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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: inquiry into mental health barriers to education, training and employment participation

The WorkFocus Group is pleased to offer this submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment in order to assist with the inquiry into mental health barriers to education, training and employment participation.

The WorkFocus Group of associated companies has over 22 years of experience providing employment services and advisory support to those with disability, including those with mental health conditions. The WorkFocus Group has helped over 50,000 people with disabilities, injuries and mental health conditions achieve employment.

The Group includes atWork Australia, a high performing DES and JSA specialist provider for jobseekers with mental health issues.

Another member company of the WorkFocus Group, WorkFocus Australia, administers JobAccess on behalf of the Australian Government and is the current National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC). Job Access provides help and workplace solutions for the employment of people with disability and mental health conditions. WorkFocus Australia has been the sole supplier of this service on behalf of the Australian Government since 2006.

The NDRC acts as a conduit between large employers and Disability Employment Service providers. The NDRC aims to create more job opportunities for people with disability by acting as a central point of contact for large employers supporting them to develop their overall level of 'disability confidence'. WorkFocus Australia is also the sole supplier of this service on behalf of the Australian Government.

We have discussed the inquiry's focus internally and summarised our key comments and observations below:

- 1) We believe the accuracy of Job Capacity Assessments needs improvement. Too many people with mental health issues are not identified or are misdiagnosed.**
- 2) Job Seekers with mental health issues need specialist services. Where mental ill health is diagnosed, those within both the Job Services Australia streams and those using Disability Employment Services should be referred directly to specialist agencies. This is currently discretionary (i.e. the job seeker is able to choose their agency). Specialists are better equipped with superior understanding, support and the expert staff and networks required to successfully place those with mental health issues into the workforce.**
- 3) Disclosure is a major barrier. There is a social stigma around mental health issues and this means job seekers will often keep their illness hidden. Those who are misdiagnosed or not diagnosed then tend to fail in their goals because generalist support may not be adequate.**
- 4) There is limited awareness of free advice and services provided by JobAccess. Both employees and employers have many services available to support them, pre- and post-placement, but these services are underused due to a lack of awareness (for example, qualified psychologists are available in the JobAccess call centre so all Human Resources professionals would benefit from knowing they have this free expertise on hand when necessary).**
- 5) The Employment Assistance Fund could include more support for workers with mental health issues in the workplace. For some job seekers with mental ill health, the current levels leave service gaps and are not significant enough to provide full support. Additionally, in line with the preceding point, a lack of awareness means the support offered by the Fund is underutilised at present.**
- 6) There is a lack of flexibility in employment services for people with mental health conditions. For example, many people with mental ill health can work successfully on a part-time basis but face recruitment procedures with mandatory periods of full time induction. Additionally, work experience placement (as a means to job entry) is underused. This 'try before you buy' model helps both employer and employee gain confidence in each other and make sure of a good job fit.**
- 7) Over time, people with mental ill health need flexible support on demand. It also needs to be easier to be reassessed as their condition improves or worsens. These two points recognise the complex nature of mental ill health where many conditions are episodic.**

the **WORKFOCUS** *group*

The WorkFocus Group is committed to supporting Job Seekers with mental health issues and providing industry leading employment services in this area. We would welcome the chance to help further with this inquiry in any way. If you need any further information, advice or analysis please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Rob Gordon
The WorkFocus Group