

Employment the Key for Sustainable Disability Support

Providing more support worker assistance in the workplace to help people with profound disabilities be employed would enable sustainable full time employment for more than 722,000 people with disabilities in Australia. What's more, it would save the government millions of dollars in doing so. Yet, unfortunately, it has been significantly overlooked in the National Disability Insurance Scheme draft report.

The sustainability of providing full-time employment support for people disabilities is easy to prove. Firstly, spend as a Federal Government around \$800 each week to provide full-time support worker assistance for a person with a profound disability at work. Then, subtract from this around \$300 each week saved on the disabled individual not requiring the disability support pension, and the \$500 total each week that the average working person with a disability and support worker would contribute in total tax. Hey presto, costs are even and 722,000 people with disabilities are employed. This must be a priority in a report which is asking our government to commit more than \$6.3 billion each year.

This cost neutral and sustainable support in the workplace would provide up to 40 hours of personal care during the working week which would otherwise need to be funded from taxpayers. It solves a key disability support issue whilst maintaining sustainability and cost effectiveness. But perhaps most importantly, it provides a future for people with disabilities to aim for and work towards, not just a welfare solution.

By no means does this imply employing a person to do a job FOR a person with a disability. Nor is it implied that every person with a disability would require 40 hours each week of support worker assistance to be employed. It is simply a matter of providing the necessary personal care and basic physical assistance that could enable people disabilities to utilise their education, qualifications or experience to be employed.

In the draft repor, Disability Employment Support is given virtually no mention. It is simply recommended that Australia should maintain the current FAHCSIA funding streams. This means continuing with the maximum allocation of funds under the Workplace-Based Assistance scheme, which is only 10 hours per week of employment. This FAHCSIA funding is monumentally underfunded, inequitable at best and it is difficult to access. In order to more adequately meet the goals of the scheme and "increase economic and social participation for people disabilities and their carers" (Disability Care and Support, Productivity Commission, 2011), it needs to give a high-priority to employment support.

And there is a compelling case study to support this argument.

Meet Peter Darch, who was recently recognized as the 2011 WA Young Person of the Year and Most Outstanding Youth Worker.



Since becoming a high level quadriplegic in 2002 Peter has completed a Psychology Degree and been employed full-time as Youth Development Officer for the City of Mandurah. He also works as a Youth Psychologist part-time. His amazing work has not only seen him recognized as the best youth worker in Western Australia, but the 2011 Young West Australian of the Year.

However, if the level of employment support is not increased in Australia, Peter will soon be unemployed. You see, Peter has been able to achieve so much thanks to the assistance of support workers, who have under his direction assisted with:

- *transport*
- *turning on computers*
- *filing papers*
- *opening doors*
- *notetaking*
- *retrieving phones*
- *fetching documents*
- *turning pages, and*
- *the list goes on and on and on...*

This support was funded by his Disability Employment Network Provider, Forest Personnel. The funding came from a surplus of money the organisation had access to, but was not sustainable. The current provisions of federally funded Workplace-Based Assistance funding cannot fund the level of support Peter requires to do his job, and therefore these small, unskilled tasks will soon lead to him being unemployed.

The benefits of Peter being employed are clear. He has not received a pension for four years. He was able to afford his own house, not requiring Homes West or government support. Despite his Disability, Peter got married, and is fit and healthy both physically and mentally. He has been included in his community and is a very active, both socially and through employment. He has helped many others through his work and volunteering positions and has for more than three years constantly lobbied Federal government to implement an "Access to Employment" scheme federally to help others reach the heights he has achieved.

In order for other people to achieve what Peter has achieved and receive the benefits of employment, it is important that the National Disability Insurance Scheme improve employment support. The National Disability Insurance Scheme has the opportunity to provide a future for people with disabilities that is equal to those without disability. It should not stop at education, or personal care, or support for carers. It

needs to provide all elements of a future that Australians desire, and a target that all people with disabilities can work towards. It needs to provide the support necessary for people with disabilities to reach employment.