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PORT PIRIE CENTRAL MISSION INC

Submission to the Inquiry into Older Workers House of Representatives Standing Committee of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations

Port Pirie Central Mission, a community service of the Uniting Church in Australia, has as its mission Caring for Country *People*. This care is extended across a large part of the northern country area of South Australia from north of Coober Pedy to the tip of Yorke Peninsula and extending east to the NSW border. Some 18 programs are conducted through this region that -build up the Mission's objectives.

The current objectives of the Mission's work are:

- strong families
- secure and safe shelter for all in need
- skilled people working productively in the community
- an awareness of social justice

The mission is a Job Network member and provides a range of services to support people into employment or into alternative productive community activity through volunteer work. The Community Support Program and New Enterprise Incentive Scheme are services that the Port Pirie Central Mission is currently contracted to provide.

Issues for the Region

The Mid North of South Australia has undergone significant reconstruction in its economic base in recent years. In particular there have been large job losses in Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Whyalla from down sizing by the industrial employers within the region eg BHP, railways and Pasminco Smelters.

Within agricultural industries within the region there has also been significant reconstruction that has resulted in reduced employment opportunities. Farming families can no longer be sure of passing the family property from one generation to the next and there has been a reduction in the range of opportunities for regular fanning labour.

These changes have led to there being a persistently higher unemployment rate through all age groups across the region. Unemployment continues to be higher than the SA average with SA having one of the highest unemployment rates of any state of Australia.

The economic restructuring that is affecting the region has led to large numbers of older workers being unemployed, often after many years of stable employment.

Older Workers- Identified Needs The Mission is regularly in contact with numbers of older workers, particularly through its Community Support Program contract. The typical profile of those workers referred to this program is that they:

- are aged 45-55 years with the majority being males

- have been unemployed for a longtime -average period of unemployment being 10 years
- have limited skill levels
- are socially isolated - many are living alone
- are suffering depression

Through the Community Support Program each participant is provided with individual professional guidance and support. Referral to additional services is provided and support in accessing services is given. Through this participant's self esteem is built up and they are encouraged to build up their social networks and become more actively involved in their community.

Participation in community work and self development courses have been found to be of benefit to these workers and enabled them to improve their quality of life.

Unfortunately the stark reality in this region at present is that with the limited level of economic activity in the region it appears highly unlikely that many will achieve full paid employment again in the style of industry with which they have experience.

These older workers are also experiencing financial hardship as they have been reliant on social security payments as their income for lengthy periods. The incidence of poverty is high. As a result of these financial pressures another area of contact with older workers is through our emergency relief and low income support program.

This lack of economic resource also limits the options available to these workers. For example it is not financially feasible for them to relocate to areas where they may have improved employment, training or educational opportunities.

It is therefore important that support is provided to prevent these workers slipping into more serious depression and being affected by other mental and physical illnesses linked with their poverty and isolation in the community. Apart from the human cost of such being permitted to happen, there are significant costs to the health system that arise when a section of the community increases its demand. This is of concern in the rural areas served by the Mission because health services, especially mental health services are already difficult to access.

Self Employment Initiatives

The New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) provides opportunity for unemployed people with a business idea to set up their own business. Participants in the program are supported as they undertake a small business management course and then mentored through the first year of the operation of their business. The Mission has enjoyed an outcome rate between 80 and 90% with this program during the last two years.

Enquiries from unemployed people who are older run at a consistently high level, however it is our experience that the requirements of the program eg the need to be told what to do and to undertake a course, act as barriers to some older applicants. This is particularly so amongst those who may have been retrenched because they were in a low skilled area of employment and they themselves may have limited literacy skills. They feel quite daunted by an expectation that they will undertake a training course.

In spite of the above comments it has been our experience that 40% of participants in the NEIS scheme have been older workers. The NEIS program is thus a useful program within the range of employment services for older people.

Summary of Needs of Older Workers

The Port Pirie Central Mission is in contact with significant numbers of older workers. From the experience of working with these clients the following needs have been identified:

- a need for sustained economic development within the region that will lead to increased employment opportunities
- tailored retraining that will enable workers who have been out of the workforce for long periods to reclaim, build on and update or reorient skills to meet the requirements of current employers
- access to appropriate literacy skill training
- access to activities within the community that will build social networks, develop self esteem and reduce social isolation, such activities need to provide a sense of self worth
- opportunities for volunteer work where paid employment is not going to be available
- adequate income maintenance payments to prevent those prematurely exiting the work force to live a sustainable life without slipping into poverty
- support with relocation expenses where people can consider relocating to areas with greater employment
- support with travel expenses to investigate employment opportunities in areas of greater employment, eg to attend job interviews

In ignoring the needs of these older workers we are making poor use of significant social capital available to our communities from the experience and wisdom gained by these members of our community. Older unemployed workers carry a degree of stigma about being out of work because our community so strongly links a person's identity to what they "do" meaning their "work". This contributes to the social isolation that is felt. That isolation is exacerbated by the levels of poverty that preclude involvement in community activities that can not be afforded eg sporting groups and cultural or craft activities.

Older workers are a group with particular needs that require the attention of the community by means of appropriate policy development and program initiatives.