**Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

# Submission No 187

**Name** Withheld

I am a 38 year old woman living on the disability support pension (DSP). I have two university degrees; a Bachelor of Arts and an honours degree in psychology, which I graduated from with first class honours. I also happen to have autism and some fairly significant mental health issues. By “fairly significant”, I mean that I have managed to chalk up more than forty psychiatric hospital admissions over the past twenty years.

I desperately want to work. I have worked in the past, but after an incident in a workplace which involved police and ambulance being called, and a WorkCover investigation being conducted, I have found myself on the DSP for the past three years. I feel utterly despairing over how I am ever going to get off it.

I have had several negative experiences with disability employment services (DES). These include the following:

* A DES caseworker deleted my university degree from my resume.
* I was sent for a job which I was incapable of doing. The role was for a front office receptionist. This was precisely the role that I was fulfilling when I had the incident in a previous workplace, which led to me applying for the DSP in the first place. I thanked the prospective employer, apologised for wasting her time, and then got in the car and cried my heart out. I felt ashamed, useless and utterly hopeless.
* I became overwhelmed during a meeting that I was having in a café with a DES caseworker. As is my habit when under stress, I started rocking in my chair to help myself settle and thereby avoid the situation escalating into one of self-harm. The caseworker responded to this by telling me she was ending the meeting and wasn’t going to talk to me anymore. I left the café in an extremely chaotic state and the only reason the situation didn’t escalate into something more serious was that the person I telephoned for help, answered my call.
* DES caseworkers have shown little respect for my privacy or the privacy of other clients. Specifically;
  + At one DES, meetings between clients and caseworkers occurred without the door to the office being closed such that everyone in the waiting area could hear the conversation.
  + I was shown the computer record of another client, by a DES caseworker who was trying to explain a point to me.
  + A DES caseworker left a message on my home answering machine, which was intended for another client.
* After finding short-term employment on my own, I received no support from the DES provider. A service that I was linked with, offered me a short-term contract position doing some gardening for them. We arranged it through the DES provider so that the service could receive the government wage subsidy. The DES caseworker assured me that he was there for support any time I needed it. A few months into the project, there was an incident. When I called my DES caseworker for support, he responded by telling me “that is something that you will need to talk to your psychologist about”. My psychologist in turn responded with; “what do they expect me to do about it? I thought they were the ones that were supposed to be helping you regarding employment”. My psychologist then made numerous attempts to contact the DES caseworker and his calls were ignored. The situation in my workplace deteriorated and the job (and my connection with the service in my capacity as a client) came to an end.

I feel utterly despairing. The incident outlined above is now the second serious workplace incident that I have had. The incident resulted in me being given two weeks stress leave. Furthermore, I was later informed that another employee, who had witnessed the incident, was also granted stress leave. I had anticipated that this job would be an opportunity for me to regain some confidence and thereby be a stepping stone into more stable employment. Instead, it just further reinforced to me all that I can’t do, rather than what I can.

Based on my experiences with DES providers, I believe that there is a strong need to improve the training of DES employees. None of the caseworkers that I dealt with seemed to have any understanding of the challenges I strive to live with, either with respect to my autism diagnosis or my psychiatric diagnosis. I fail to understand how they can be expected to support me to find suitable employment, when they do not understand what “suitable employment” would look like for me. Nor do I understand how they can support either me or an employer in making an employment venture work, if they themselves do not understand the issues. I recognise that I need support. I recognise that I need an employer who understands my situation. How can a DES provider help me to find such an employer, when they themselves do not understand my situation?

A second barrier that I perceive, regarding my attempts to gain employment, is that there seems to be an assumption that people with a disability are only suited to positions requiring little or no education. It was evident to me that none of the DES caseworkers that I dealt with knew what to do with the fact that I had a University degree (and was at that time completing a second, higher degree). This was most strongly evidenced by the caseworker who simply deleted my degree from my resume – an act that caused me enormous distress. At no time did any caseworker offer up any ideas regarding employment commensurate with my level of education.

Finally, from my perspective, a third barrier is the stigma that persists within the broader community regarding psychiatric disability. I do not know the answer to this. I despair over whether there really is one. It is my experience that a person can know me for several months or even years, and then one day see me when I am in a chaotic state. After that, no matter how well we got along before, they can never again see me in the same way and they cease contact with me. This is the pattern of my entire adult life.

I would make a good employee. I would turn up on time every day and put my full effort into a job. However, I cannot guarantee that there won’t be an incident. I have an extensive history of trauma and abuse. I cannot guarantee that something won’t trigger an overwhelming avalanche of flashbacks and emotions, which I will respond to by engaging in behaviours that the people around me might find frightening and difficult to understand. But if that happens, I will still be me. After the storm subsides, I will still be the same well-educated, reliable and committed employee. Is there any employer in Australia who is willing to ride out the occasional storm with me so that I can be a productive member of society? I hope so.