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

# Submission No 158

**Name** Withheld

# Submission regarding Older Australians

I am writing to the inquiry on age discrimination about my experience in the HR department of **[employer redacted]**. I agree with the issue raised in a report by the HRC that age discrimination exists but many people are too intimidated to make a formal complaint. As noted in the report it would lead to career suicide. It is very difficult to prove and the organisation will usually put all its resources behind the perpetrator in order to not incur a financial cost to the organisation.

**[Employer redacted]** like other government departments promotes diversity and inclusion but most of this rhetoric and is not borne out in practice. The reality is that managers find ways around the system to discriminate against older workers. I previously worked in a department which did comply with anti-discrimination legislation and promoted a culture of inclusion. I was extremely surprised when I commenced work with this department.

In this workplace there is often openly derogatory comments made about older workers. Older workers are more likely to be bullied and discriminated against in terms of promotion. Older women are often relegated to low admin support roles and kept in those roles indefinitely whilst younger workers are promoted or given higher duty opportunities which means that they can act at a higher grade and thus develop higher level skills and knowledge about the department and improve their skills and promotion opportunities considerably. There seems to be an unwritten rule that older women who are in low admin roles are to be kept in them to provide support to others.

Since working for **[employer redacted]** I have applied for numerous roles at the next level but have never been successful. One of the contributing factors is that I have never been given the opportunity to act in higher grades and do not have the higher level experience.

In contrast younger workers, men and contract workers are often able to act in higher grades and are spoken of positively by their supervisors. One example is a young man who worked on my team was promoted up from the clerk grade 3/4 level to a clerk grad 7/8 level without having to go through a merit selection process. When he left the department he handed his work over to me which I incorporated into my own workload. I asked the manager if I could act in the higher level (grade 7/8), vacated by the young man as a development opportunity. My substantive grade is a grade 5/6. He refused saying that he was sorry that my direct manager didn’t provide the support to the team he should have. The direct manager was also under one of these higher duty arrangements and had also not taken part in a merit selection process but acted in the higher level role in spite of not providing support to the team. In the meantime I undertook the work previously graded at a 7/8 whilst continuing the support work.

I am absolutely certain that my experience and qualifications more than meet the criteria for a higher level role. I worked in another government department for 8 years prior to coming to this department. I also worked in Non-government Organisations. I have a Masters in Human Resource Management, a Bachelor of Social Science degree in Social Welfare and an Advanced Certificate in Community Welfare. I have completed a range of additional training including public speaking, Mercer job evaluation certificate, project management, financial management training TRIM training and Visio. I have a high level experience using word, outlook and other day to day workplace technology along with a strong academic understanding of the purpose of government and its operations.

I am also aware of highly competent people who are looking for work and others who have remained unemployed for over two years when they took Voluntary Redundancies (VR). Among this group there are women who were stuck at the lower grades and took the VRs to avoid the day to day degradation of being treated so unfairly. Being treated unfairly, being stifled and pigeon-holed has an ongoing impact on a person’s sense of self worth. I find that this experience is causing me to become very depressed and disillusioned about my prospects for future employment. It also impacts on my sense of wellbeing outside of work.

 The department is currently undergoing a major restructure which is exacerbating the distress for all employees but is particularly concerning for older workers. Whilst there is likely to be a 30% reduction of staff there has been an increase from six graduates to 19. Although the program is open to all graduates the graduates are all young graduates. I recently asked if I could volunteer a couple of extra hours a week to develop skills in Industrial Relations in order to develop skills to utilize my Masters in HR. I was refused without being given a reason.

There is also an increase to the number of contract workers employed to perform the higher level duties whilst ongoing employees with more corporate knowledge are retained in support roles. I worked on a team where one of the graduates was acting at a very high level and I was relegated to packing boxes and printing out volumes of material for the team.

There are older workers in high level roles but they were promoted when they were younger. Like a lot of other older women I had family commitments. I have raised five children. I take care of my son who is quadriplegic as a result of a motor vehicle accident. I have raised two of my grand-children when my daughter passed away in 2002. I have worked to support myself since I was 16. In spite of these challenges I have managed to retain employment and achieve relatively high tertiary qualifications. I am able to help people at much higher grades in this organisation to write documents and use the various technologies required to perform their roles with the credit usually going to the higher level person.

I believe that my life experience, qualifications and broad range of work experience are more than adequate to work in a government department at a grade 7/8 level. In spite of the fact that the new Executive Director in the HR branch said that work would be pushed down so people at the lower grades could perform more meaningful work this has not been the case. In fact the work has been pushed up to the higher grades. At Christmas time a group of Clerk Grade 5/6s was directed to put on the Christmas lunch, for the whole department. The group consisted of the mature age women in those grades. I wrote to my Director and pointed out that this function was traditionally a volunteer function. I also made the point that in order to promote diversity if the function was directed that it needed to include people across the grades and men. I was advised that I was “off the hook” and that other staff agreed with me and one man and other higher level staff agreed to take on the catering task. There was no policy or guidelines put in place to deal with the situation if it arose in future.

I believe that positive experience and recognition at work also contributes to a sense of well-being and confidence to achieve your full potential. I have demonstrated my capabilities by graduating from my Masters in Human Resources. My workplace does not utilize my skills or provide me with opportunities to work to my full potential. I know I am not alone and it is disappointing that government departments are beginning to reflect some of the worst aspects of the private sector in terms of ageist, sexist and disability discriminatory attitudes. Ageism is also more likely to be overlooked because many people are concerned with how they would be perceived if f they made racist or blatantly sexist comments for example whereas ageism is more accepted and still not considered “uncool”.