

The Administration and Purchasing of Disability Employment Services in Australia

With regard to the Education, Employment and Workplace References Committee inquiry I would like to make the following submission:

- Challenge Disability Services has been providing employment services to people with disabilities since 1987. We have been supporting many of the same clients intermittently over that period as they progress with their employment. In that time we have come to know the client intimately. Our staff not only know the client, but their family, their housing situation, their doctor, their psychologist and much of their personal history. In that time the clients, in turn, have come to develop a trust and confidence in the staff. This is the kind of trust that isn't earned in five minutes with a new service provider. It is this trust, confidence and intimate knowledge of the clients that allows us to place them in a job that is a good fit, and is ultimately enduring. It is a knowledge that allows us to handle situations with family, police and those in their intimate circle, and means we can keep them in a job when the wheels are falling off in their personal life.

My concerns about two (2) year contract terms include:

- The clients' trust and confidence in us, which allows us to keep them engaged in employment when their life circumstances are in turmoil, will be lost.
- The training and professional development required to equip staff for this unique role takes significant time. Our staff are trained in marketing, ESS, disability types, mental health first aid, OHS, organisational orientation, traineeships and apprenticeships, and workplace assessment and training. Staff don't acquire these skills and qualifications overnight. These skills are unique to our industry and are not available in the wider community when recruiting. To make this investment in staff, and then only offer them a short term contract will make recruiting into this industry impossible in the future. Who will work for an organisation that requires this level of commitment to training when there is no long term security or opportunity for career advancement in the medium to long term.
- Understanding the local employment market also takes time. Over the years as a rural service provider we have developed an intimate knowledge of businesses and their key decision makers. In the past, businesses have been reluctant to employ people with disabilities, particularly those with psychiatric conditions. However as we have worked with them, and they have grown to trust us, the barriers to placing people with disabilities have been slowly broken down. Many times business owners will say to us, "You know my business, would you employ this person if you were me?" This knowledge and confidence is not established with a cold marketing call from a new service provider interested in a quick outcome to boost their star ratings. We are here for the long term, and if we burn an employer with a bad placement we may have shut the door to any future placement. We have to live in the same community as these employers, our kids go to the same schools, we know each other socially. It is in our interest to look after their long term best interests.
- Not only do we have a commitment to the best interests of employers in the region, we also have well developed networks with doctors, psychologists and other service providers. This local knowledge, acquired by the service over 24 years, will be lost if we are unsuccessful at tender.
- As well as the impact on clients, staff and employers in the region, two year contract terms means the organisation's investment in infrastructure will be short term at best. What service

provider would invest in IT, training facilities, motor vehicles and a prime CBD location if they are looking at a two year contract term?