

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Michelle Wakeford, National Ticket to Work Manager, National Disability Services;

Ms Suzanne Colbert AM, Chief Executive, Australian Network on Disability (*via videoconference*); and

Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, Children and Young People with Disability Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. If you can switch off your mobile phones or turn them to silent now, that would be good. All evidence taken at this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege, and I am not sure how it works for a televised hearing.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament website. Rebroadcasting of the hearing is not permitted, in accordance with the with Legislative Assembly standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I think we are just going straight into questions at this point in time, so we will proceed with questions and then at the conclusion you can provide further statements if you need to. Thank you for being here.

Ms CONNOLLY: Which areas in the Jobs Victoria Employment Network do you think are working well for jobseekers with a disability and where is there room for improvement? It is a loaded question, isn't it.

Ms SAYERS: The Jobs Victoria Employment Network is crucially important because the Victorian Government playing a role in the employment space is critical because of some of the failures in the Commonwealth. The jobactive network as well as the Disability Employment Services run by the Commonwealth have been well proven not to be effective on the whole for working with children and young people with disability. What I know from the data that has been given to me from the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions is that around 334 young people with disability—and young people are obviously our concern—have been registered with JVEN, and of those, 139 placements into work have been claimed. We understand that it is working for keeping young people in employment for a long period of time. I think it is because the Jobs Victoria Employment Network is fairly new in terms of some of the early data that is coming through and obviously in my previous employment at the Victorian Council of Social Service, and I know you have had Emma King, the CEO, speak to you as well. I worked with Jobs Victoria, and their method of engagement has been really effective.

The CHAIR: Any further comments on that?

Ms WAKEFORD: We work a little bit—we get some funding—looking at after-school work for young people with a disability, from Jobs Victoria. I think one of the issues is the interface between DES and JVEN. The DSS—the Federal Government—stated that they should not work together, which I think is a mistake. I think we need to really start to look at how we blend and make sure that within a place-based approach there is a smooth transition to a range of different things. So we advocate that JVEN take that broader role of how people, particularly young people with disabilities, interact with the service system. We have found some great benefits particularly with—which I am sure Suzanne will touch on—the Jobs Victoria employment engagement team. One of the things we think is key is that we need a broker with employers, someone the employers can trust because often the service system is looking at their own needs, not necessarily the employer's needs. We have found that those roles have worked quite well with employers because they are that trusted broker and they are looking at their interest and how they can interact with the service system that suits them. That has been a benefit to us, and that is what is found overseas—that employers need that support.

Ms COLBERT: You are absolutely right, and thank you. What we find when we look at the research is that employers are open-minded about including people with disability in their workforce, and we have seen quite a lot of growth in a whole range of areas. I think the strength of the JVEN program is that it does focus on brokerage and supporting employers and treats the employer as a valuable asset to the employment process as opposed to more a transaction party, which you can imagine that most employers do not appreciate. When people get a job it is about a relationship. And to the point raised previously, in the DES service system one of the things that is a challenge is the huge drive that the DES providers have to place somebody in a role so they get paid but not necessarily with the best interests of the employer at heart and indeed sometimes not even to the hopes and aspirations of the jobseeker. So to make progress on the employment of people with disability we really have to consider the way we treat employers and value them as a partnership approach so that the recruitment and retention of people with disability becomes a sustainable approach. So that brokerage role that

is being played is critically important. It respects employers and is adding real value. So I certainly commend the Victorian Government for developing the program.

Mr BLACKWOOD: I guess we are talking about employers, so how can we improve the employers' own processes around the application and interview process for your clients?

Ms SAYERS: Look, there is a holistic approach that is needed by employers which goes beyond just the recruitment process. The discrimination that people with disability face spans across a whole range of areas, and recruitment is only one tiny part of the picture. The majority of complaints that go to the discrimination commissioners are around discrimination in employment; it is around attitudes and it is around the fact that employers do not have either the leadership or the policies and procedures in place to make sure that the experience for the person with disability is a good experience. So it is a major challenge that needs to be thought of more broadly than just thinking about recruitment. It really needs to have disability inclusive workplaces.

The Australian Human Rights Commission put out a report called *Willing to Work*, and they identified a number of areas where there could be improvements. We obviously commend the Victorian Government for having disability inclusion plans or disability plans as a requirement for State Government agencies as well as hospitals, but one of the things we could think about is how the Victorian Government could lever encouraging businesses to have disability inclusion plans as well, because the recruitment part of it is critical, and we need that process to be good, but it is part of a much broader picture.

Ms WAKEFORD: Through our Ticket to Work network we are working with over 2,000 employers, we have got more than 3,000 young people in work experience and 1,400 students in work. We have researched the needs of employers, and what we have found is our employers want ongoing support, because we work mainly with intellectual disability. The common way of working is 'place and pray'—stick someone in a job and just pray that it will work. It never, never works. We take the approach of match—to make sure it is the right match for that employer—place and support. What our employers are saying and what some of the research is saying, particularly that AND has been doing, is that employers are willing but they need the right supports in place, and that is what our experience has been through the Ticket to Work networks, and that demand-led approach, that they are not just a vehicle; their needs are being taken into consideration.

Ms ADDISON: I was just wondering, Michelle, what type of work, what type of employers—can you give me sort of—

Ms WAKEFORD: It is very broad. We take a customised employment approach, and I have got some packs and a proposal in there.

Ms ADDISON: Or even types of industry?

Ms WAKEFORD: Any. We look at the employers—it is a place-based approach, so the employers in the area that need staff and the young people that we have, the students.

Ms ADDISON: So retail, hospitality, manufacturing—

Ms WAKEFORD: Retail, hospitality—everything.

Ms ADDISON: You name it.

Ms WAKEFORD: Yes. So depending, if we are in the country there will be more of the agriculture and things like that. We try not to focus, but having said that, a lot of it is about what young people normally would be employed in, like our upskill project—you know, Macca's, Hungry Jack's—because that is where you would normally do an after-school job. We talk about having a normal pathway with extra supports, rather than trying to create disability pathways.

Ms COLBERT: This is a great question, because to some extent this is why the Australian Network on Disability was founded. In my experience of working in a disability employment service and keeping the data, I noticed how long it took us to find one person a job. A woman called Michelle wanted to do a commercial

cookery class. It took us 180 phone calls to find her that commercial cookery job that supported her studies. It occurred to me that if it took every young person with disability 180 phone calls to get into a job, then it was like selling tickets to a plane that was never going to take off. We are offering employment to young people but actually the reality is that the system barriers are well and truly against them, particularly with large employers.

When we started the organisation if you knocked on the door of a large organisation, it was very hard to find anybody to open the door. Now of course the door has been replaced with a website, and the complexities of navigating online applications that do not provide an opportunity to have adjustments or to tell your story are even more complex. Throughout our many years of operation there have been two particular services that come to mind, one is called a 'recruitment review'. We have done hundreds of those and we have never found a single employer in Australia where a person with disability could fairly and equitably apply for a role and expect to get through the process. It is better in the public service because you can still speak to a human, but there are other barriers in the public sector such as traditional merit selection that get in the way.

We also have another program called 'disability confident recruiter' that gives people an assurance that if they apply for a job at that organisation, they will get fair and equitable treatment and be considered for that role. But that is a very small number of vacancies, so the system barriers to applying for and successfully being recruited to a large complex organisation—and it is large employers who are recruiting at the moment, not small to medium from a city perspective. In regional areas there is indeed growth in recruitment, particularly in Victoria. But from a city-based perspective, it is large employers who are doing most of the employing, and it is very hard to get through their recruitment and selection process on the basis that the whole purpose of an efficient HR process is to take 500 applications and reduce them to five in as short as possible a time frame with the best possible match. As we see the growth and development of AI in recruitment and selection that will become increasingly difficult.

To add to that, we run an internship program for university students with disability. Even though they are well educated they still have substantial disadvantage in competing with their cohort. In the 1,200 or 1,300 times that we have done that, we know the importance of the right level of support for the business as well as the right level of support for the students, and by holding the business and the student in equal importance to make that ongoing relationship work, that is how you create success.

So I totally agree that 'place and pray' just does not hold water, and I worry that with such a model we are diminishing the capacity of employers to open up their opportunities to jobseekers with disability, not building their capacities.

Ms ADDISON: Can I just follow-up on that, and I am very interested in your university graduate program Stepping into Internship—is that what the program is called?

Ms COLBERT: Yes.

Ms ADDISON: Is there evidence that when people with a disability have a formal qualification, whether that be a Cert III, a diploma or a university degree, that the percentages and the chances of success are significantly greater, or are we still seeing that there are so many systematic barriers that even being well qualified does not actually open as many doors as it should?

Ms COLBERT: Fifty-seven per cent of university graduates find some level of employment within four months of graduating. However, that employment may be as a barista or may be an employment that is not related to their area of study. For university students who actually complete the Stepping into Internship program, 80% of those students find a job within four months of graduating. The majority of those are within their field of study, and more of those students choose part time. So if they are working part time, it is because they have selected part time as their preferred option to accommodate their disability.

I think there is similar data out of the US available when it comes to kids leaving school. The kids who did work experience or work in summer vacation programs, once again, have a much higher employment rate post school. In absolutely supporting others, the importance of supported work experience while at school is critical to post-school options and to be able to compete on a level playing field with their cohort and age group.

Ms SAYERS: Could I add some points there?

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Ms SAYERS: Just to give you some statistics on this, to CYDA employment starts with education. We know that 29.1% of young people with disability in Victoria commence VET, while only 8% actually finish VET—that was from the NCVET data that came out this week—compared to 36% of other young people aged 15 to 24, while 30% complete. So we have got a real challenge with education and pathways. Just in terms of people aged over 20 who have completed year 12, if you have got a disability, 32%. If you do not have a disability, 62%. So we have got a huge problem with our education system. We have 19% of people who have left school before the age of 16. If we are going to solve this challenge around ensuring young people with disability actually get to work, we actually need to look at our education system.

Victoria is actually failing in its human rights approach. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has a specific and continuing obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible to the full realisation of article 24.12 of the human rights convention. This is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: mainstream and special education. In Victoria special education, or segregated education, is increasing; it is not going down. The evidence shows that children and young people with disability succeed much more when they go to their local primary and secondary schools, yet in Victoria we do not have a policy framework for inclusive education. So if we are going to think about employment—and it is all good to talk around, ‘Well, they need to be able to compete to get jobs’—we actually need to start with our roots within our education system. We have an inherently discriminatory education system in Australia; Victoria is not the only state.

The other area where we are failing is in post-school transition. On the whole this is not done well. I would like to acknowledge the work that NDS has done in Ticket to Work, because that is a real lighthouse piece of work in thinking around post-school transition, how we equip and, as Michelle mentioned, starting with education as a pathway into employment. We need to change attitudes and misconceptions, and we need legislative and policy reform around inclusive education.

That was the bulk of our submission to the jobseekers Inquiry. We cannot wait to fix this once children and young people have left school. There is a whole lot of issues around the need to tackle discrimination structurally in our systems as well as with employers. I guess that was a real key point—because you went to education there—that we really need to emphasise that we really are failing students with disability in this state.

Ms WAKEFORD: And just back to the question, there has been quite a bit of research by Melbourne Uni as well as Curtin University about post-school education and training. There is a really clear indication that higher ed or TAFE where it has an employment element—so internship or work experience—has better outcomes. Also what we have found and overseas is that secondary education where it has connection to employment—so work experience, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and after-school work—has much better outcomes. That is what has been found overseas and that is what we are finding here.

The CHAIR: Further questions?

Ms SAYERS: Can I just add one more point?

The CHAIR: Sure, Mary.

Ms SAYERS: I commend the Victorian Government on its social procurement policy as well as the fact that it will not purchase from Australian disability enterprises that do not pay award wages, because another challenge is, like segregated education, segregated employment. Again, we believe that that is a breach of human rights as well. We know that there are around 4,000 Victorians with disability who work in segregated employment, and the supported wage system is inherently discriminatory. We really welcome that the Victorian Government has a commitment around not purchasing from ADEs that actually do not pay award wages for people with disability.

Ms ADDISON: I would be interested in talking about recruitment practices. I know we have mentioned artificial intelligence and a few people have talked about that in terms of the bias in terms of applications and issues like that. How can employers adjust their application and interview processes to be more inclusive of people with disabilities?

Ms WAKEFORD: Probably Suzanne could start.

Ms COLBERT: Yes, so I think if I can open the question out to say that the way that we see it there are two main challenges. One is to have what we call a barrier-free front door. That means that anybody with disability can apply through the main way of applying and get fair treatment. But we also need a side door for people who need to be considered separately from that main door competitive process. So we have seen programs for women, we have seen programs to help Indigenous Australians get into employment and we also need to have programs so that people with disability can enter into the market through a side door.

I want to point out that I think there is a lesson in the growth of the business Specialisterne. Specialisterne is an autism-specific organisation. It is a global organisation. It is a not for profit, and they package up services. Many of our member organisations, such as DHHS, for example, have the Rise program through Specialisterne. The reason I want to raise that is because the Specialisterne program has a substantial cost, about \$10,000 a placement, and yet our members are absolutely flocking to use that program. The reason that they are is because it is very well packaged. It is clear what the employer will get: the support that they will get and for how long and how much that will cost, the alignment between the roles they have on offer and the talent that they will be provided. The way that people are recruited through the Specialisterne program is through a two-week on-the-job work experience kind of package that is about learning and understanding and demonstrating their skills and capability without the need for a formal interview.

This is not required for every group, but the point I will make to you is that I think of our members certainly 20 or 25 organisations from the public and private sectors have recruited hundreds of people through Specialisterne. I say this because it is not about the money, because clearly the DES program is free, yet employers are choosing to engage with Specialisterne because of the way that the program is packaged, it has a good reputation, they have good data, it really makes a difference for that particular cohort. I think the lesson that we can draw from that is that the way that we engage with employers and how we package the opportunity is critically important for us to achieve scale.

So when we are thinking about disadvantaged jobseekers, particularly those with disability which is the interest area of us here at the table today, we have made no progress over more than 20 years despite the economic growth and prosperity that Australia has had. The question that we have to be asking ourselves, and you in Victoria, is: how do we move from stagnant or going backwards to really achieving scale, and what can we learn from the enormous success of Specialisterne? Once again, a well-packaged program that employers know exactly what the pitch is, exactly what they are going to get and a high number of employers engaging, but we have got to be able to create scale. It is an example of a program that is doing that, and as I said, it does not have a traditional interview. It has a two-week working interview, if you like, that makes it easier to clearly articulate the skills and capabilities of individuals and then to match them to very specific roles. Those roles are not only in IT. They have certainly had success in agriculture and many other areas, so I think it is an example of where we could learn for future design and the way that it puts employers at the heart as well as the skills and capabilities of young people with disability.

Ms WAKEFORD: Yes, we work a lot with the diversity field officers, which is a demand-led model, so looking at what that employer needs. We work a lot with small and medium business because they do not have HR structure we can have a conversation, and it is all about relationships. We use a customised employment approach, which is the idea: it is one employer, one person. You know, let us have a conversation, 'What are your employment needs? What are your barriers to employing people with a disability through your structures and how can we work together?'. Often these things are all about relationships.

Ms SAYERS: I just wanted to touch on confidence of businesses to employ people with disability. Often there is a fear of the workplace adjustments that are going to need to be made. There is a lack of confidence or knowledge. There is sometimes an absence of leadership commitment, and then for small businesses navigating all the frameworks and all the processes is really complex, so there needs to be both incentivisation and public awareness about the benefits of employing people with disability. People with disability face barriers to participation in not just employment but in all aspects of their life. So the more we can promote the benefits of how it is not just good for the person with disability but also good for society and the community if we employ people with disability. So I just wanted to touch on that and that a broadscale campaign around why it is good to employ, why you are a good citizen of Victoria if you employ a person with disability. It is not just a charity

thing, actually they are good workers and they bring a lot of richness and diversity to the workplace. So it cannot just be based on a charity model.

Ms COLBERT: I want to, just in order to support this, give an example of how other countries have managed this. So in Australia, as you would be well aware, employment is a federal responsibility, and yet in the Australian Human Rights Commission the most people or manpower we have ever had employed in disability rights is about 4.5 people. And in comparison to the UK, for example, when their disability discrimination legislation was developed, they had a massive employer education program. Every employer, even sole traders, were sent a very neat little pack helping employers to understand who their potential workforce could be and who their potential customers would be. That gave them an example of the kind of adjustments that they might want to make for people in their community who want to do business with them as employees or as customers. So there are some very strong precedents being set by other countries that have made substantial differences that go to the heart of employer practice.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you for all the work that you do. I want to talk about on-the-job support for people with disabilities and whether that is adequate in terms of, I guess, the funding or the support that employers are provided to give that extra wraparound support to people with disabilities when they come to work with them. Do you have a comment on that at all?

Ms WAKEFORD: We think it is vitally important. The group we work with is people with more significant disabilities, and an employer just needs that confidence that, one, there is someone that will be there for the long haul if they need support. Also, we have been through a system where our employment services have not been supporting people with more significant disabilities for a very long time—used to but they do not. So when you look at the DES system, people with intellectual disabilities is only 8% of the market; it used to be 80% of the market. So we have lost those skills I think within our communities around how to support people into sustained employment. So things like task breakdown, how to teach—all those sorts of things are lost. So we have been doing some training around customised employment techniques, which is about bringing those skills back into Australia, because there is a lack of that kind of knowledge about how to do ongoing support well—the place and pray. We have lost that knowledge. We need to bring that back. The way we work is very much looking at a service system or a place-based approach and looking at who is best. So rather than looking at the programs, it is about, ‘Let’s look at the system and look at a place, and let’s look at how we can make it work for that area using evidence-based practice to do that’. So it is a lost art that needs to be brought back.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: And is there anything the State Government can do to support that?

Ms WAKEFORD: Yes. Building capacity is a huge need. We need to look at those kind of place-based approaches and how we can do that. So there is a real place for that collective impact approach, which the State Government would be quite well suited to take on.

Ms SAYERS: I would agree with a place-based approach. What I think would be really worthwhile for the Victorian Government to do is to develop a youth employment strategy, because we know all young people, not just young people with disability, are struggling to find work—a youth employment strategy which has a particular focus on disadvantaged jobseekers, including young people with disability, and builds off existing place-based mechanisms like Local Learning and Employment Networks, like JVEN, like the education initiatives around Navigator, but also collaborates with peak bodies, with disability representative organisations. One of the things that the Victorian Government has done very well in things like their family violence reform has been co-design, so co-design with young people with disability to be able to help design the solutions. I think we have learned a lot from other co-design work, and I think that that could be really critical in thinking about what the Victorian Government could do.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you.

Ms COLBERT: If I could just add to that, I would include employers in that co-design process right from the beginning. I think that is very important. And in relation to ongoing support, I would just like to use an example in relation to people with intellectual disability. A few years ago we did three cohorts of people with intellectual disability in business administration traineeships. The results were outstanding. In the first cohort there were five trainees; all completed their study and all were retained. In the second group there were

13 trainees; I think 12 completed their studies and eight were retained in the ACT Government. And then we did another cross-organisation cohort, once again with very high completion and retention rates.

But unfortunately, as the world of work changes there was no-one to go back into those organisations to assist supervisors and managers to know how to restructure and reorient the work for those people with intellectual disability. Because as the placement had been made some time before, there were no skills, no opportunity, so nothing available. So as a result of that we had a series of supervisors who were really stressed about, 'I have got this person on my team with intellectual disability, and now I have no work for them. What do I do?'

And we cannot expect that managers will have the capability to customise the role. As Michelle says, that is highly skilled work—how you create a customised role in a large, complex organisation. And so there is a real deterioration over time. We have also had members in the private sector who have had people with intellectual disability on their staff for 20 years who have called up and have been desperate to know, 'How do we develop this person? How do we give them new learning opportunities?'

It is not sending them off to learning and development to do an online course like they would with the rest of the staff. But with no support provision and no answers from anybody other than, 'Find an independent specialised teacher who can come into your workplace and work with you'—it is not enough. We really have to do better at long-term supports, also, for people with intellectual disability, in the anticipation that the future of work will be different from how work is today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you for your attendance, and thank you for being online, Suzanne.

Ms COLBERT: Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.