

Wednesday 8th July, 2015

Aged and Disability Discrimination Commissioner
The Hon. Susan Ryan AO
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY, NSW, 2001

Dear Commissioner Ryan,

For sixty two years Greenacres Disability Services (GDS) have provided training and support for people with a broad range of disabilities in the Illawarra and more recently the Shoalhaven. GDS began in 1953 with the opening of Greenacres Special School which was parent driven and committed to the development of skills; there were no other like options in the Illawarra at that time. Today GDS is a multifaceted organisation delivering "Best Practice" services to over eight hundred people each week with a disability across vocational and non-vocational needs; they are:

- Australian Disability Enterprises (ADE's) that employ two hundred and fifty three people with a range of disabilities;
- fourteen Community Access services that provide a broad range of programs for three hundred and thirty service users who are unable to work;
- a Retirement Options program that provides a service for people with a disability who are ageing and need and want to retire from work;
- an Open Employment service, Greenacres Employment Services (GES) that places people with a disability in open employment and supports them on the job; and
- an intensive school to work program Joblink, for young people with a disability under the State funded Transition to Work program

The attached paper discusses our position with regard to our ADE and I am sure reflects other ADE's throughout Australia. The ADE is an essential component in the provision of opportunities for employment for people with a disability. Unfortunately many ADE's carry the stigma of being a "Sheltered Workshop"; this is not true and has negatively influenced many decisions with regard to ADE's by Governments and most particularly ill-informed advocacy groups.

The paper is self-explanatory, we believe that the ADE is in a unique position to provide excellent, cost effective services for people with a broad range of disability, particularly with the introduction of the NDIS.

I hope this paper provides you with information that will assist you to progress the journey of the ADE in Australia and for people with a disability who want and have the right to work.

I would be very pleased to discuss this paper with you; please do not hesitate to contact me at Greenacres on (02) 4229 2666 or my mobile 0425 231 813.

Yours sincerely,



Chris Christodoulou
Chief Executive Officer
Greenacres Disability Services

WINNERS

2014 Employer of Choice Award - Momentum Energy Illawarra Business Awards
2014 Excellence in Workplace Health and Safety Award - Momentum Energy Illawarra Business Awards
2012 Innovative Partnerships Award - NSW Disability Innovation Award (Organisation)
2010 Best National Mental Health Program Award - Eli Lilly

GREENACRES IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Human Rights Commission **Issue Paper – National Inquiry into Employment and Disability**

The Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) is an essential component in the provision of opportunities for employment for people with a disability. The ADE provides a range of work options for people who for one reason or another are not able to access open employment.

In many areas of Australia the ADE still carries the stigma of being a “Sheltered Workshop”; this has negatively influenced many (ill informed) decisions with regard to ADE’s, particularly by Government/s and advocacy groups.

Many advocacy groups argue that ADE’s promote segregation. This could not be further from the truth; ADE’s promote life skills, inclusion and interaction with people without disabilities; they also -

- teach people with a disability the requirements to be work ready, as well as time management skills
- teach people that getting to work often involves public transport and interacting with the general public on public transport. Travel training is an important component of inclusion
- assist the employee to understand that work provides ongoing development and reinforcement of their skills; and a work ethic commensurate with the nature of their disability
- foster interaction between supported employees, support staff and management which is an important element in ensuring people with a disability are treated with dignity and respect
- provide work in/or run enterprises where there is a greater interaction with either the public or open employment

ADE’s are in a unique position to be able to provide a practical cost effective service for people with a disability on the cusp of entering open employment but are not work ready. An ADE can provide a grounded program which would encompass the practicalities of going to work each day, working alongside others and being socially responsible; these are most often the barriers to a person with a disability accessing open employment.

ADE’s such as Greenacres Disability Services (***see attachment 1***) have employment training programs in place that could be easily accessed by people with a disability across a broad range of ages and disabilities to assist them to become work ready. Greenacres *Transition to Work Program* places a number of their service users into the ADE so that they can have the experience of real work and working conditions; the majority of them move onto work in open employment. Those that do not meet the criteria of jobs that may be available, can choose to remain employed by the ADE and have their skills, competencies and comfort levels for open employment reviewed at a later date.

The ADE does not limit its intake to school leavers, a broad range of people, disabilities and ages are employed by ADE’s. An ADE would be a perfect vehicle to operate the NSW State Governments’ *Employment Enablement Packages Project* (EEP) along with the NDIS. The

eligibility, scope and outcomes for both the NDIS and EEP programs would slot easily into the day to day workings of an ADE.

The greater majority of ADE's in the twenty first century have interesting, varied work that fits and challenges the skills and competencies of their employees. Some ADE's have a high ratio of able bodied workers integrating with their higher skilled employees with a disability, this composition tends to produce highly skilled work quickly. Other ADE's have employees that require additional support because of their high levels of disability; these services have higher numbers of qualified training staff and provide work that is appropriate for their employees' skill levels; even though some of these people have significant disability they want and have the right to work.

As previously stated, across all ADE's there is a variety of work; administrative, packaging, electrical assembly, manufacturing, fork lift driving, catering, hospitality, property maintenance, ground maintenance etc. These are the perfect vehicles for people with a disability who are able and want to work; the ADE could and should be an integral part and at the forefront of preparing people to work in open employment and at the same time provide a safety net for those that can't make it.

There are many advocacy groups that want to see ADE's closed down. They have a view that all people with a disability who might want to work should be in open employment. In reality this is not possible for the majority of people with a disability in ADE's without forcing an employment formula in the market place.

The closure of ADE's will mean that many employees with a disability will be forced into community participation (CP) programs with less income, or, at worst if they are not eligible for CP programs could become unemployed.

Attachment 1

About Greenacres Disability Services' Australian Disability Enterprise

- GDS has two hundred and fifty three people with a disability working both full time and part time in its ADE. At any one time there are up to one hundred and sixty people working in our Community Enterprises alongside and/or supported by thirty people without a disability.
- GDS embarked on the 'business road' for people with a disability in the Illawarra because there was a yawning gap in services and opportunities for people with a disability who wanted to work and earn a wage.
- ADE's must have at their core a dual focus; the provision of supported employment for people with a disability and the operation of a commercially viable business. The duality of focus demands that they balance two effective competing requirements to achieve success. This is not easy, particularly in the current business climate.
- The volume and variety of jobs coming into the ADE has tested the 'duality' of focus premise; that is, training/people versus production/profit. The ADE's training and supervisory staff (without a disability) has succeeded in maintaining that balance, with employees with a disability being multi-skilled and demonstrating increases in skills, competencies and productivity.

- Our absolute priority is our employees with a disability; it is our belief that everyone has great potential, a unique gift, and that it is our responsibility to create an environment and opportunities where that potential can be realised. GDS achieves this with one to one support on the job, a range of training programs that are relevant and interesting and individual personal support.
- The philosophy of management is to empower the employees, and in the process encourage them to understand that they are an essential part of the business and that they have real ownership. The average service of our employees with a disability is twelve years. The innovative training programs flow onto production increase and success at all levels, resulting in that balance of employee satisfaction and growth in business.
- We are the employer of choice for people with a disability in the Illawarra who are unable to gain and maintain work in open employment. We also offer people with a disability (particularly those transitioning from school) who do want to move into open employment, the opportunity to experience work in a real employment setting, gain the skills and confidence to assist them to access open employment either through our DES open employment program or the ADE will assist them to job search and interview.
- The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) has recognised GDS's commitment to its female employees and has featured three of our programs on its website; these are our Transition to Retirement program for ageing employees with a disability, the Quality Circles programs undertaken weekly by all of our employees covering a broad range of subjects and issues; and the question of equal remuneration for women in the workplace.
- GDS Policies and Procedures are reviewed in line with our Quality Systems, changes to relevant Government Legislation and changes to procedures that facilitate the day to day running of the ADE.
- A data base has been developed which contains all of the files/records of our employees with a disability; as well as personal details such as medication etc. these records include the employees' level of skills, competencies and productivity on a broad range of jobs. This enables staff to ascertain the most suitable people to undertake specific jobs as they come into the ADE. The data base also contains the Individual Plans (IP's) of all employees; these include their future goals in the workplace. These goals are an invaluable tool for future planning and policy. The IT system is currently being completely upgraded throughout the organization.
- The ADE is also branching out into Community Enterprises. This involves negotiating partnerships/contracts with mainstream businesses and providing employees from the ADE to be employed in work environments which are more interactive with open employment. To date we have a crew of seven working at BlueScope disassembling and checking scaffolding; we have another crew of three working in a "pop up" coffee shop in Wollongong, this offers great opportunity in the hospitality industry. It is anticipated that our Community Enterprises will grow.

- The ADE was one of the first ADE's to have established an Enterprise Agreement with a Union which promotes the working rights of people with a disability. The Enterprise was ratified by the Industrial Relations Commission in 2004 contains a Competency Based Wages (CBW) system for people with a disability. GDS is committed to intensive training for all employees to ensure that they have every opportunity to reach their maximum potential, and as a result receive appropriate recognition through the CBW system.
- GDS has become a model for disability services particularly with regard to its CBW system which is used by over 30% of the ADE's in Australia. Our enterprise agreement which incorporates our wage assessment tool was recently renegotiated with United Voice and endorsed by the Fair Work Commission. Importantly the agreement also covers people without a disability who are eligible to join United Voice.
- At Greenacres we promote the rights of people with a disability to be represented by a union like any other employee. We have reinforced this with our supported employees and their carers and we recognise this in the operation of our wage assessment tool.
- The ADE has a training program called Quality Circles. Each employee is part of a group (or Quality Circle) of eight to ten people who participate in training every week usually for an hour. Quality Circles programs cover a diverse range of topics such as Work Associated Skills, Personal Hygiene, Sexuality, WHS, the Enterprise Agreement and Wage System and the Disability Standards.
- Volunteers have become a very important component of the success of the programs undertaken in the ADE. GDS's Volunteer program is managed at senior level and includes induction training over two days and ongoing supervision. Volunteers are 'matched' to specific areas and individual employees. They not only offer an extra layer of interaction (both teaching and socially) but volunteers with qualifications, skills and experience facilitate literacy and numeracy sessions and assist with speech therapy.
- GDS undergoes an annual Certification Business Review Quality Audit against the Federal Disability Standards and the ISO9001; the audit is undertaken by a government approved independent body. This is a stringent audit and involves all facets of the organisation. Our employees are a vital component; a cross section of them are interviewed over the duration of the audit. To date our audits have been first rate, they are all about continuous improvement, which is what we are about.
- GDS in partnership with the Illawarra Division of General Practice and local GP's has developed a program called 'Better Days'; a sustainable peer-led support service and on-site individual professional input (such as Mental Health Nurses, Psychologists etc.) for Greenacres ADE employees with severe mental illness. This joint collaboration has enabled the provision of specialist mental health service for employees of the ADE and resulted in -
 - 20% reduction in absenteeism from work
 - 100% reduction in hospital admissions from October 2013 to June 2015
 - Increased social networking, friendship and support

This Program won the National Eli Lilly National Partnership and Well Being Award and is a further example of the ADE's commitment to the development of programs that enhance the lives of our employees.

- The ADE has undergone steady growth. Twelve years ago there were one hundred people with a disability working in the ADE, today we have two hundred and fifty three. Twelve years ago GDS had seventy two able bodied staff working across all divisions of the organisation; today we have two hundred and twenty seven.

GDS has always had an unreserved commitment to training; this reinforces the fact that the ongoing training programs facilitated in the ADE produce continuous quality improvement and great outcomes for the ADE employees.

GDS Management has always committed whatever resources are necessary to develop and produce quality training programs for people with a disability who want to work. The philosophy of driving innovation and 'best practice' in training has led to GDS being recognised as an industry leader. This has been at a cost to the ADE when competing with the general business community in providing products and services to customers at a standard and quality of excellence. Our ultimate goal is to provide safe, secure, and quality employment outcomes for people with a disability.

It is for all of the above reasons Greenacres won the Illawarra Business Chamber awards for Excellence in WHS and Employer of Choice in 2015 beating a number of sizable profit and not for profit organisations.

Chris Christodoulou
Chief Executive Officer
Greenacres Disability Services
1st July, 2015