

NSW.

12<sup>th</sup> April, 2002

Dr. Ralph Lattimore,  
Assistant Commissioner,  
Productivity Commission,  
P.O. Box 80,  
BELCONNEN. ACT. 2616

Dear Mr. Lattimore,

Please find enclosed copies of Centrelink forms and correspondence in regard to the evidence I presented to Mike Woods on Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2002 at City Hall in Newcastle, NSW.

I received the letter from Centrelink dated 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2000 *after* the breach had been acted upon. As you can see by my scribbled information on the letter, *just* how many times I rang the customer service line, to find out why I was breached when I did attend the interview with IPA on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2000. Hence my so called *abusive and argumentative* behavior on my file at Centrelink because I became extremely upset at being given the run around instead of the information I requested.

The two Centrelink notifications dated 2<sup>nd</sup> August and 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2000 inform me that my Newstart had been suspended and the breaches in place. *I had not* been given any prior warning that this was to happen in order to present my case before the penalties were enforced. The complaints hotline for both Centrelink customer service and the Job Network turned out to be a total waste of time and if the Member for Newcastle, Allan Morris had not intervened on my behalf, the breaches would never have been revoked. I have enclosed a copy of the letter I received from the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. In paragraph three I am advised to take my complaint back to the manager of IPA. Under the circumstances that would have been impossible and their solution seemed to be to 'pass the buck'.

I have also enclosed a copy of the letter sent to Allan Morris by the manager of Centrelink, Mr. Michael Beisty, dated 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2000. The contrast between the 'before' and 'after' the breaches is *very* different and disturbing, as my character was blackened, and the *level of guilt* proven without any evidence whatsoever.

In the letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2002 I was advised to attend an interview at the Jobfind Centre. I then had to attend a three-week Preparing for the Work Agreement program. On the first day Craig Allen went over the information in this letter. He then informed us that around 130 clients register for employment each week with Jobcentre. Out of that number, around 8 is placed in jobs, quite often out of Newcastle where employment is difficult to achieve. He then advised myself and another 'over 40' that Jobcentre would not be able to place us in employment because of the age barrier. He then said that the governments have known about this problem

for over twenty years and have 'parked' us in the system because they don't know how to deal with the problems. However, he warned us that we would have to attend the program and cooperate or risk being breached. The session finished at 11.30 am.

On the second day, he did not show up. John and I were given 'goal setting' activities to read through and fill out, either before leaving or at home to bring back the next day. He showed up on the Wednesday. The session lasted about an hour and a half during which time he was on the phone frequently because he was doing two jobs at once. On the Thursday he did not show up. On the Friday we had mock interviews. As a writer, I asked permission to use my query letter to a publisher as the interview because that is the only way I can submit my manuscript and earn an income from publication. He told me that my task for the following week would be to look up publishers on the net and send each of them the letter. I did not attend the remaining two weeks of the program because I obtained a medical certificate.

From 1997 until January, 2002 I have been sent to three separate job network providers. I have been in intensive Assistance three times. I have been sent to *one* interview during that time. Each time I have been in Intensive Assistance I have provided the case manager with suggestions as to finding employment. The only instructions given by them were to register with every other job network provider in Newcastle. No other assistance was given and the casual positions I have worked in over the last six years I have gotten myself without any assistance from a job network provider.

It is a fact that people over 40 have very little chance of gaining full time employment. Part-time and casual work comes in dribs and drabs, but it does not provide stability, acceptable levels of income or quality of life in a working community that treats the unemployed as lepers and outcasts.

It is a waste of a very valuable human resource. Not only do the 'baby boomers' have life experiences that the young under 35's do not have, they also have wisdom gained from those experiences, which in past generations has been an asset to their younger counterparts, who let's face it - think they know it all, but don't! Mature aged workers have also proved to be punctual, reliable, honest and take less sickies than their younger counterparts.

It is also a fact that there are more people looking for work than there are jobs, with the exception of Sydney and Melbourne. Even in these cities, age can be a barrier. The job network has not worked and has been a waste of taxpayer's money. The training programs and job matching has failed too. Sending long term unemployed people to TAFE or university is only beneficial *if a* job is guaranteed after completion of the course. I've got a 'fat' portfolio to prove that fact.

Therefore I suggest: -

- a) Only send clients on courses or into further education if a job is guaranteed at completion of the course.
- b) Stop the deceit about discrimination where age and long term unemployment is a barrier, which goes against Equal Opportunity legislation. First of all the lie must be exposed and the government must tackle this problem with employers, rather

than treat the people falling into this category as victims, who are 'parked' in the system. Employers must be convinced that older people are not a risk and are just as competent as younger people. The government could use ad campaigns to promote this undervalued human resource.

- c) The old CES system did work better. In six months I went to three interviews and found the staff helpful and emotionally supportive. Fear tactics used to motivate people to look for work is inhumane and does not work. It only causes mental, physical and emotional health problems, poverty and *no* employment. The 12-month training programs were a good scheme, even if the company did not offer employment to the participant. Actually being in a real work environment gave the long term unemployed confidence, raised their level of self-esteem and provided on-going training, rather than just academic theory, which TAFE or uni courses provide. On the job experience is the best way to learn skills and perform tasks in a working environment. When training to be a personal carer, I did one-day work experience a week in an aged care facility. This hands on experience was essential to my training and also allowed me to know for certain that this is the kind of work I wanted to do. This scheme also allowed the participant to *feel* as if they were working and gave them a *wage*, even if it was lower than a normal wage. It was certainly better than being on the dole. Consideration should definitely be given to revamping this scheme.
- d) Staff at job network providers should be made to go through an intensive training program before being employed as consultants. For mature age clients, people in that age group should be trained to manage them as they would not only have empathy, but would also make clients feel on the same level as them. It is very disconcerting to be case managed by a consultant who is the same age as your son or daughter. They should also assist clients in finding out what kind of work they are suited to, unlike the gentlemen who was told selling ladies shoes would be the perfect job for him. People have talents and skills that they *may* not be aware of. For example, I have a great talent as a writer. I have spent many years learning the craft and writing. Now I am taking steps to make a living from writing. My son is gifted musically. He is studying at the Newcastle Conservatorium, has his own rock-and-roll band and plans to teach music or work in a music based industry. Long term unemployed people could use their talents to start their own business. However, with the rising cost of public liability, something would have to be done to help people set up their business, perhaps through government subsidies until the business was making substantial profits. The Small Business Incentive Schemes are a very good idea and should be expanded upon by State and Federal governments. In this way, people can *take control of their own lives and cease to be welfare dependent*.
- e) Training programs should be carried out within the job network centres along the lines of the old Skillshare method. I could not help but notice rooms with rows of computers not being used at Mission Australia. What a waste of resources and taxpayers money. Also, a lot TAFE teachers work part time and could do with extra hours of work. I am sure they could be employed part time in job network facilities to train clients in small groups within the centre. This way the consultants, the clients and the training staff would work together to assist people to gain the correct qualifications to re-enter the workforce. The training programs as set out in the letter from Jobcentre is a complete waste of time, unless a client has no resume or is looking for work for the first time or after years of being out

of the workforce. Once the training has been provided, it is ridiculous to keep making people to it over and over again.

- f) There should also be more communication between clients. Workshops, coffee mornings and self awareness programs should be organised on a regular basis, so that people can offer each other support, discuss their problems and difficulties in obtaining employment and not feel *alone and isolated*, which in turn, leads to depression, illness and often suicide. The job network providers should also be part of a network within the system instead of being separate entities all competing against each other for business. Conferences and seminars could be arranged from time to time for job network staff, charities, government representatives, company and business representatives, training providers and clients from around the country to encourage better cooperation and communication between all those involved in job creation and placement in these forever changing times.
- g) The work for the dole should be scrapped. Why should anyone be forced to work as a punishment for not being able to find a job? If a person is working, they should be paid a proper wage, and it should be their choice, not something that is forced upon them to prevent being cut off from benefits. The 20 hours voluntary work a week is a good idea because people do not have to continue to look for work if they commit themselves to this. Centrelink does not encourage long term unemployed or older clients to do this, nor is there much information available. One usually finds out about it through someone else. In reality, most people over 40 will find it almost impossible to obtain full time or even part-time work. Therefore doing voluntary work keeps people active in the community. They are also feeling needed and useful, plus helping out in areas where their contribution is valued. For example, in aged care, hospitals, community centres, schools, numeracy and literacy programs, childcare-the list goes on and on-this wasted human resource could be utilised. It as been proven that with literacy problems in children and adults, a one to one tutor/client program achieves outstanding results of success, and in the case of adults, prepares them to enter TAFE courses to further improve their reading and writing. It is too expensive to run such programs using paid tutors and TAFE does run 7-week courses for volunteer tutors. This could be expanded and take in aged care, childcare, etc. One example is a scheme for single teenage mothers to take their babies to school so they can finish their education. A person like me, who has reared her children, could be trained to work in a crèche in a school engaged in this program. Aged care is another area where volunteers give residents the emotional support the personal carers have not got time to give. The Pink Ladies at the Royal Newcastle Hospital have practically kept the place open! Also surrogate grannies, uncles or aunties could be trained as nannies or housekeepers to help families who need two incomes to keep going, or sole parents who face burn out because they have to juggle work with parenting and running a household. The Grey Army organisation is a great success story and could definitely be expanded on. A lot of older people like to stay in their homes as long as possible. Home maintenance becomes an obstacle and being on low incomes often prevents such people to hire say from Jim's Mowing Service on a regular basis. I have enclosed an article from the paper, which addresses the value of volunteers.
- h) If this voluntary scheme was implemented, instead of participants being on the dole, they would be paid by the government in the form of an allowance which would be say \$50 more a fortnight. This would raise their level of dignity in the

community and free them from that 'dole bludging' label. It would also stop them from sitting at home getting more depressed or wasting their time being sent from job network to job network looking for work that does not exist! If a person chose to stay on the dole and continue in that system, then it would be their choice and their responsibility to find work.

- i) The main problem with doing voluntary work is the cost of insurance. Either organisations or institutions have to cover a volunteer or a volunteer has to pay for their own insurance. Public liability is a problem too. The government should find ways to address these problems with insurance and subsidise volunteers if necessary. All the money that is being wasted in the job network fiasco could definitely be channeled into these areas.
- j) Also, it might be a good idea to get back to a 40 hour week. Some people work ridiculously long hours; others 2 hours a week if they are lucky! See enclosed newspaper articles. The new industrial relations legislation and casualization of the workforce has a lot to answer for.

These are just some suggestions to find other solutions to the job network problem, which could be given further analysis. The present system is not working. The media and the government are not presenting the true picture to the general public. The long term unemployed Australians of *all* ages are being made scapegoats for something that is beyond their control. If nothing is done, crime, violence, disease, mental health, depression, suicide, child abuse, gang warfare, alcohol and drug abuse will continue to rise at alarming rates. No one in the community will be safe. The police force is already caving in under the stress of increasing violence and crime around the country *and* is grossly understaffed. Our prisons are already overloaded and very costly. Mental illness is on the increase. Car theft, break and entry and bashings are a common every day occurrence, which we all have no choice but to live with.

The 6 point *something* percent unemployment figures released by Mr. Costello is nothing short of a lie. Perhaps in Sydney and Melbourne there would be a grain of truth in this figure but certainly not in other capital cities and definitely not in regional cities and towns or in the country.

It is time the government and media stop being mean and nasty. Honesty and fairness to *all* Australians in these troubled times is the solution. Keeping their heads in the sand and pretending that job network providers are solving the problems of long term unemployment is not the answer. This Productivity Commission is not before time as new solutions urgently need to be found.

Yours faithfully,

(signed)

MS SUZANNE HUDSON

Included with this submission were copies of seven letters from Centrelink and nine newspaper articles which could not be reproduced clearly in an electronic document for publication on the website. The letter and newspaper article headings were:

Centrelink:

1. Activity Agreement letter
2. Suspension of Newstart Allowance letter
3. Newstart Allowance letter
4. Member for Newcastle letter to Centrelink
5. Reply to Centrelink re: Member for Newcastle letter
6. Centrelink - Job Search Training assessment interview letter
7. Dept. of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business letter

Newspaper Articles:

1. 'The age barrier' – Newcastle Herald
2. 'An unkindness of bureaucrats – Weekend Australian
3. 'Stripping of welfare entitlements not brutal but fair, claims Government – SMH
4. 'Time for governments to value volunteers – The Post (Newcastle)
5. 'For love, not money – The Newcastle Herald
6. 'Overworked and well over it all' – Weekend Australian
7. 'Push to retire at 70' – Sunday Telegraph/'Big day at the office on trail' – Newcastle Herald
8. 'Brutal crime rising: doctor' – The Post (Newcastle)
9. 'Lifeline filling gap in mental health' – The Post (Newcastle)