

OFFICE of SENIORS INTERESTS

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INQUIRY INTO ISSUES SPECIFIC TO WORKERS OVER 45 YEARS OF AGE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT, OR ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS, FOLLOWING UNEMPLOYMENT.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry on the above subject.

The Office of Senior's Interest is the State Government agency in Western Australia with responsibility for research and policy concerning the needs of seniors (people aged 60 and over). The Office's overall objective is to improve the quality of life for seniors through better planning for an ageing population. The Office considers that people over 60 should not be excluded from the work force and also should be included in inquiries such as the present one.

The age group under investigation by the Standing Committee is also of interest to the Office because of the importance of planning for the future of this very large number of people.

The main issues regarding mature workers noted by the Office of Senior's Interest are: discrimination against mature workers; ensuring that adequate help is available to assist older workers to locate and retain employment to prevent long term unemployment; and promoting family friendly work practices to accommodate older workers needs to care for their ageing parents.

While the Equal Opportunity legislation in Western Australia prohibits discrimination in employment on basis of age, there is evidence that negative attitudes towards mature workers hinder their employment opportunities.

To learn more about mature-age employment and unemployment, the Office of Seniors commissioned a study in 1998, conducted by Dr Anne Hawke et al. from the National Institute of Labour Studies. The study included the age group 45-59 years, and the findings therefore are relevant to your inquiry.

The relevant points to emerge from this work are as follows:

- The main difficulty found by mature-age workers when seeking employment is the perception by employers that they are simply 'too old.' The second major reason cited by mature-age workers for being unable to gain employment was the lack of available jobs in their area of skill or residency.
- The higher rate of long term unemployment among men aged 55-59. While the proportion of long term unemployed is generally lower in Western Australia than in Australia as a whole, in WA 4.9% of men aged 55-59 are long term unemployed.
- In the 45-49 age group marginal attachment to labour force is substantially higher in Western Australia than other States. This refers to group of people who, because of the difficulties in finding work no longer actively sought it, but were available for employment, should the opportunity arise. There is a danger that a large numbers of this group could become long-term unemployed, without support from services aimed at them specifically. (Persons not in labour force, marginally attached: Men aged 45-49: 38.5 %; Women aged 45-49; 37.2%).

These findings are supported by a recent research report conducted by Adriana Vanden Heuvel from the National Institute of Labour Studies.

A further area of concern is the impact of elder care on older workers. This issue was key item at the 1998 Work and Family Conference, organised by Department of Productivity and Labour Relation and partly sponsored by Office of Seniors Interest. Pru Warrilow noted in her paper 'Eldercare. Remapping the Boundaries - Have Employees' Dependent Care Issues Overtaken Child Care' that 15% of employees in the workforce care for dependents other than children and that on average three days per employee per annum were lost and a further four days disrupted due to aged care issues.

In response to these findings, Office of Seniors Interest has identified the following issues:

- negative attitudes of employers towards mature age people.
- lack of information on ageing and employment issues, such as the benefits of employing mature workers;
- assistance measures aimed at changing practices that impede the employment and training of mature age people.

The following- should be considered in relation to the above points:

1. To counteract the negative attitudes of employers towards mature workers, promotional campaign should be conducted to inform employers about the positive qualities of mature workers and of the benefits of employing them.
2. Retraining of the mature work-force is needed. Mature age workers should have training designed to meet their needs. It is important that they receive help in maintaining their motivation, skills and work capacity.
3. Financial assistance is needed to enable workers to retrain. At present, most of retraining takes place at the expense of the unemployed person.
4. Skills acquired while doing volunteer work should be recognised and credited, especially since volunteer work provides a useful introduction back to work force.
5. While employment agencies receive payment only on successful placement, they have no incentive to try to help to place people from groups considered 'difficult', ie. disabled and mature workers. A system of incentives should be considered, to encourage agencies to do more for the disadvantaged groups.
6. The report on mature-age employment in Western Australia shows that most mature workers work in private sector. The services of mature workers could be marketed specifically to small businesses.
7. Family friendly work practices and other flexible work arrangements need to be encouraged to support older workers staying in the work force.

In conclusion, as the 45-64 age group is the fastest growing group over this decade, the consequences of a large scale, long term unemployment among them is a serious concern, both socially and economically. The Office of Seniors Interest supports the development of pro-active policies, which will assist these age groups to gain employment.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment, and I look forward to receiving a copy of the Committee's report.

Dianne Moran

Executive Director

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