

JE.

Inquiry into mental health barriers to education, training and employment participation

Friday, 29 April 2011

To the chair of the committee

Ms Amanda Rishworth MP

Summary: Recommendation to review the usage of 'benchmark' hours where a person with a mental illness can or cannot receive assistance from a Disability Employment Agency. A review of this could lead to more people experiencing a mental health condition increasing their hours in the workforce (with the assistance of the employment agency) and reducing their reliance on government payments, thus empowering the person with mental illness and saving the government money.

Dear Ms Rishworth,

I make my submission to this Parliamentary Inquiry as a person who has been affected by serious mental health issues for all of my adult (and much of my teenage) life.

I currently work 15 hours per week as a Consumer Consultant at a community mental health service (Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Service) in Melbourne.

Consumer Consultants in mental health work with consumers (clients / service users) of mental health services, attempting to bring their views into the service and influence it, through group work, feedback, and systemic advocacy.

I have been working as a Consumer Consultant at my present and a previous service since August 2005, or 5 ½ years now. I have had no breaks due to illness in that time, and have generally been seen as capable and punctual in my role.

Despite my problems, my mental health is stable, and I am looking for opportunities to increase my work hours. This is not possible at my current work. I am university qualified with a Bachelor of Arts degree, and also have TAFE qualifications in Community Development and Mental Health.

I contacted my former Disability Employment Agency in Melbourne recently as to whether they would either be able to help me find a different job altogether, or a second job to complement the hours of my current job. Despite employment in the mental health field having brought great benefits and recovery to me, it is, I believe, not preferable in the long term for most people with a current mental health condition to work in mental health. This is due to the issues from home and community life (personal

life) affecting thoughts and feelings at work, and vice versa. Sometimes, it never seems possible to get away from mental health (or illness).

I was informed, when wanting to apply for a new job with increased hours, that the employment agency could not help me. I was informed that at my last review for Disability Support Pension (which I receive), that my 'benchmark' hours for work were set at 15-22 hours per week.

As I was already working my 'benchmark' hours (15), the employment agency, or any disability employment agency, could help me in no way whatsoever. If I wanted assistance with employment, I was advised that I would have to quit my current job entirely, and start looking for a new job. *Then* they could help me.

The employment agency advised me against this, and in any case it was obvious to me also.

I question the logic in this. For every hour that I work greater to my current hours, I reduce my reliance on Disability Support Pension. In other words, as I earn more, I am paid less by Centrelink. This saves the government money, and over time, a substantial amount of money.

If I were to secure, say, 6 hours more work in a new role, thus making me work 21 hours a week, in a few weeks, or certainly no longer than a few months, the amount that it would cost the employment agency (funded by the government) to find me the job, would have been recouped by the reduction in my Centrelink payments. These savings could go on for years to come, and give a kick-start to the recovery process, that may not happen by itself.

This is without mentioning the equity and wellbeing level that it could give me (the recipient) in holding down more work.

The problem is, many people with mental health conditions do not quite know how to go about getting more work themselves, and in any case I have substantially benefited from the assistance of Disability Employment Agencies in the past. In fact, they were the difference between me entering the workforce after illness, or staying unemployed for a prolonged period.

It is obvious that the work of Disability Employment Agencies can be quite effective in securing work for marginalised people, including those with mental illness. It is also fairly difficult, especially by oneself, to secure a suitable and rewarding role, for only one day per week (the extra employment I am seeking).

Whether it is to replace my current role altogether, move out of mental health, or gain another day's employment, I haven't shown a very successful track record of being able

to do so all my myself. It is too easy to raise to a level of competence, and then remain there. This is where the support and rapport that a disability employment agency can give, to help build confidence and keep going in the path of life and employment. So many areas of life can be positively affected by securing ongoing, meaningful, rewarding and sustainable employment. Employment is not the only area of a person's life that can be successfully improved through an intervention, but it is an important one.

In summary, I would encourage this committee to consider changing the rules as to who can and who cannot receive assistance from a disability employment agency.

I must say I was very disappointed, to hear that as I was working by 'benchmark' hours of 15 per week, I could not be given any help from them. It left me feeling 'stuck'. It further seems incongruous when, with assistance, understanding and support from the employment agency and my employer, that it is likely I am able to work further hours and be happy and capable in doing so.

When added to this one considers that the government could save money through doing so, and that this enhances the income, standing and self-esteem of the worker, the whole process simply seems illogical.

I urge this committee to consider these facts and sentiments in its report to government.

Yours Sincerely

(name withheld)