means giving them control of it. We don't want a new Commonwealth Employment Service, we want an employment service that works for us when we need it, and we want better social supports based on our needs, not government contracts.

An employment service should not be the frontline response to poverty, and nor should it be a make-busy program for people that our system has cast aside as economic sacrifices.

Employment services should be a universal and voluntary service dedicated to accessible and sustainable employment operated by the concurrent powers of the federal and state governments, with local government appendages to reflect the localised nature of poverty and labour markets.

Continuing or reforming the current system is no longer viable and we cannot force people to engage with a system that harms them any longer.

Poverty is a barrier to work, and the employment services system is not designed to overcome this. The overemphasis on employment as a solution to poverty, or 'welfare-to-work' is an obvious failure and any individual or organisation with a shred of self-awareness would know this.

The social security system in its current form is a barrier to work, and it needs to better support people gain the capacity to eventually take up work. We must now provide services to support us, breakdown the barriers created by current systems and develop supportive systems that lead to employment.

Approach

This submission is based off the input from five workshops we held in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. The input is from people who are or have been subjected to employment services.

We will separately include full discussions from those workshops.

Surveys run by the Antipoverty Centre have also been used to indicate what people want, and what they're constantly asking for is a service that works for them and an end to mutual obligations.

What people have been telling us are consistently the same, they don't want mutual obligations and they need payments above the poverty line. They're clear that the current structure is harmful and has not helped them in anyway what-so-ever.

Recommendations:

Our entire social security system is the barrier that keeps people back and it is designed to be that way, to force people to either comply and be crushed or force them out to fend for themselves.

As we saw during COVID the right response for people in poverty was to provide them with a payment equivalent to the Henderson Poverty Line and to remove mutual obligations. We know that this worked, because people reported that they were more equipped to take on work and complete their studies.¹

The current system does the opposite, it shelves people and harms them by keeping them hungry on the verge of homelessness and blames them for their own conditions. The current system harms and maims people and is a tool of social murder.

To address this while we design a better system the government must:

1. Raise all income support payments above the Henderson Poverty Line and then work with people on payments and low incomes to develop a more sophisticated measure of poverty for the 21st Century.
2. Build and buy quality public homes towards universal access and support for co-operative housing to ensure the right to safe and secure shelter is upheld for all of us.
3. End all forms of conditional welfare and the onerous welfare-to-work structure.
4. An end to all subminimum waged work (ADEs, prison labour and work for the dole) and replace them with a guaranteed job with fair pay and conditions, for those who want one.

Employment services must end to make room for a voluntary employment services and employment programs

Decades of rearranging the deckchairs has shown that this system is beyond redemption. We propose that employment services must be reimagined and a new system must be something that is both helpful and desirable to people who are ready, willing and able to take up work.

1. A new system must be led by and built by unemployed people

¹ Klein, Elise, Kay Cook and Kelly Bowey, 'Social security and time use during COVID 19' (2021) *Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare* <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/covid-19-social-security-measures-enabled-job-seeking-but-payment-cuts-inhibit-this-once-more-finds-survey/>.

We discuss a vision to provide communities with the resources to give people in poverty the voice and capacity to make demands of government to provide them with the supports they need, and not what the federal government thinks they need.

These community councils must direct the services and supports that they need and make sure that the funding is directed by them, not by charities and NFPs.

A new approach to social services design based on a framework for locally controlled processes led by unemployed people with the involvement of the broader community, service providers, local government and others to identify gaps in supports and design new supportive programs.

2. End compulsory “mutual” obligations activities.

There will never be any trust in a compulsory system. Trust is vital for a system that works. Coercion and compulsion has no place in a system intended to support people. High quality employment supports should be available to anyone who wants to use them, regardless of whether they receive a Centrelink payment.

3. Employment assistance integrated with other social supports.

We all have different strengths, circumstances and needs. Employment services should not be a one-stop-shop, but part of an ecosystem including health, legal, housing, union and related supports. We must have the freedom to choose for ourselves what we need and easily access information about what is available through local community centres.

4. Democratic control and oversight of services.

Ongoing accountability for service providers and a responsive system achieved through independent local oversight groups led by people accessing supports. Any service for people in poverty should be monitored by the people who use them to ensure they work effectively and in concert with related social supports.

Ensuring there is an oversight body developed to hold services to a high standard and guarantee they are operating as intended. It must be made up of people who have direct experience of systems that create harm.

5. An investigation into the handling of private contracts and practices of outsourced employment services

A detailed inquiry into the business practices of privatised employment services and contracting arrangements between the department and employment providers. This would enable the public to better understand the value for money for these publicly funded, privatised services that have cost billions of dollars over the decades and learn of the business practices of providers to gain payments under the contracts system.

6. Remove control of employment services/ programs from the federal government.

Employment and social services must be removed from the federal government and a program given to the state and local governments resourced by both the state and federal governments to run these voluntary programs, freeing up resources and expenditure through a demand driven service to fund localised services.

A needs-based funding model would be established to ensure that communities with higher needs receive more support.

7. Employers responding to our needs and creating jobs that work for us.

Everyone who wants a job can work, but many of us are locked out of paid work due to disability, illness, caring duties or other responsibilities that lead to discrimination. Government and employment services must assist unemployed people by tailoring workplaces that fit our ambitions, capacity and support needs and work with unions and employers to develop safe, inclusive, sustainable jobs.

8. A social wage that provides universal social supports

The government must have a universal, accessible social and health and supports system. The poorest in society do not have access to appropriate and supportive mental and dental care, and we're seeing a rapid decline in quality of accessible public education as funding benefits private institutions, and we're seeing the decline of quality and accessible healthcare.

The committee may determine that this is out of scope for the inquiry, however we would firmly disagree with that determination. A lack of universal supports is a barrier to people in poverty, you cannot expect people in poverty to improve their conditions if we do not have the accessible supports we need to be healthy and happy.

Remove service providers from the decision-making process

Get the current industry out of the way, with a transition plan for current employees to stay employed and transfer knowledge of how to support people to the new system, as we get to work building a system that isn't oppressive.

The current industry is not a stakeholder, they're a commercial industry whose entire business model is predicated on government funding. They act as a shadow bureaucracy to make a few people extremely wealthy off the backs of the poor.

Whether for-profit or not-profit service providers, private organisations do not act in the interests of unemployed people. An ecosystem of supports must have the public sector at its core to provide meaningful assistance. Create sustainable, skilled public sector jobs at all levels of government to guide the delivery of community-identified services.

1. A voluntary supportive system that helps people address issues that creates barriers to employment. They won't be forced to jump through hoops instead they'll have access to a variety of social supports and the time to think about what they need and want with the support to help them get it.
2. For people ready, willing and able to work who need a service they will have an employment service that is universally accessible, equitable and about connecting people to employers who are actually going to give them sustainable and properly paid work.
3. A skills industry that is lead by our TAFE and universities, so we know that the skills training and courses we're taking mean something and aren't just a tick box exercise that won't get us a job and load us with debt.

There is a role for government to support people and we believe that people should be free to have control over what they do. If you build a genuinely good system you won't need to force people to participate in it.

We will always advocate to give people the supports they need to get into work when they're ready. The work we do is to understand people's lives and their needs, something the current decision-making process refuses to do.

Mutual obligations are wrong and harmful

As stated in our introduction we are presenting a way forward that is based on years of work and advocacy, through speaking with people with mutual obligations and those fortunate enough to no longer be subjected to them.

The administrative law that exists around them, the policies that are developed to implement them are a mess and piled on to a bad bureaucratic infrastructure that is split between two different federal government departments that are functioning across the entire continent.

Their legal application is a mess and largely unchallenged because of their rigid application, that does not care for individual lives, and the lack of ability for community legal practitioners to challenge their validity and the hopelessness that people have when seeking to challenge them in the first instance.

Putting conditions like this into law will always make things difficult and that is the point. The application of laws like this has always been about punishing people on social security payments, it has never been about "helping" them to find work, especially when those services have never worked to do that for them.

It is unjust to apply a rigid set of laws to a group of people who are never going to test and end these rules, it makes no sense to keep the legal and rigid mess, it is best to do away with it and instead provide something for people to engage that supports them.

The ABS has collected the following statistics that show that no one is 'doing nothing':

People who are available within four weeks, but not actively looking:²

- 18.16% are studying;
- 17.65% are caring; and,
- 9.34% are disabled.

People who are not looking for work, but who want to work and are available:³

- 23.27% are studying;
- 22.04% are performing unpaid work, including caring;
- 13.35% for health reasons;
- 6.87% unsuitable jobs; and
- 3.41% because of discrimination.

In the 12 months to February 2022, people who reported difficulties finding work reported that their main difficulties are:⁴

- 15.31% reported too many applicants for the job;
- 14.05% reported insufficient work experience;
- 11.07% reported ill health or disability; and,
- 6.12% said it was too far or had transport difficulties.

Underemployed people who wanted more work:

- 53.5% are aged between 15-29;⁵ and, of the underemployed who applied for more work
- 12.1% reported too many applicants for the job and 10.3% reported there were no vacancies in their line of work.⁶

² Potential Workers, 'Table 3. Duration since last job and main activity of discouraged job seekers and other potential workers' (February 2022) *Australian Bureau of Statistics*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/potential-workers/feb-2022>.

³ Potential Workers, 'Table 4. Main reason for not actively looking for work of persons who wanted to work and were available' (February 2022) *Australian Bureau of Statistics*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/potential-workers/feb-2022>.

⁴ Potential Workers, 'Table 5. Job search experiences of unemployed persons' (February 2022) *Australian Bureau of Statistics* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/potential-workers/feb-2022>.

⁵ Underemployed Workers, 'Table 3: Median extra hours preferred by age and sex' (February 2022) *Australian Bureau of Statistics* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/underemployed-workers/latest-release>.

⁶ Underemployed Workers, 'Table 5: Main difficulty in finding more work' (February 2022) *Australian Bureau of Statistics* <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/underemployed-workers/latest-release>.

The principal underpinning ‘mutual obligations’ is flawed

The belief that mutual obligations are in any sense of the word “mutual” is wrong.

Mutual obligations have never been “mutual” because they are a mechanism in a system that was not designed to help people find work, it was designed to police people on welfare – and more recently, ensure they’re forcefully engaged in a system that treats them as a commodity, to guarantee the viability of the outsourced employment services.

We and the department know that people want to work and people who are closely engaged with the labour market are quick to re-enter work.⁷

People want to work, they don’t need to be beaten into work.

Mutual obligations have now become a brutal weapon to instrument harm on people who are struggling to care for themselves, their family and fighting daily against the social barriers constructed by poverty.

The PBO has shown that people on payments are likely to be receiving a full rate, have a partial capacity to work and are women over the age of 45.⁸

This is a fundamental demographic shift from the 1990s when government was concerned about young men being lazy and “abusing” the social security system.

Again, mutual obligations were never appropriate and keeping them is fundamentally inhumane because they’re targeting a demographic of people who face labour market discrimination, societal and government barriers – like an incredibly low income and being treated like a criminal at every step of the process.

Not to mention that central banks the world over seek to create unemployment, and the scarring affect that traps people, families and communities in poverty. Our economic system generates and relies on poverty, and conditional welfare provides

⁷ “The first thing to note here is that half of everybody who was referred left within six months. We are going to talk more about the long-term participants in a little while. We have this corollary where the majority of participants at any given point in time have been here long term, but also the majority of people who come in will not be long term. We have a lot that shows both things are true Fifty-three per cent of people had exited jobactive by six months, so 47 per cent are left. You see that on the table at the bottom. By the end of 12 months, after someone’s initial referral, 29 per cent have remained, so 71 per cent have left within a year.” Dr O’Rance, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services ‘Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services House of Reps committee’, (November 2022) *Australian Parliament House*
<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcomprep%2F26293%2F0000%22>.

⁸ Parliamentary Budget Office, ‘JobSeeker Payment: Understanding economic and policy trends affecting Commonwealth expenditure’ *Australian Parliament House* (2020) 03/2020, 19
https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Budget_Office/Publications/Research_reports/JobSeeker_Payment.

politicians the cover to harm people, as they use the media to generate the consent to keep the poverty machine running.

The current mutual obligations system is bad for people. From a survey conducted by the Antipoverty Centre, 85% said they've never had a positive experience with mutual obligations, 93% said it made their mental or physical health worse and 98% said mutual obligations aren't useful.

Nor are they safe. In responses to the same survey from people who had performed work for the dole, 39.3% recalled a safety incident in their WFTD placement, 45% said they had not been given WHS information and 97% said they did not want to do the program.⁹

Ending mutual obligations is about political courage, not evidence

We're at a point now where the exercise to prove what we must replace current levers with to manage the poor is more of a political exercise to distract people from the moral and social failure that our social security system has become.

Firstly, there should not be a conditional barrier to people receiving social security supports. It is an unconditional right that must be upheld, that we owe to every person that the state has a duty of care to, regardless of visa status.

Second, it is the obligation of the state to provide supports to people it has failed. It is not their responsibility to pick up the various pieces or try to address the barriers that our inequitable society has put up encouraged by the macroeconomic decisions.

Thirdly, the political class, past and present, is responsible for the development of the dole bludger myth and it still rings strong within our society because the media and political class feed one another in a gratuitous cycle of depravity as they mythologise the "unwanted citizen".

During this inquiry the language around "welfare dependency" and the usage of the "very few people who don't want to work" is evident that this inquiry, the evidence, and substance of contributions, has fundamentally shown that this inquiry is not being undertaken in good faith to bring about a genuinely better system of supports.

The myth has been curated for decades and manufactured evidence to substantiate an inherent cultural bias. We believe and advocate for a system that recognises and supports the people in it, something the mutual obligations and the current employment services system doesn't do, as it profits from the dole bludger myth being reimagined and redefined through tailored and predetermined advice and research.

That is why this is no longer about factual or so-called "evidence-based" policy, and is now an entirely moral point of: "Why are we punishing the poorest in our society

⁹ Total sample size of 346, with 155 people reported as having done 'Work for the Dole' as of February 2022.

for no other reason but to force them to engage with a system that does not work for them?”

The moral, and right, approach is to develop a series of universal social supports for people to voluntarily access and permit them to cater their services based on their needs.

People report mental distress when having mutual obligations forced upon them, and the committee is aware of the rise in mutual obligation failures since the introduction of the ‘targeted compliance framework’.¹⁰ It is obvious that this system is a) a budget saving tool that has the capacity to legally violate their human rights by depriving them of social security,¹¹ and b) a conditioning tool to coerce people off social security by any means necessary.

Conditionality is morally reprehensible and it should not continue on in any form.

Community led programs for the public good¹²

Our vision is to end poverty. To do this we must fundamentally alter the way in which our society and government respond to personal and collective issues in our communities that cause poverty and long-term unemployment.

The social security system and service delivery programs are failing people and trapping us in cycles of poverty.

Programs for and by us

The idea of getting rid of the employment service and what we could replace that [with], I think ideas around mutual aid and group work.

So, I've got a social work background and have a topical group work which I found to be one of the few really sort of radical places where you could actually build collective power through working together in groups.

¹⁰ Between 2018 and 2022, 7,092,778 suspensions had been made under jobactive.

Parliamentary Budget Office, ‘Table B1: Number of unique participants with payment suspensions for selected programs in Employment Services Information, Advice provided by the Parliamentary Budget Office to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 13 January 2023’ (January 2023) *Australian Parliament House*, 10

https://www.apb.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Additional_Documents.

¹¹ Between 2018 and 2022, the total income support penalties totalled \$23,626,294.

Parliamentary Budget Office, ‘Table A4: Total value of financial penalties by income support payment type in Employment Services Information, Advice provided by the Parliamentary Budget Office to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 13 January 2023’ (January 2023) *Australian Parliament House*, 9

https://www.apb.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Additional_Documents.

¹² “The public good connects us to each other, brings us closer to democracy and provides a common language and framework for bringing together the things we care about.” Rooney, Millie and Lilian Spencer, ‘Reclaiming our Purpose: It’s time to talk about the public good’ (March 2022) 17 *Australia remade* <https://www.australiaremade.org/public-good>.

So, this this type of thing, really basing it... should look like a bunch of people with experience of the employment services system sitting around and sharing their knowledge with each other and sharing their strategies with each other for what the barriers are for work and what we've found useful in overcoming them.

What we need to help find work or to get involved with education or caring or other types of unpaid work and have someone who can facilitate that without being in control of it.

The facilitator is there to serve us, help us with what we want to achieve. I think that's a great way for identifying problems with the system and changing the system over time... just having people get together build some collective power before going into work. – James, Adelaide.

Poverty itself is a barrier to work and creates or exacerbates other structural barriers to social participation. An income-first approach to employment is vital to ensure success in any employment or social support program. We need to not be in poverty and have freedom from systems that harm us, and we will get that by developing a model for government and civil society to listen to and have broader success in responding to, and breaking down, barriers to employment.

We have seen that service delivery responses do not improve conditions and money is wasted because they have no long-term solution in mind – just short-term responses. These responses fail because they create harm rather than enabling people to progress, or even asking us what we need and want to succeed.

Based on our experiences and what is shared with us by people who contribute to our work and those we support, we know that existing approaches to service delivery either do nothing or exacerbate poverty and create barriers to employment. It is why people who want support to get paid work are crucial in leading the development of localised responses.

Principles for the community response

A project about us without us has no legitimacy.

- People with direct experience must lead on the issues we face. Excluding us from responses to poverty has exacerbated the effects of inequality.
- Poverty is a political choice and throwing more conventional place-based services won't change that. Employment programs are not an alternative to income support above the poverty line, and they cannot overcome poverty as a barrier to work.
- There is and should be a vital role for government – both direct and indirect – and government should not abrogate responsibility by increasing its reliance on private service providers and philanthropy.
- Government is also not the only actor required to address the cycle of poverty, but neither are paternalistic organisations, particularly any who have been involved in implementing cruel government policies.

Aim

To develop and demonstrate better informed responses to structural conditions that create barriers to social and economic participation by ensuring those of us directly affected by these barriers play a leading role in policy design and that we have power and agency in these discussions. To orient employment programs towards projects that are for the public good.

Overall outcome

- Community led employment programs focused on delivering projects for the public good and operating as part of an integrated ecosystem of social supports.
- Programs devised and monitored by local planning, oversight and accountability groups led by unemployed and low-income people.

Community Makerspaces

So tool libraries, maker spaces, those are something that I'd really like to see because if you don't have access to resources, you can't do much... it should just be part of the library system. I mean, what was it just books and DVDs? Yeah. I mean, this library I looked and it has sewing machines. – Josh, Melbourne

Makerspaces that don't cost a fortune, is that I. There are a bunch of tools I would love to have access to the only space where I would be able to get access to them that is within 45 minutes of me. Is \$300 a month membership. – Eve, Melbourne

Implementing a better system – localised employment services and social services to support long-term unemployed people

An income first approach is the solution, and then a choice of services made available to everyone should follow.

Create labour market and social services intelligence gathering from a local level to dictate services and requirements, and then develop a needs-based funding model to provide opportunity and diversity of employment based on capability and capacity for each local area.

Local government, labour market and social service submissions for each area to develop a demand model to prioritise services for the community, and projects for people to contribute to or participate in if they so choose to.

Providing funds directly on a demand-based system to areas that require more capital for a diversity of services based on specific need.

Removal of for-profit and profit motivated business models entirely. Begin looking at government funding for co-operative models that are hyper-local community groups, or local government operated programs funded by state and federal funding,

designed to offer an array of services for people who need a light touch, and more intensive services for people that want them.

Employment services should not be a street-level welfare program, it should be a voluntary universal services system used by people who require it to assess what they need and want and then to be provided with those services.

Services related to employment should be state government operated and entirely voluntary and universally accessible. It would be a faceless operation that people with limited barriers can access, with the option of face-to-face services on the local government level for people that require more intensive or accessible supports.

People offering face-to-face services will have accreditation and background in community services and be closely connected to local social services so that they can assist people who might need or want additional supports.

Social services back in public hands

Currently we have an outsourced social security model that does not provide anything that is anywhere near appropriate to support people who face systemic and personal issues, but also the barriers constructed to prevent them from improving their conditions.

...the reality is that they're [providers] usually the biggest barrier, like if a job service provider, I don't want them to exist, but if they have to exist, they should be able to go, well, you're somebody who is disabled, here's the person who works here whose entire job it is to understand your disability pension application or to understand NDIS applications, who will just facilitate your application who will make appointments. Ideally pay for your appointment so that you collect the evidence needed, who can help directly contribute to getting this done. – Eve, Melbourne

A support person needs to be genuinely supportive, but they cannot be if they're not trained or are unaware of what they could do to help a person to improve the conditions that society has reduced them to.

We promote that a skills transfer of people who currently work in employment services undergo community services training and are moved into public sector jobs working out of, or connected to, Centrelink offices to provide advice to connect people to social supports if they require them.

This would seek to maintain the jobs and knowledge of people who are, and wanting to remain, in the employment services space. People who have a genuine desire to help people and have proven to have helped people over a long period of time and to improve their employment security and conditions.

This will mean that people who are upskilled and remain in the system will transfer their knowledge of and connection to specific labour markets to help with the development of a new service.

Stronger communities, built by the community

We have laid out a plan above on how communities would be better served and organised to develop responses to poverty and to provide supports within the community to give people resources that employment services will never be capable of providing.

This needs to be centred around those in poverty, with organisations responding to and implementing the supports that they're calling for. It cannot be led by the charities or other not-for-profit groups that organise around and are more concerned in responding to funding arrangements from government.

It is about centring those in poverty and providing funding groups and programs on a needs basis. Not all communities require the same supports and will differ on geographic location, income etc. so that is why it is fundamental to have those in need of supports tell you what supports they need.

Greater role for the public sector

In this new system it would provide secure employment and better conditions by keeping it in public hands and granting them better access to government agencies to advocate and streamline processes like housing and NDIS applications.

The outsourced model as it currently stands has proven to fail and the reliance on charities and other organisations has means that they have become unaccountable arms of the government that are likely to close with change of government or a shift in policy.

There should be more room for community-controlled organisations and cooperatives in the space, so that those providing services are focused on and giving space to the people receiving the supports. The ability to control and provide feedback that informs and adapts to what people are expecting and wanting from their service.

Industry connections for employment services operating out of TAFE and Universities

The government should redirect funding and resources from employment services to TAFE and University hubs, whereby a newly unemployed person who is in contact with Centrelink and has capacity to work, or needs or wants skills training, can engage with staff who are knowledgeable on the industry, labour markets and programs for skills – again, this would be a universal system that people can be connected to.

Industry connected employment supports

The first point of contact for someone who is ready, willing and able to begin seeking employment would be through digital or phone contact with a job agent that is employed by and working for state government operated services.

The job of the agent is to ask a series of questions about the person to establish a connection with them and learn about what their goals and career aspirations are. From here the two will work together to develop a plan and strategy to connect them with employment.

Depending on what each individual needs will determine the level of servicing they receive.

It might be that someone is recently unemployed and not on social security but seeking employment, or someone who has been long-term unemployed and is ready to reengage with the labour market, or someone working casually looking for secure work.

Regardless of the persons circumstances, the agent will be there to develop an understanding to support them to find employment or connect them with industry hubs (see below) to help them find the right training and education that will directly or indirectly connect them with employment.

These services can refer a person to more specialised and intensive supports if that is what the person needs and wants.

Industries

Employment services would no longer be about welfare management, it would be about employment. People who are ready, willing and able to work and have an interest in a certain industry or field would be connected via state-based supports to an industry specialist to understand their skills, or what they need to do to find employment.

Industry specialists, operating out of TAFE and Universities, would be run by people who have worked in that industry, have knowledge of it and are in one way or another connected to the industry.

These industry-based employment services would be connected to the Jobs and Skills Commission to better develop their servicing to support people who are wanting to get started in an industry or are skilled and close to the labour market and able to take up work opportunities offered to them.

Different TAFE and Universities with industry specialties would host these sites, as this would better connect them with the teaching staff to resource people about what training they will need, or what skills courses might be better suited to those with pre-existing skills.

This should be specifically for creating better skill sets or adjusting courses to industry changes, standards and expectations and not about the industry shaping the education sector.

Running in the interest of the 'public good' to help support our communities and develop skills for programs that communities need and are demanding.

It should not be a place for certain industries to control or monopolise the flow of labour, it is not about driving business for the TAFE or University, or the certain industries, but to develop skill sets for people to have sustainable employment and contribute to the growth and sustainability of their communities.

Staff profile

These "hubs" would be staffed by people who have recently been employed in a certain industry and has active and ongoing connections to the industry, so that they're aware of what the skills demands are and can work with people who may require skills training.

The current system is bad for the people who are receiving the services and it is bad for those who are working in job agencies. The conditions are not supportive and are stressful, trying to help people with varying issues with no training or qualifications.

Another reason why employment services should be voluntary and the people staffing those services are qualified with industry experience to help mentor and support people into a work.

Supports for helping artists navigate and get started in the arts industry

People are often like in different sort of arts and media, workplaces that I've been in, like, often that doesn't count for either volunteering or career development... even when it really clearly is.

I think like specialized support people who actually know stuff about industries, they don't have to be like geographically based, like it would make sense that you have say, an arts provider or like an academia provider or whatever, that just deals with, you know, that has specialized skills for those fields.

You know, like, understanding that there are types of work that are precarious, not because someone is unskilled, ...and having people who can help with that and have resources to be able to deal with things like writing grants, putting together a business plan.

Someone who's like these are all of the industry specific supports that you could apply for here are some paid residencies, you could apply for here grants we can help you edit your grants, and it would also create heaps of work.

*This should definitely just exist or something that's free through Centrelink, I ran a bunch of workshops for emerging trans artists and like, why doesn't Centrelink pay for that? –
Jianghua, Melbourne*

The recent mutual obligation guidelines for artists¹³ released by DEWR is evident that those designing the system have no real understanding of the workload that goes into supporting an industry like the arts.

It would be better serviced by those already working in it supporting people who are entering or already working in it. This is just one example, there would be plenty others where the nature of insecure employment impacts people's ability to maximise hours and income.

Jobs and Skills Commission

Employment service design should operate under the Jobs and Skills Commission and act as broad reaching labour market intelligence service, understanding what is affecting every labour market and industries around the continent.

This would be best suited to understand what businesses are doing and what skills they need, so that TAFE and Universities can respond to this directly with the people who are engaging with business and industry can tailor their services to help people with specific industry focus.

Utilising the commission is the best way forward as it is a preestablished commission that could be given more funding to absorb and host employment services and employment policy.

This would also mean that responsibility for social security would go back to DSS and Services Australia, where it would be about social security support rather than welfare compliance. The merging of the two was a considered attack to undermine the rights of people on social security and a policy disaster.

More focus should be given to the Jobs and Skills Commission to work with unions, industry and employers to create job opportunities for disabled people.

These opportunities will be retained by the commission and shared with specific specialist industry hubs that work to help disabled people into employment, but also on state intranet to offer to disabled people who are contacting call centres looking for work opportunities.

Making better jobs

Bad jobs are a disincentive to work, and we shouldn't be made to do "any job".

An employment services sector should be devoted to working out how to make jobs more sustainable through better conditions, pay and support and not policing the poor.

¹³ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 'Doing irregular or freelance work to meet your mutual obligations' *Australian Government* (2023). <https://www.dewr.gov.au/workforce-australia/resources/doing-irregular-or-freelance-work-meet-your-mutual-obligations>.

They should be consulting with unions, workers, disabled and unemployed people how to better design workplaces to make them more suitable and to respond to our needs so we're able to hold down jobs and thrive in them when we get them.

The current underpinning of the system has nothing to do about jobs or workplaces, it is purely about brutalising a person into any job at any cost and is putting the cart before the horse.

The labour market is a barrier and so too are the workplace conditions that do not host suitable environments for people who have disabilities,¹⁴ caring and other responsibilities that aren't valued by our society.

Conclusion

The government must immediately end mutual obligations for people who are subjected to them. The punishment has gone on for too long and not acting to end systems that deprive individuals of an income, during a cost of living crisis, is a moral failure.

Like with parentsNEXT, CDP and during COVID, the government can end mandatory requirements while getting to work on building a better system. You have shown it is possible and so you must act immediately.

We have shared ideas and a vision on how to create better communities, processes to build better institutions that support people and we look forward to meeting with you to discuss these further.

You cannot rely on the old way of doing things, they simply don't work and all they do is take tax payers money and put it into the pockets of incredibly wealthy people. Take the courage and end them now.

¹⁴ Coonan, Jay, Kristin O'Connell, Damiya Hayden and Giancarlo de Vera, 'In Our Own Words: People with Disability Australia's submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the purpose, intent and adequacy of the Disability Support Pension [submission] (August 2021) *People with Disability Australia* <https://pwd.org.au/in-our-own-words-submission-to-the-senate-community-affairs-references-committee-inquiry/>.