

Proposal for work opportunities for the disabled

Recommendation

That the ACT Government introduce a pilot scheme whereby disabled pensioners can work three to fifteen hours per week (half day to two days) for government and government funded agencies.

Appropriate funding would be \$6 million each year for three years, with about \$10 per hour as a training wage paid to the disabled worker and \$30 per hour paid for the supervisor in the government agency, in order to assist 1 000 people annually. Agencies would submit competitive funding requests to a central pool managed in the chief minister's department.

Because of the national importance of this innovatory pilot program, we propose to ask for co-funding from the Hon. Jenny Macklin, Commonwealth Government Minister for Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Hon Julia Gillard, Employment Minister, over the three year trial.

Background

Much of the misery and disadvantage of Australians on disability support pensions can be alleviated with realistic part-time employment opportunities available to them. All of these people are aged between 16 and 65. A few participate in "sheltered" type arrangements, often for three hours per week. A tiny number overcome extraordinary obstacles to participate in the main-stream workforce. But only nine per cent work even one hour per week, and 91 per cent do no work.

The Hon Rob Knowles AO, former Victorian Minister for Health and President of Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia, has emphasized the extremely low employment rates for people suffering from a mental illness in Australia compared to the rest of the world (Radio National Life matters in September 2008). The Oxford Handbook of Psychiatry and mainstream research summarized by Dr E.Fuller Torrey emphasize that in most cases people do recover from even the most severe mental illnesses over time, provided that they have the opportunity of participating in part-time employment. This is not accessed in Australia, or Canberra.

There are some 8 000 disabled pensioners in Canberra and 732 000 in Australia. During the past twelve years other employment approaches have failed and innovation is necessary. Disabled pensioners have increased in numbers and they remain excluded from any work opportunities. The percentage is low for two reasons. First, until recently there was a fear of losing one's disability pension if one did work. Second, unlike other countries, Australian government and non-government employers remain averse to offering less than eight hours weekly work, particularly to people with a mental illness or other disability.

We suggest this should be a voluntary and competitive scheme. Disabled people would compete for work. Only agencies who wish to participate for these additional resources would do so.

There are many compassionate highly skilled employees who would wish to hire and support an additional workmate, on a part-time basis, and who would have the skills and empathy to provide on-the-job training for them. The cost might appear large, but in practice three-quarters of the funds will provide additional much needed support for many agencies providing valuable community services.

We also have a friend who was a world-awarded architect and landscape architect until the age of 54 when he became a paraplegic after a traffic accident, and now does no work. We believe that people like our friend would also be more likely to participate in part-time work if Australia, like other countries, had a culture of disabled people with realistic opportunities of participating in the workforce.

We have had preliminary discussions with several directors of government and non-government agencies in developing this scheme.

Potential benefits

The scheme guarantees work opportunities for a significant proportion of the disabled population. It allows for the disabled to compete for jobs and for agencies to compete for additional funding to provide realistic support. People with sight or hearing or paraplegic disabilities are most likely to access part-time work. Research has shown that part-time work enhances the health and mental well-being of the one quarter of disabled pensioners with a mental illness. There is likely to be a decrease in costly admissions to hospitals for this group. Over a realistic timeframe, all those who participate in this scheme will enhance their work skills. They will have immediate access to greater income, and over time they will have better prospects of gaining non-assisted part-time work and ongoing mainstream part-time work.

In purely economic terms, there are extremely good prospects of this investment being recouped from increased taxation, immediate decreased levels of hospital support and social support currently necessary.

Canberra has large government and government funded agencies, which do have the resources and expertise to make the scheme succeed. Because of its national potential, we propose to ask for Australian Government co-funding.

This issue is of fundamental concern to 8 000 disabled pensioners in Canberra and their immediate families.

Dr Paul Kauffman and Rupert Gerritsen 8 October 2008

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