



NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc
ABN 82 549 537 349

18th September 2008

Dr Jeff Harmer
Pension Review Submissions
Reply Paid 7101
Canberra BC ACT 2610

Dear Dr Harmer,

Re: The Pension Review

The NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG) is the independent, statewide organisation representing the views of mental health consumers at a policy level, working to achieve and support systemic change. Our vision is for all mental health consumers to experience fair access to quality services, which reflect their needs.

NSW CAG commends the Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs for conducting the Pension Review. We appreciate the opportunity to provide information on issues relevant to people living with mental illness so that they are considered in the Pension Review.

Recently NSW CAG conducted several consultations with mental health consumers across NSW to inform a response to a discussion paper initiated by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations regarding the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy. Through these consultations we were informed by mental health consumers in NSW of the range of barriers to gaining and remaining in employment which are relevant to the current Pension Review. These barriers include:

- The regulations and red tape regarding/involving access to Centrelink
- The 15hr work week threshold for the Disability Pension
- Potential loss of Health Care Cards

One of the most significant barriers to obtaining employment for mental health consumers raised during our consultations was the regulations surrounding Centrelink. The lack of support and the excessive amount of paper work, jargon, inaccessible clear information and regulations associated with Centrelink can discourage people from looking for and maintaining work. In particular for people who live with anxiety and other mental health issues, this can be especially debilitating.

An example of this is the Disability Support Pension (DSP) which is only provided to those who work less than 15 hours per week and is removed once a person is in employment. Many people experience difficulty finding employment that is less than 15 hours per week and when they do it is likely to be casual or temporary work, which does not provide stable income or payment for sick



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leave. People living with mental illness are also often able and happy to work more than this. Mental illness is unique in that some people can be well for long periods of time, experiencing episodes of being unwell only occasionally. This poses a level of uncertainty for those who are trying to actively engage in employment and live normal lives. The system as it is currently is not designed for this type of situation. If a person obtains employment for more than 15 hours per week and is no longer eligible for DSP, there is no immediate support in place during a time of being unwell, where they are unable to work. For many the uncertainty around what happens during periods of being unwell leads them to being unemployed and on the DSP rather than risk the vulnerability of getting a job, losing it or taking leave during a time of relapse (often without pay due to most work being casual) and then having to re-navigate the system, in order to reapply for Disability Support Pension (DSP).

Comments received during consultations were that consumers “need to know that they will be able to access their sickness benefits easily and expediently if they start work and then become unwell again,” and “to have a system whereby people cannot get their sickness benefits easily after having worked for a period of time is to suffocate their desire and hope to begin work of any nature.” A system whereby people feel supported to enter into employment is essential for ensuring stable and secure housing, and to reduce the pressure and stress of instability and uncertainty. NSW CAG therefore recommends that people living with mental illness (and meet the requirements for DSP) have the option to remain linked into the system so they can have peace of mind should they experience a period of being unwell.

Along side this it is felt that the threshold of 15 hours of work per week does not provide enough income for a person to support themselves and it is therefore not an appropriate measure for the removal of the DSP. This is especially relevant when multiple expenses surrounding medication are involved. While there needs to be a cut-off for those receiving DSP, it has been suggested that the previous limit of 30 hours per week needs to be reinstated.

Similarly, NSW CAG was informed of the need for a review of the regulations surrounding eligibility for Health Care Cards. When earning over the threshold for these cards, consumers of mental health services face additional financial pressures of seeking psychological and medical treatment, including the purchasing of medications. These treatments are, for many, essential for the continued recovery from mental illness. In many cases, the costs of these treatments are substantial. Although it is recognised that a threshold of earnings for eligibility for Health Care Cards is essential, a review of this threshold is required in consultation with consumers of mental health services, to ensure that the risk of losing their Health Care Card is not a barrier to gaining employment.

Additionally people living with mental illness have many different levels of literacy and medication can sometimes impact their vision. In order to assist people in navigating the Centrelink system, NSW CAG recommends that information be provided in many different formats, including access to verbal support.



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NSW CAG therefore recommends the following:

- Reinstate the work hour threshold for DSP or other suitable pensions from 15hrs/week to 30hrs/week
- A review of the Health Care Card threshold for people purchasing medication and accessing services for mental health
- Guaranteed support from DSP or other suitable programs for times where an individual living with mental illness experiences periods of being unwell and has no income or becomes unemployed, in order to remove fear and uncertainty surrounding entering the workforce
- Information in relation to the navigation of Centrelink needs to be easily available in different formats, including access to verbal support

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further queries.

Yours sincerely

Karen Oakley
A/Executive Officer