

**Submission to the:
*Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable
supported employment*
Discussion Paper**



November, 2010

NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG)
501/80 William St, Sydney 2000
Ph: 02 9332 0200, Fax: 02 9332 0299, email: poshea@nswcag.org.au



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

Friday, November 26, 2010

**Vision for People in Supported Employment
Department of Families, Housing, Community
Services and Indigenous Affairs
Australian Government**

Email: supportedemployment@nationalmailing.com.au

Re: Submission to the *Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment* Discussion Paper

Dear Sir / Madam,

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 is pleased to offer this submission on the *Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment* Discussion Paper. We would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission to this important policy discussion paper and we look forward to seeing the incorporation of our comments specific to people living with a psychosocial disability in Government policy for the inclusion for people with disability through sustainable employment.

Please feel free to contact me if you require clarification or information.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Peri O'Shea
B.Soc.Sci. Psyc.Hons. M.Soc.Policy. PhD

Policy and Operations Manager

poshea@nswcag.org.au

Suite 501, Level 5 80 William St Sydney NSW 2000 Tel: 02 9332 0200 Fax: 02 9332 0299

Basis of this advice

NSW CAG exists to ensure that policy makers hear the perspectives of mental health consumers across NSW. To enable our representation of mental health consumers and to advocate for systemic change, NSW CAG conducts a range of consultations with consumers, carers, service providers and other stakeholders throughout NSW.

The information provided in this submission is based on information elicited from our core work including regular interaction and consultation with people who use mental health services across NSW:

- Over 1000 people on our Network who are accessible via the internet;
- Face to face consultations that NSW CAG has conducted during 2009/10 at several locations within each Area Health Service across NSW; and
- Our knowledge base derived from consulting with consumers of mental health services in NSW over the last 17 years.

Mental Illness as a Psychosocial Disability

In considering the Discussion Paper, *Inclusion for people with disability through sustainable supported employment*, it is important to note that mental illness is recognised as a disability by the World Health Organisation (2009), and within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006). It is well known that mental illness can have a significant impact on a person's education, employment, relationships, and health (Kitchener, Jorm & Kelly, 2010). Thus, rather than resulting in physical disability, mental illness can mean that a person experiences psychosocial disability. Indeed, mental illness is amongst the leading causes of disability in Australia (Begg, Vos, Barker, Stevenson, Stanley & Lopez, 2007).

For many people living with mental illness, the opportunity for participation in meaningful employment is an important aspect of their recovery journey. Up to 90% of consumers are interested in and want to obtain and maintain employment; however, they still experience many challenges in making this a reality (Mental Health Council of Australia, 2007).

Opportunities for participation in the workforce have a range of benefits for individuals that include increased self-esteem and self-worth, confidence, and providing a purpose and meaning to life. Participation in meaningful and satisfying employment also facilitates broader opportunities for economic participation, increasing social interaction, helping people to feel valued in society, increasing self-esteem and reducing self-stigma, and increasing future security through superannuation and options for housing.

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 uncertainty for those who are trying to actively engage in employment and live normal lives.

NSW CAG has been made aware that often people living with mental illness are not effectively engaged in employment, with opportunities limited due to having a mental illness. It is important that workplaces are designed and supported to be able to meet the needs of people who experience psychosocial disability associated with a mental illness.

Issues relevant to accessing employment are continually raised by mental health consumers with whom we consult include the following:

Education

NSW CAG hears regularly from people living with mental illness that there is a strong need for improved training and education around mental illness for employers, employees and the wider community. One consumer, in a NSW CAG consultation, commented that “employers need more awareness of mental illness” (Gosford, NSW CAG Consultation, 2009).

Mental health awareness needs to be targeted at all employees to help create a shift in workplace culture. Many uninformed myths and misconceptions exist around mental illness, and can lend to negative attitudes towards people living with mental illness, and many consumers living in fear of discrimination if people at work found out about their illness.

Education needs to be provided about the nature of mental illness and mental health promotion to increase the knowledge and understanding of mental illness and help to improve attitudes and reduce stigma in the workplace. Creating more psychosocial disability friendly work environments can lend to creating a more inclusive workplace for people living with mental illness. Implementing education on practical strategies to detect problems in staff and identify support for people to get help will assist in creating a more inclusive work environment not only for those with psychosocial disabilities, but for all employees.

Education and training specifically tailored to help managers and supervisors supervise staff with psychosocial disability is also needed in workplaces. NSW CAG regularly hears from consumers that there is a need for “mentors within the workplace that has an understanding [of mental illness] and can support us appropriately” (Wagga Wagga, NSW CAG Consultation, 2009).

It is important for managers to be able to access adequate training on how to supervise people living with mental illness, so they have a developed understanding of what they need to provide in terms of support. In a survey by SANE (n=284), 49% of people living with mental illness say that support from their employer is what helped them most in staying in open employment (SANE Bulletin 3, 2006, <http://www.sane.org>).

Training

NSW CAG hears from consumers that there is a need for workplaces to provide more opportunities to gain access to training on the job. People living with mental illness have identified that they appreciate it when they are “provided lots of opportunities to advance [their] skills and knowledge” (Nowra, NSW CAG Consultation, 2009).

To create a more inclusive workplace environment for people with disability, access needs to be made to training on the job and skills development opportunities, providing the chance to enhance skills, and assist people in transitioning out of supported employment.

Choice

NSW CAG hears from consumers that there is a strong need for more choice in workplace, “there is not enough variety in work opportunities” (Blacktown, NSW CAG Consultation, 2009). People living with mental illness recognise that they have a variety of skills, however, they are often not given the opportunity to show these skills, and instead placed into a support employment position that they may not be suited to. Increased options and choice of employment should be made available for people living with psychosocial disability, and more effort should be made to match jobs to individuals dependent on their skills.

Reasonable Accommodations

The Discussion Paper identified that working hours can have an impact on people with disability within the workforce. For people living with mental illness, this is an important issue to be addressed. NSW CAG hears through our consultations that many employers and workplaces are inflexible, particularly around work hours and leave. One consumer commented, “It’s hard to find flexible full time work that allows for a slightly late start because of my illness and the side effects of my medication” (Tamworth, NSW CAG Consultation, 2009). Inflexible workplaces present a large barrier to the employment of people living with mental illness. For some people, the unpredictable nature of mental illness is such that it may be difficult for them to commit to regular hours and days.

Other accommodations, beyond working hours, that may assist people living with psychosocial disability include:

- Workspaces near windows
- Breaks in meetings and at other times
- Reduced noise levels
- Limited number of people with whom they must interact with, and
- On-site support, e.g. from mentors or supervisors

It is important that these reasonable accommodations be made available for all employees, not just those employees with a disability. Employers must ensure that they provide facilitates and services that can reasonable be provided and which they need to be able to do their jobs.

Remuneration

In determining an adequate wage for people with disability in the workplace, it is important to consider looking towards other workplaces that may have established a remuneration package for work that may be similar to what these employees are carrying out. Minimum wages need to be determined for people living with psychosocial disability; this would help ensure consistency across all supported employment organisations.

In looking at wage, incentives need to be built in and regular reviews should occur to ensure that any economic changes (such as inflation) are considered. Incorporating incentives into the wage determination also provides goals; a sense of fulfillment; and something to work towards for employees.

NSW CAG also hears from consumers that there is a need for wages to be based on productivity in supported employment. Remuneration should reflect the work being performed by people with psychosocial disability. Skills level should also be considered when determining an adequate payment for employees. Pay increases should also be considered dependent on future learning and on-the-job training that may be carried out by individuals during their employment.

References

Begg S, Vos T, Barker B, Stevenson C, Stanley L, Lopez AD, (2007). *The burden of disease and injury in Australia 2003*. PHE 82. Canberra: AIHW.

Kitchener BA, Jorm AF, Kelly CM (2010) *Mental Health First Aid Manual. 2nd ed* Melbourne Orygen Youth Health Research Centre.

Mental Health Council of Australia. (2007). *Let's Get to Work, A National Mental Health Employment Strategy for Australia*. November 2007: MHCA.