

Briefing Paper

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National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy

- The National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy (the Strategy) was released by the Government on 14 September 2009.
- The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide AFAO members with an overview of the Strategy.

Background:

The Strategy was developed to address barriers to employment faced by people with disability, including mental illness, its broad objectives being:

- to increase the employment of people with disability;
- promote social inclusion; and
- improve national economic productivity.

It includes initiatives funded by the Government's \$1.2 billion investment in new employment services for people with disability, various other previously announced 2008/2009 Budget measures, and the provision of a \$6.8 million Disability Support Pension (DSP) Employment Incentive Scheme for employers and people with disability.

Main initiatives:

- **Initiatives designed to enhance participation via education, employment, training and employment, including:**
 - enhancement of Disability Support pensioners' access to employment services and reducing disincentives to seek work, by removing the requirement that a full DSP eligibility review (regarding level of impairment and capacity to work) be conducted before a pensioner is referred to an employment service. This measure has been in effect since September 2008;
 - the piloting of a workforce re-engagement program for 16,000 people recently granted DSP, which will involve the provision of advice regarding employment incentives for pensioners, including explanation of the tapered pension income test and the policy to suspend rather than cancel pension for Disability Support Pensioners taking up paid work;
 - the development, with state and territory governments of a national Disability Strategy; and
 - implementation of the Fourth National Mental Health Plan, endorsed by the Australian Health Ministers Conference on 4 September 2009.
- **Improvements to disability employment services, including:**
 - implementation of measures designed to enhance the access of people with disability to employment services provided by Disability Employment Services (the new model established from 1 July 2009);
 - introduction of less complex eligibility, assessment and referral processes;
 - introduction of the Flexible Ongoing Support program (a new program for participants who are placed in work who have irregular or unpredictable support needs - for example, people with an episodic psychiatric disability), and the Job in Jeopardy program (for people whose jobs are at risk because of their disability, health condition or injury);
 - improvements (already implemented), to the Job Capacity Assessment process for DSP eligibility assessment, and the assessment of potential referrals to employment services. Reforms include providing face-to-face assessment for people in regional and remote communities, and reducing administrative requirements and the number of multiple assessments for new claimants and for pensioners under review, particularly for people who are seriously ill;

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- providing additional financial assistance to Australian Disability Enterprises, a commercial enterprise which provides supported employment to people with disability who are unlikely to be able to compete in the open employment market; and
 - participation in the major ongoing study which seeks to identify and evaluate the most successful models for employment assistance for people with mental illness (the final report from the study is due in 2010).
 - **Improved access to education and training, including:**
 - enhancements to the National Disability Coordination Officer Program, to improve linkages between school, post-school, employment and community organisation programs; and
 - introduction of initiatives, to commence on 1 January 2010, to build on Youth Pathways, YouthLinx, Connections and Mentor Marketplace services for young people with disability.
 - **Employer incentives, including:**
 - introduction of the two-year Disability Support Pension Employment Incentive Pilot (a \$6.8 million project announced in the 2009/2010 Budget), which will involve 1,000 Disability Support pensioners. Employers will be paid a subsidy of up to \$3,000 after the participant has been employed for 26 weeks;
 - introduction of less restrictive rules for providing financial assistance to people with mental illness under the Employment Assistance Fund, under which both employers and employees are able to access financial assistance;
 - implementation of the new Disability Action Plan framework; and
 - streamlining of the assessment process and workplace modification rules applying to the Disabled Australian Apprenticeship Wage Support program.
 - **Public sector employment improvements**
 - introduction of new Australian Public Service targets for employment of people with disability; and
 - implementation of initiatives developed by the Australian Public Service Commission and the Public Employees Disability Network.
 - **Innovation Fund**
 - This is a \$41 million initiative, operating until June 2010, to address barriers to employment faced by the most disadvantaged job-seekers, including Indigenous people and people with mental illness.
 - **GP's**
 - Strategies are to be developed to increase the role of GP's in assisting people with mental illness to find, return to or retain work.

Comments

- Given the high prevalence of mental illness among people living with HIV, and the combined impact of the episodic nature of mental illness and of HIV-related illnesses, the Strategy's DSP initiatives, employee support programs and employer incentives are pleasing. However, many PLHIV claiming Social Security income support cannot qualify for DSP due to its restrictive eligibility criteria – both in terms of the 15 hour per week work test, and the difficulty establishing eligibility for episodic disabilities and illnesses. The result is that many people with HIV who are intermittently unable to work, due to HIV-related illness and/or mental illness, receive activity-tested payments such as Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance. Some such recipients with disability are referred by Centrelink to employment and other services for people with disability, but they are generally referred to mainstream services and thus exposed to the rigours of activity-testing when ill. They are then potentially subject to breach penalties. It is unfortunate that the Strategy does not recognise the fact that many people with disability who are reliant on Social Security income support are not on DSP, yet would benefit from the new initiatives restricted to people on DSP.
- Especially in respect of PLHIV who have a psychiatric disability or intermittent mental illness, any evaluation of the effectiveness of the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy will need to be in the context of a holistic evaluation of the range of Commonwealth and state/territory strategies (regarding disability, health, homelessness, etc), which impact on employment issues for people with HIV.

References

- The Strategy is available at: <http://www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Publications/PolicyReviews>