

10 August 2007

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL SECURITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2007

About Job Futures and our interest

Job Futures is one of the largest providers of Australian Government Employment Services in remote Australia.

We deliver Job Network, Disability Employment services, the Personal Support Program, the Jobs Placement Employment and Training Program (JPET), Green Corps and the Community Work Co-ordinator Program in Central Australia (including Mutitjulu, Imanpa, Titjikala, Ti-Tree, Santa Teresa, Utopia), the Barkly Region and the Thamarrurr Regional Council area including Wadeye.

Job Futures is a non profit company limited by guarantee which delivers services through contracting local community organisations. Our model is based on building the capacity of local community people and organisations to provide services in their own community. In the Northern Territory, we contract Anangu Jobs, Tangentyere Job Shop, Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation and Thamarrurr Regional Council to deliver employment services.

Other people and organisations are better equipped to make submissions on the wider implications of this Bill for the affected communities and individuals. This submission is confined to one area – and that is its implications for Job Futures as a provider of Australian Government Employment Services.

Guidelines applying to provision of Employment Services in the NT

On 24th July 2007 the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations issued guidelines to providers which described new arrangements to apply in certain Northern Territory remote communities. We were advised that:

“These measures will change some aspects of the current assessment and referral processes and participation requirements for Indigenous job seekers”

In the normal course of events, job seekers participate in Job Network services for six months before a period of “mutual obligation” starts. At this point, job seekers have a choice of activities to meet their obligation – which includes community work, part time study, language literacy and numeracy. We believe that one of our obligations as a provider is to assist job seekers to exercise this choice in a way that maximises their future employment prospects. After six months of mutual obligation, job seekers access additional intensive customised assistance from their Job Network provider. Once in Customised assistance, job seekers are expected to be engaged intensively, so this does not generally co-incide with Work for the Dole.

However in the guidelines that were issued the Department stated that:

“In the first instance, the JNMs must refer all job seekers referred to Job Network to a CWC for participation in WfD activities.”

The pro forma Activity Agreements that were issued included Work for the Dole (as opposed to other forms of mutual obligation) as a mandatory activity. The guidelines state, as does the explanatory memorandum accompanying this Bill, that Work for the Dole will continue until the job seeker leaves income support. Customised assistance to find work, or to improve employability, is in addition to, and may co-incide with, the Work for the Dole activity.

The Guidelines also make it clear that the expectation extends to people who would not normally be required to participate in Work for the Dole:

“Job seekers assessed and referred to a DEN, PSP, JPET or VRS provider (via the JCA where required) should be commenced as quickly as possible in the services. In most instances, participation in WfD will improve these job seekers employment prospects.”

Work for the Dole can certainly improve the employment prospects of many individuals, particularly where the project is well designed and focused on building work skills relevant to the labour market. However people who are referred to Personal Support Program or JPET are referred because they are assessed as having multiple barriers to work. These include mental health problems, domestic violence, substance abuse problems, homelessness. While some may be able to participate in Work for the Dole, many need some additional intervention (eg rehabilitation, mental health service) before they can be expected to meet the obligations of a Work for the Dole program. If individuals are referred to Work for the Dole and fail to attend, or otherwise breach the requirements, we are contractually required to make a report to Centrelink which may result in a suspension of benefits.

The Department has made it clear that it will favour providers that meet its expectations, even where they are not spelled out in contractual terms:

“DEWR expects all PAGES to work closely with Community Brokers and other providers, including CWC and STEP providers. The Australian Government is implementing emergency measures across the Northern Territory, and a constructive and positive approach to the implementation of the changes will be highly valued. “

However Job Futures takes its obligation to work with each person who accesses our services on the basis of their individual needs, circumstances and aspirations seriously. One of the protections for us in seeking to exercise this duty is the protection of the Racial Discrimination Act.

Our request of the Senate

We would like to be able to work with job seekers to find the best pathway into employment. We recognise that beneficiaries in the Northern Territory should have the same obligations to participate in mutual obligation as others. They should also have the same rights to choose the form in which they meet this obligation. Their obligations should be no greater than that of other beneficiaries.

Providers should not be required to refer vulnerable people, such as those accessing PSP and JPET, to programs for which they are not suited, which expose them to breaching. Each person should be assessed as an individual.

Job Futures is of the view that providers of Australian Government Employment Services should be subject to the Racial Discrimination Act, as should the Commonwealth when it issues guidelines to providers. We believe that this is essential in order to meet our obligations to the people that we work with.

For enquiries
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