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Senate Select Committee on Job Security

Response to Question on Notice, Public Hearing - 28 July 2021

Dear Select Committee,

I am pleased to provide this response to a question on notice asked by Senator Small in the public hearing on 28 July 2021. The question is *'On notice, could you come back to me on this final point, because, in the context of unemployment being at 12-year lows and with high participation rates, this idea of them being low-skilled workers seems perverse when you compare it with the health and safety risks that you point to. Could you explore that on notice and come back to me, because there seems to be, again, a disconnect there. But I do thank you for your testimony this morning.'* (p. 6)

I address this question with reference to: (i) demand and supply characteristics of the disability support work labour market; and (2) changes in the risk environment of disability support work that have occurred with the implementation of the NDIS entailing a move to individualised services and an individual consumer market.

Demand and supply characteristics of the disability support work labour market

Disability support work can be complex and difficult and it is not particularly low-skilled work, although it is low-paid. There is a long history of undervaluation of this work, as with other social care work. These issues were canvassed widely and recognised by the recent Aged Care Royal Commission.

Before the pandemic disability services providers experienced significant difficulties attracting appropriately skilled and experienced people for disability support jobs and they continue to experience these problems. Service providers experience problems retaining workers and they have limited capacity to train people for disability support roles (NDS 2019, 2020). NDIS workforce turnover is relatively high. At current levels it is expected the NDIS will lose around 213,000 workers to churn by 2024, with this not

including the additional 63,000 workers needed to meet growth in demand (DSS 2021, p. 10). Factors contributing to turnover are likely to include:

- *Low wages and limited career opportunities:* Wages are mostly determined by NDIS funding. NDIS pricing levels for disability support are very tight. Pricing levels and structures work against employment of more experienced and skilled disability support workers at above the minimum rates, other than for providing the most complex support. NDIS funding is largely limited to client-facing time and pricing levels and structure limit opportunities for workers to participate in on- and off-the-job training and to build skills (Cortis et al 2017; NDS 2020).
- *Short-hours part-time work with fragmented and variable working time:* Disability support work is overwhelmingly part-time and casual work (DSS 2021; NDS 2020). Working time requirements can make it difficult for workers to manage other work, study or family commitments, as a job can involve multiple short shifts with work hours that vary and can be unpredictable. This contributes to the seemingly paradoxical situation where there is unmet demand for labour at the same time as disability support workers want to work more hours. Periods of high demand for disability support interspersed with times of low demand over the day contribute to labour underutilisation, as does the organisation of work by employers to gain maximum labour flexibility (Macdonald et al. 2018). Disability support workers can be underemployed yet still have long work days and work across most days of the week.¹ Over the past decade underemployment has increased significantly among people in community & personal services occupations and in the healthcare and social assistance industry (Chambers et al. 2021).

Low-skilled and inexperienced workers are seeking employment as disability support workers in this labour market, including because:

- There are no qualifications requirements for employment as a disability support worker and the jobs are dispersed geographically and present in all communities.
- Disability support work is now actively promoted to unemployed people, including young people (DSS 2021), who experience high levels of unemployment. Youth unemployment was high prior to the pandemic and, in June 2020, among 15 to 24 year-olds it rose to 16.4% (ABS 2020). Young people remain a minority in the NDIS workforce but their participation is growing (NDS 2020).
- *Underemployment* is high among low-skilled workers. In 2019-20, among people in the labour force aged 20-74 years, the underemployment rate for women was 10.3% and for men it was 7.2% (Chambers et al 2021). People seeking multiple jobs to make a living may be attracted to this work.

Health and safety risks associated with the work:

Health and safety risks for people with disability and for disability support workers were present in disability support services prior to the NDIS. However, there are some new risks under the NDIS and some risks are less readily managed and mitigated (Macdonald 2021, see chapters 7-8). Employment arrangements are a key factor in this.

In organisational employment disability support workers have some access to training, supervision, peer support, de-briefing and organisational systems and processes for preventing and reporting problems and mitigating risks. Where a worker is engaged via a platform there is no organisational employer oversight of,

¹ See <https://cpow.org.au/dayinthelife/>. A day in the life of a care and support worker illustrates this through a 4-minute animated video of work organisation for some care and support workers in the NDIS, based on time diaries and interviews.

or responsibility for, the quality of support and the safeguarding of the person with disability or for the occupational health and safety of the disability support worker. This is a change that has occurred in disability support services with the implementation of the NDIS. Quality of care and support and safeguarding for people with disability are matters that are regulated by the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission. The risks to the worker resulting from the employment arrangement are not a central concern of the NDIS regulator and arise from the employment arrangement.

I am happy to provide any additional information the Committee may require.

Yours sincerely

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