

QUEENSLAND PARENTS FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY INCORPORATED (QPPD)

Response to

National Mental Health and Disability Employment

Strategy

Discussion Paper 2008

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FOREWORD

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (QPPD) is a parent based, state-wide, advocacy organisation advocating for people with disabilities, by parents, against abuse and exclusion, for justice and rights. Its Mission:

QPPD vigorously defends justice and rights for people with disabilities by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disabilities as respected, valued and participating members of society.

For 27 years QPPD has been an organisation that is extremely well regarded throughout the general community and seen as *the* advocacy organisation for parents in Queensland. It is an organisation that has been loved and nurtured since inception by parents who found it to be a place where they are heard and understood and their concerns addressed through a united voice.

QPPD welcomes this opportunity to have input into the *National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy*, representing the views of parents.

As President of the Committee of Management of QPPD I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Transition Sub-Committee who have been advocating, in various ways, for a vision for young people with a disability leaving school and participating in the same range of opportunities and choices as all young people, so that they can pursue their chosen goals through work, further education and an independent lifestyle.

Phil Tomkinson
President
QPPD Committee of Management

RESPONSE

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability has pleasure in submitting its response to the Discussion Paper on the *National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy*.

For many people with disability, particularly young people, the issues regarding employment begin while they are still at school. Despite all the rhetoric about 'inclusion', there still exists an education system that supports a dual service of both 'mainstream' and 'special', doesn't deliver teaching and learning opportunities to accommodate individual learning styles and separates students with disabilities from their peers. This system generates an ethos of low expectations for these students which in turn results in inadequate educational outcomes, illiteracy, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

With this general malaise on exiting school, it is no wonder that many young people with disability find it difficult to find and maintain employment. The optimal time to begin transition planning is in year 9, with opportunities to sample both Post School and Disability Employment Network (DEN) services as support to trial work experiences. This should in no way be used for day service delivery as a replacement for core curriculum activities, (as some schools are wont to do merely as respite for teachers).

The range of school-based traineeships and apprenticeships needs to be expanded for students with disabilities, with appropriate support for students to access TAFE subjects and courses, as well as university. For those who have been neglected in the education system, there should be literacy and numeracy courses that are not created on the premise that students have basic literacy skills which is the case at this point in time.

Post school funding is extremely inadequate, and programs are often limited to a range of recreation and leisure activities rather than education and training. For many people with disabilities who are unable to access a Disability Employment Network (DEN) service, this is the only other option, yet the quality of programs available varies greatly. Some providers offer support for work experience and training, but these are very few. This means that the clients who access these services are sometimes engaged in the same round of experiences year after year. These programs should be offering a range of experiences that include some form of education and workplace training.

The capping of DEN services must be lifted so that all people with disabilities can access the supports required to obtain and maintain employment. The quality of DEN service provision varies. The best service providers work with employers to create niche roles for people with disabilities: not only do they provide job support to clients, but also both physical and emotional support, and work with employers and other staff, which very often determines if a job is going to be successful and sustainable or not. This is the optimal model of service provision; other DEN services do little to find employment for people with significant disabilities. Standards need to be raised.

The role of Centrelink for students transitioning from young teens to young adulthood is overwhelming. The process of applying for the Disability Support Pension (DSP) has been compounded by the requirement to undergo a Job Capacity Assessment (JCA). When students have left school and attempt to seek the services of a DEN, the JCA generates a review of the DSP. This creates a fear that there will be a loss or a reduction in financial support and benefits (pharmaceutical, rent assistance etc). The negative, unintended impact of this is that it can result in reluctance to actively pursue employment as an option.

Similarly the role of the State Government Disability Services (DSQ) has a process of application for post school service funding that is equally daunting. With extended waiting periods to learn the outcomes of applications, and then further delays waiting for service delivery to commence, many families are left in despair. There is an urgent need for cross government collaboration and cooperation to simplify this process and negate some of the high tensile stress experienced by people with disability and their families.

Employers could be encouraged to adopt “affirmative action” policies to employ people with disability, especially if there were more Special Employment Placement Officers in workplaces. While these roles exist in some workplaces, and have worked well in the past, there is a prospect for this role to be advantageous across the workforce. A review and expansion of the role of these Officers is much needed.

People with disability want to contribute to the community in which they live. This increases self-worth and confidence. For many people with significant disability, the opportunity to engage in voluntary or unpaid work/work experience is how they can contribute. Currently, the opportunities are few as this usually requires support from a post school service, and as stated previously, few services afford this chance.

Funding incentives should be available for people who contribute to society through unpaid work. This could be done by funding their support requirements from an alternative source other than post school funding. Opportunities for unpaid work often require one-to-one support and this results in overtaxing the meagre amount of post-school funding available to clients.

There is an incentive for employers to allow people with disability to undertake work experience/training as they gain skills, and the employer receives the benefit from the unpaid work. Cross-government cooperation to promote this would mean more employers would afford these chances to people with disability. There is the prospect for both state and federal government to support this venture by providing funding for support for people with disabilities to do this unpaid work. Eventually, many people will either be employed in the same workplace, or will gain skills to be employed elsewhere.

“...for the vast majority of children with disability, it is the lack of schooling and not their disability that limits their opportunities.” Reference – World Bank Education Notes, author Susan Peters.

CONCLUSION

In summary QPPD believe that successful, sustainable employment for people with disability begins at school. If young people with disability are leaving school illiterate (and many are), with inadequate planning in place and insufficient information about ‘what is out there’ for them, then their chances of gaining purposeful employment are extremely limited. As has been stated in this document, there is a great need for work experience or ‘tasting’ of various employment options while at school. There needs to be clear, easy to understand information available about courses so that students can choose to pursue their goals for further education. Employers need to be encouraged, through incentives, to include people with disability in their workforce.

While there have been significant commitments by both state and commonwealth governments in the past to improve training and employment outcomes for young people with a disability, as well as numerous research projects (see Appendix 1), there still remain significant challenges and barriers to be overcome. QPPD would advocate for a greater commitment and ‘will’ to establish cooperative and collaborative mechanisms between the many government departments involved as well as employers so that there is greater participation of young people with disability in the workforce. QPPD is hopeful that this initiative of a National Strategy will go a long way to realising this vision.

APPENDIX 1

RESEARCH

The following list provides an indication of the extent of the research (this is only what QPPD is aware of – there is most likely more) that has been undertaken over the past several years:

- **2007 - Curtin University** – Employment/day options interface for people with disabilities
- **2007 – Telethon Institute for Child Health Research** - Leaving School: maximising participation and life outcomes in youth with Intellectual Disability transitioning from secondary school to adult life
- **2006 - Griffith University** - Quality Outcomes for Students with a Disability – Transition Practices and Post School Outcomes in Queensland Schools
- **2004 - Disability Services Queensland** - Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF)
- **2003 - Office of the Public Advocate Queensland** - Navigating the Pathways from School to Work
- **2002 – The Enterprise and Career Education Foundation** - Lighthouse Initiative
- **2001- Queensland Department of Employment and Training** - *Equal Access?*
- **2000-2005 - National Strategy** - Bridging Pathways

As well as the above research, under the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA) the Queensland Bilateral Agreement sets out areas of mutual concern to be progressed by both governments. One of these areas is “strengthening cross government linkages, particularly at critical life stages and transition points by movement of people with disabilities from school to appropriate employment, day options and training services”. There is a commitment to undertake joint analysis of policies and practices that impact upon this movement.