

STANTHORPE TRAINING CENTRE INC.

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY ON THE ADMINISTRATION AND PURCHASING OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES.

DATE: 13/09/2011

I would like to offer a number of strong reasons why DEEWR's administration and its purchasing process is detrimental to people with disabilities and not at all in accord with the spirit of the Disability Services Act and the Disability Service Standards.

Term of reference (a)

We have a client with "Down's Syndrome" as his primary disability who was placed by us in work approx 10 years ago and we have been supporting him since. His support has required staff work outside normal hours on weekends with a readiness to respond to the needs of the client and his employer at short notice and on a regular basis. Without our support this client would lose his job of 10 years immediately. We worry for him and other clients in similar situations if we were to lose the upcoming tender and a new provider is appointed who is unable or unwilling to "go the extra mile" for their clients.

There are probably hundreds of such DES clients around Australia whose jobs would be put in jeopardy by DEEWR's apparent lack of understanding that we deal with real people with feelings who also can be very afraid of change.

Term of reference (b)

The majority of staff at our Service have been with us 10 years or more or have had experience of work in employment services for as long. All have many contacts among other services and employers in the community. Engagement with employers and other services has been a constant practice in our Service long before DEEWR got the idea and is still the reason we are producing results after 17 years. Our small country service was a pioneer with Disability Employment taking part in the first Case Based Funding Trial and the Quality Assurance Trial and we were the first QA certified in Queensland. We were also involved in assisting other Services with their initial QA certification. How much would be lost with a new provider with new staff? How could starting over produce better outcomes?

Term of reference (c)

- (i) How can a tender process test the market? All it can test is the ability of a provider to resource and produce a winning tender.
- (ii) Why allow new players into the market if it is to remove already high performing services which such a rigid tender process is very likely to do?

- (iii) There should be other ways to address the problem of poor performance if indeed there is such and it's not the fact that there are many difference in the labour markets around Australia where some small towns such as ours don't have the industry as the more densely populated centres. We think we do extremely well for a town that has only 5500 people with approximately another 5000 in the surrounding area where rural pursuits are our primary industries. Most rural jobs need fit workers. We work very hard for the jobs we get but does this work show up in the DEEWR star ratings? We think not. It's quite possible that the tender process will "throw the baby out with the bath water".

Term of reference (d)

How can a performance framework focussed entirely on employment outcomes be the best means of assessing performance? Surely the spirit of the Disability Services Act and the Disability Services Standards is to put the needs of the client first. If DEEWR is administering services to people with a disability shouldn't that whole department be subject to the Disability Service Standards? It appears to us that the Standards are conveniently ignored when it does not suit or fit with some political agenda.

Forcing services to compete with each other for Star Ratings based solely on placement outcomes cannot put the needs of the client first. Some of our clients with more severe disabilities have taken up to 2 years to become "job ready". This is often 2 years of hard and thoughtful work. No competitive star ratings can assess the good work that takes place in the older Services who still, regardless of the pressure to do otherwise, put the needs of the client first. I must say that with DEEWR policies this is becoming increasingly difficult. The Department seems to have no idea of the difficulties many people with disabilities have to face on their way to employment and how long it can take to help them overcome many of their barriers. It is easy to see that the "engage, place and exit as soon as possible" model that we are expected to operate under is completely unrealistic and not in the spirit of the Disability Service Standards. One of the expectations of the Disability Standards is that clients should have a choice in the type of work they do. In an area like ours it may take some time for such a suitable job to arise. We have known it to take 2 or 3 years for a suitable job that suits a person's disability to come up. There is no provision for this tailoring of job to client in the current DEEWR model although it is expected of us. There is simply insufficient time allowed as there is always this 'Outcome as soon as possible' pressure.

Term of reference (e)

The possibility of a change in provider every three years makes no sense as long term relationships are the very basis of disability service provision. A 5 year contract is much more sensible but even then there should be no competitive tender. Unless a provider is obviously underperforming ie way below the average, all contracts should be rolled over. Its simple common sense when you are dealing with vulnerable people as are all people with disabilities.

Term of reference (f)

Any time would be a bad time as there are always time consuming changes going on whether it be from the Government Policy or DEEWR operational changes. Constant change and growing complexity seems to be the order of the day with more and more time having to go to administration. This does take away from our purpose for existing which is of course to assist people with significant disabilities and barriers into work. With more and more admin with no more money who is likely to be the loser? – our clients.

A few more general comments:

Disability Service Standard 3 is Decision Making and Choice and we have noticed over the years we have been with DEEWR that our ability to give decision making or choice to our clients has been very much curtailed as our own ability to use our own initiative has been greatly reduced by more and more regulation. Even so in a recent QA audit we were congratulated by the audit team on some of our innovative solutions for some of our clients.

Recently we received information from DEEWR with a detailed plan of how we can improve our performance and what do you know it's what we have been doing for many years. Its time DEEWR woke up to the fact that they don't have to spend millions of dollars telling experienced people how to do their job unless of course they are expecting a lot of new players and wouldn't that be a massive waste of resources for people with disabilities. One has to question the wisdom or logic of putting 80 percent of a strong and experienced workforce at risk with such a flawed and uncertain process at a DEEWR tender.

Resourcing a tender process by a small organisation such as ours will be very difficult as during the time that the tender is being developed most of the staff will have to be involved. We will have to find stand in staff for the 6 weeks of the process, not easy in a small town but we will do our best if we have to and as we always do but we would prefer to get on with the job we do best, supporting people with disabilities.

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