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Level 2, 22 Horne Street,
Elsternwick Victoria 3185
T +61 (3) 9519 7000

ABN 79 174 342 927

Hon Ronald Sackville AO QC
Chair
Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and
Exploitation of People with a Disability
GPO Box 1422
Brisbane QLD 4001

By email: DRCEnquiries@royalcommission.gov.au

Dear Commissioner,

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Disability Royal Commission's issues paper on employment.

MHV is the peak body for the mental health sector in Victoria. Our members include consumer and carer groups, community health and mental health services, hospitals, medical associations and colleges, police and emergency services associations, unions, local governments, and other bodies across health and related sectors.

The employment rate for people with psychosocial disability is exceptionally low. Often, people with psychosocial disability face multiple and often complex barriers to employment, including:

- structural barriers: such as a weak labour market, poor access to quality employment programs and a lack of aligned mental health supports
- attitudinal barriers: including stigma and discrimination in both the community and workplace
- personal, health and/or social barriers: such as poor physical health, criminal record, substance misuse, family violence, homelessness etc.
- work-related barriers: including interrupted/low level of skills/experience, interrupted/low level of education, limited networks, poor literacy or numeracy, and lack of access to transport.

Despite people with mental illness consistently ranking employment as one of their highest goals, people with psychosocial disability are significantly less likely to be employed than others. In 2015, one in four people with a psychosocial disability were employed, compared with just over half of people with another disability type, and 78.8% of people with no disability. Very few people with psychosocial disability were employed full time (8.1%) compared with 34.4% of people with other disability types and 53.8% of people with no disability.¹ This problem persists across the age-span with the unemployment rate for young people with mental ill-health up to three times higher than the overall youth unemployment rate.²

The sustainability of supported job placements for people with psychosocial disability also remain low, with only 8.8% of people with psychosocial disability who start in Disability Employment Services gaining and maintaining a job for at least a year.

The importance of employment to recovery and the economy

COVID-19 has heightened our awareness of the mental health benefits of work and the negative impacts of unemployment. Work provides daily structure, a sense of purpose and opportunities for social interaction as well as independence and income. Conversely, unemployment increases the risk of a range of negative outcomes including relapse, homelessness, harmful substance use, crime and suicide.

Mental illness costs the nation approximately \$60 billion a year³ accounting for the costs of service use, unemployment benefits, lower social cohesion, and lost productivity.⁴ Therefore, opportunities to better support people with psychosocial disability to gain and retain employment have the potential for economic benefits on a national scale.

Without significant investment and reform, the devastating social and economic impact of unemployment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue to disproportionately disadvantage people with psychosocial disability.

Mental Health Victoria urges the Disability Royal Commission to play an integral role in removing the barriers to employment faced by people with psychosocial disability by supporting:

- approaches that require governments to work together to address the often complex social and health-related barriers to employment
- streamlined access to disability employment services and tailored pathways for people with psychosocial disability
- an employment strategy for people with psychosocial disability in the NDIS
- the scaling-up of existing employment programs that offer a broader range of supports, delivered by mental health workers
- strategies that support collaboration between community service organisations, industry and education providers, including:
 - a mental health education strategy for industry
 - financial incentives for employers and subsidies for employees that encourage the employment of people with psychosocial disabilities
- the development of a national mental health employment strategy.

Response to the issues paper

The Disability Royal Commission has provided a succinct summary of income and employment support for people with a disability in the Issues Paper (12 May 2020). MHV commends the Royal Commission's application of the human rights and life-course approach to employment, which are central to addressing the inequities that people with a psychosocial disability face in accessing employment and other opportunities in Australian society.

While MHV supports the Disability Royal Commission's focus on the employment of young people, which is vital in avoiding inequities later in life, it is also important to note that the mental health and employment of older people is increasingly important as the population ages. Older people often miss out on the mental health⁵ and employment support⁶ they need and older people with psychosocial disability are particularly vulnerable to disadvantage.

We further commend the paper's recognition of the specific barriers experienced by people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

communities. We recommend employment policies also consider the specific needs of others who are disproportionately more likely to experience mental health issues and other significant barriers to employment, including:

- people with dual disabilities
- LGBTIQ+ people
- people living in rural and remote areas
- people with complex needs or whose needs cross different service sectors
- refugees and asylum seekers
- ex-service personnel
- women.

This submission focuses on specific measures to address the barriers to employment faced by people with psychosocial disability. For a broader and more detailed analysis we refer the Commission to a recently released report by Victoria's Legislative Assembly, entitled *Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers*, in which many of the recommendations are applicable to people with disability.

Ensure the federal and state governments work together to address barriers to employment

For both governments and society as a whole, there should be an overarching aim to provide people with psychosocial disability meaningful employment opportunities and the necessary support to access them. The disability sector alone cannot achieve this aim. Rather, a whole-of-system approach that encompasses disability employment services, the NDIS and other intersecting social services, and involves collaboration with industry and education institutions is required.

Sustainable employment for people with psychosocial disability often depends on the coordination of multiple supports from across different program areas, funded by different levels of government. Some of the most powerful barriers to employment commonly experienced by people with psychosocial disability relate to associated issues such as other disabilities, physical health issues, housing issues, family violence, harm from alcohol and other drugs, legal issues etc. The complex relationship between these social determinants of health, psychosocial disability and employment requires an integrated or at least coordinated response spanning multiple funded agencies and service sectors.

Capitalise on parallel reform processes to address employment

Now is a critical time for governments to work together to ensure people with psychosocial disability can envisage, work towards and maintain gainful employment. In addition to the significant improvements required in disability employment services and supports, people with psychosocial disability also require access to an appropriately funded, well-designed and effective mental health system.

The confluence of the Disability Royal Commission and a number of other reform processes at both a state and federal level present an historic opportunity to better connect people with psychosocial disability to appropriate employment support and to address the systemic barriers they face to finding and keeping a job. MHV has made a number of submissions around the much needed reform of the mental health system, including to the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health⁷.

Other relevant reform initiatives include:

- Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Mental Health
- Australian Department of Health’s Adult Mental Health Centre trial
- Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers.

It is vital that the Royal Commission into Disability consider its recommendations around employment along with these reforms to ensure strategic alignment, an effective use of resources and long-term efficacy of the initiatives.

Streamline access and create tailored pathways in disability employment services

In the second half of 2017, psychiatric disability was the largest disability group (39%) in the Employment Support Services (ESS) program of the national Disability Employment Services (DES)⁸. The numbers are growing but the sustainability of job placements is not. Data from the Department of Social Services shows that only 31.5% of the 34,085 people with psychosocial disability who started in ESS in Victoria secured a job placement. Only 19.8% of the cohort remained employed for 6 months and 8.8% of those that started the program sustained a placement for one year.⁹

Currently, it is difficult for people with psychosocial disability to access and navigate disability employment supports. Many don’t pursue employment support because they don’t know where to go or they find the eligibility and assessment processes too difficult (especially in combination with other complicated processes associated with the NDIS and Centrelink). Others who do enter the system often end up with the wrong support or job placement because their needs were not accurately assessed¹⁰.

There is a need for clearer and more appropriate pathways to and through employment services for people with psychosocial disability including streamlined assessments (using more appropriate work readiness assessment tools) undertaken by skilled professionals with an understanding of mental health.

While a tailored pathway through existing employment services for people with psychosocial disability might improve the provision of appropriate support and potentially better job matching processes, effective services for this group must also be:

- recovery oriented
- trauma informed
- culturally safe
- inclusive of families and carers
- collaborative.

Develop and implement a plan for the employment of people with psychosocial disability in the NDIS

For those who have access to the NDIS, the Scheme offers an opportunity for complementary supports to existing employment services. However, NDIS employment supports are not yet well-established and more planning and resources are required to specifically address the employment of NDIS participants with psychosocial disability.

MHV acknowledges the work of the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy (2019–2022) and commends associated efforts to address low workforce participation rates among people with disability. However, in addition to this, there is a need for an NDIS

psychosocial disability employment plan, which is integrated with other relevant strategies. This strategy should include specific targets and measures to:

- evaluate, strengthen and improve NDIS supports that are in line with employment goals
- improve NDIS stakeholders' (particularly Planners) knowledge of psychosocial disability, the importance of vocation/employment, and available NDIS employment supports
- ensure relevant and ongoing employment-/vocation-related goals and supports are identified in all plans
- detail how NDIS supports can better integrate with employment services outside of the NDIS
- monitor and improve participant workforce participation rates
- enhance research and evaluation to drive continuous improvement in sustainable employment for people with psychosocial disability.

Expand and scale up existing programs delivered by mental health practitioners

For many people with psychosocial disability, employment is not an end point of recovery but rather, wellness and work are mutually beneficial. Considering that the vast majority of people with disabling mental health issues will not be eligible for the NDIS, and cannot get the intensity or type of support they need through DES¹¹, a broader range of employment supports is needed. The current 'payment on outcome' DES framework shifts focus away from the prevocational rehabilitation and intensive, integrated support that many people with psychosocial disability need to participate in their communities and work towards job-readiness.

The attached case studies present a selection of employment support services which have been successful in supporting people with severe mental illness or psychosocial disability into employment and other forms of participation. Integral to the success of these models is that they are:

- longer term
- recovery oriented
- person-centred
- integrated, co-ordinated and/or co-located
- collaborative (in partnership with participants and, where relevant, carers and families, broader support networks and industries)
- delivered by skilled and experienced mental health practitioners.

Effective service models like these should be expanded and provided with long-term funding so they can continue to improve participation outcomes for people with psychosocial disability.

Target industry and employers to improve the job prospects of people with psychosocial disability

Now more than ever, interventions addressing the long-term employment of people with psychosocial disability must also target industries and employers. COVID-19 has lessened the availability of entry-level, permanent roles and will inevitably increase the competitiveness of the job market. These challenging times require stronger collaboration

between community service organisations, industry and training providers to innovate, from policy to program delivery.

The recent Victorian Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers¹² found that co-design and co-delivery of employment interventions has the potential to better meet labour market needs, create work ready candidates and support employers to recruit people with psychosocial disability. Such initiatives include:

- place-based approaches
- social procurement
- social enterprises.

At the job placement level, additional resourcing is required to assist both employer and employee in establishing supportive and ongoing job placements for people with disability. Such supports include:

- a centrally coordinated agency to support job placements¹³
- fair and appropriately-timed financial incentives for employers, including allowances for the episodic nature of mental illness
- minimal contract compliance burdens for employers
- fair wage subsidies for employees
- discretionary funding to cover the financial costs to employees of finding and starting a new job.

Given that job outcomes for people with psychosocial disability are more sensitive to employer attitudes¹⁴, there must be interventions to address the stigmatising attitudes that impact the availability of work and potentially lead to discrimination, abuse and violence in the workplace. A mental health education strategy for industry includes:

- mental health and inclusion training, including the promotion of success stories demonstrating the benefits of employing people with psychosocial disability; and
- the development and implementation of:
 - cultural awareness training
 - best practice guidelines
 - self-audit checks
 - support for providers to implement disability action plans.

Ensure governments develop a national mental health employment strategy

An overarching, co-ordinated and comprehensive national mental health and employment strategy aligned with a significant boost in funding will improve the participation of people with psychosocial disability. Central to the success of this strategy is a whole-of-government approach with a robust and effective governance framework, which maintains oversight and accountability.

People with a lived experience, including consumers and carers, should play a key role in the development and operationalisation of the strategy, with targeted co-design and consultation approaches for diverse groups to ensure systems are designed with their needs in mind. Self-determination and cultural safety must also be assured for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Along with key reforms already mentioned above, the strategy should be integrated with other relevant policies, strategies and plans. It should ensure that:

- access to employment support is guaranteed and timely, regardless of a person's support needs or where they live.
- the mental health and associated workforces are adequately sized, appropriately credentialed and trained, equitably distributed and well-supported to deliver employment supports.
- the lived experience and peer workforces are specifically planned for, resourced and supported to grow in order to meet need (and established as a viable career option for people who have experienced mental health issues/psychosocial disability).
- mental health promotion strategies address the structural drivers of unemployment.
- there are measures to prevent job/skill loss when people experience mental health issues .
- employment support is available to people early in their recovery from a mental health condition and across the life span including youth, adulthood and older age.
- the needs of groups more at risk of mental health issues and unemployment (mentioned above) are addressed with targeted approaches.

Conclusion

Reform processes occurring in parallel to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to take a strategic, foundational whole-of-government approach to the employment of people with psychosocial disability.

At this historic time, we can draw on trials and existing high-quality programs that have successfully tailored employment supports to the needs of people with psychosocial disability. There are also important opportunities to join-up state and federal government approaches to mental health and unemployment and to elevate the role of people with a lived experience.

Now is the time to capitalise on these strengths to build an accessible, integrated and person-centred system of supports that not only support recovery but also people's capacity to participate and to access the socioeconomic opportunities of paid work.

MHV again thanks the Disability Royal Commission for the opportunity to contribute to this vital piece of work, and welcomes any further opportunity to provide more detailed advice.

For further information on this submission, please contact Larissa Taylor, Director of Policy, on (03) 9519 7000 or l.taylor@mhvic.org.au.

Sincerely,



Larissa Taylor
Director of Policy
Mental Health Victoria

Appendix: Psychosocial employment support provider case studies

McAuley Community Services for Women, McAuley Works¹⁵

McAuley Community Services for Women is an integrated service for women who want to be safe from family violence. It provides 24/7 crisis support, temporary accommodation and a range of services for women and their children, including housing, employment, mental health, legal, family/parenting and other supports.

As part as a suite of services, McAuley Works offers women employment supports to assist them to find and maintain employment. Workforce participation can help women to gain financial independence as well as confidence and self-esteem, which are vital to prevent women from returning to unsafe or violent relationships. The program assists these women to overcome the unique barriers they face to achieving these goals.

The importance of the program is illustrated in this story from one of the participants:

'The McAuley House was a God-sent help for me. I left Wodonga [regional Victoria] due to family issues and not being able to find employment there. I came to Melbourne in search of employment which I found within a week. However I had no stable place to stay as I was jumping from couch to couch.

One night I was unable to find a place to stay as my plans had fallen through that night and I was stuck in Footscray. As I was walking and crying out of defeat I stumbled across a green house that offered refuge for women without a place to stay. I hesitated to ring the bell because I wasn't an Australian citizen so I thought they wouldn't help me and I was also embarrassed of how bad I had let my situation get.

As I hesitated to ring the bell a lady came out ... I told my story and in my mind I really didn't know how she could help me, but she really listened to what my urgent needs was, and not wants. She organised a two-way return ticket from Melbourne to Albury-Wodonga and money to buy clothes as I was wearing ripped clothes.

...With that act of kindness I was able to settle in Melbourne the next week, I had more time to sort out my stay when I returned to Melbourne.

I sadly lost my job and I felt helpless again.

I called the McAuley House and they set up a meeting with me the same afternoon. They drove to my location and they bought me hot chocolate and made me feel comfortable. They gave me hope knowing that I wasn't doing this by myself and that they would support me with getting my CV up and running to attract more jobs.

Within a week I retrieved a full time job and six interviews from the CV they assisted me with. The McAuley House was my support system, and with their help I was able to become independent and stable.

My new job was with an interpreting company. While I was there I received numerous calls from McAuley House booking interpreters to help other women get on their feet. It was always emotional speaking with them because that's where I started off as well. I am and will be forever grateful to McAuley for helping me get my life back on track.'

WISE Employment, WISE Ways to Work¹⁶

WISE Employment is an employment support provider, providing services under Disability Employment Services and JobActive.

WISE Ways to Work is WISE Employment's vocational rehabilitation and employment support program for people experiencing mental illness. It is a capacity-building, skills training and employment support program which provides opportunities for participants to gain exposure to work and to work towards open employment.

All participants start with WISE's six-month vocational rehabilitation program, Employ Your Mind, which helps build key skills for work and confidence. It has a particular focus on improving cognitive functioning skills and includes a work orientation placement to gain exposure to work. Participants can also take part in the Optimal Health Program, an 8-week program that helps participants to manage their mental, physical, emotional and occupational health. The program's vocational coaches and occupational therapists support participants on an individualised graded vocational pathway that builds success at each stage.

WISE Ways to Work's network of partner employers provide work experience, training, and job opportunities to participants. Vocational coaches work with employers to identify and adapt positions and provide training in best practice mental health workplace support.

Comments from participants illustrate the effectiveness of this approach:

'The program has given me purpose and happiness in myself. I used to be too introspective, but now I'm not too focused on myself . . . I'm using my mind again and my memory. Routine and planning has given me purpose. I feel inspired.'

'The program has made me feel more capable. I have realised that skills that I learnt . . . can be generalised.'

'Through this program, I have rediscovered my skills and attributes . . . I have become more reflective, able to receive feedback, aware of my strengths and areas I need to work on. My interest in learning new things has increased, and my ability to concentrate, organise, and problem-solve have improved.'

Employer feedback:

"I could work with the [WWtW] team all day every day of my job allowed it. They really know what they are doing and have designed the employer support approach really, really well"

"The [WWtW] team are great, the occupational therapists really know their stuff and will work alongside you to ensure the placement is a success. That is what drives them"

Kindred Clubhouse¹⁷

Kindred Clubhouse Inc. is a mental health support organisation which operates as a community-based centre in Hastings Victoria. The centre is a safe, welcoming space that aims to create a strong community, network of support, and lasting friendships for people experiencing mental health issues, as well as access to employment and educational opportunities.

The Kindred Clubhouse operates in-line with the internationally recognised Clubhouse model – an evidence based model for mental health recovery. The model comprises 36 accreditation standards guided by 4 principles:

- The right to a place to come
- A right to meaningful work
- A right to meaningful relationships; and

- A right to a place to return.

The centre is run by and for members, which means members work side-by-side (as peers and partners) and with the staff, to run every function of the centre.

Lynne has regularly attended the Clubhouse since it opened in 2016:

"I like coming down (to the Clubhouse) because the guys are great. I came in with a friend one day and started helping in the kitchen. I just taught them a few things – health, safety and stuff. I enjoy doing it. It gives you a purpose in life, creates a schedule for your week and, for me, I don't see anyone until next Saturday and I really look forward to it. It might take me a few times to get out of the door, but when I do, I love it.

Kindred Clubhouse really gives me a purpose. Kindred Clubhouse teaches us life skills too. Cooking is something that we really enjoy, the barbecue in particular. This is a place where people come and go, you can't hold them to coming. Part of Kindred Clubhouse is understanding that you should not force people to attend."

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings, available: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4430.0Main%20Features902015?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4430.0&issue=2015&num=&view=#~:text=Of%20the%20people%20with%20a,of%20people%20with%20no%20disability.>

² Orygen 2020, Submission to inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers, p. 2, accessed: <https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy/Policy-Areas/Employment-and-education/Employment/Inquiry-into-Sustainable-Employment-for-Disadvanta/Inquiry-into-Sustainable-Employment-for-Disadvanta?ext=.>

³ Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies 2016, 'The economic cost of serious mental illness and comorbidities in Australia and New Zealand', Royal Australian & New Zealand College Psychiatrists, available: <https://www.ranzcp.org/Files/Publications/RANZCP-Serious-Mental-Illness.aspx>

⁴ Parliament of Victoria 2020, *ibid.* p. xv.

⁵ Mental Health Victoria (MHV) and Council on the Ageing Victoria 2020, 'Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of older Victorians', available:

<https://www.mhvic.org.au/images/PDF/Submission/V50037%20MHV%20Report%20-%20Mental%20Health%20of%20Older%20Victorians%20SP%20HR.pdf>

⁶ Parliament of Victoria 2020, *op cit.* p. xvii.

⁷ MHV and the Victorian Healthcare Association 2019, Joint Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, available:

https://www.mhvic.org.au/images/PDF/Submission/MHV_VHAJointSubmission.pdf

⁸ Australian Government 2013, Department of Social Services, Labour Market Information Portal, 'DES Outcome by Disability Type: December 2017' available:

<https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/DESOutcomeRatesbyDisabilityType>

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ "[T]he mandatory national job capacity assessment system may be misclassifying up to 30% of people with psychotic disorders, by underestimating their assistance needs" Waghorn G. *et al.* 2012, 'Earning and learning' in those with psychotic disorders: The second Australian national survey of psychosis, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 46(8), p. 774-785.

¹¹ Parliament of Victoria 2020, *op cit.* p. xiv.

¹² Parliament of Victoria 2020, *ibid.*

¹³ Parliament of Victoria 2020, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Productivity Commission 2020, 'Draft Report, Chapter 14: Income and employment support', p. 4.

¹⁵ <https://www.mcauleycsw.org.au/about-us/our-mission-and-values/> and

<https://www.mcauleycsw.org.au/story/a-life-back-on-track/>

¹⁶ <https://wiseemployment.com.au/2019/11/11/wise-ways-to-work-launches-the-good-egg-employment-generation-group-program-to-help-more-people-who-have-mental-health-problems-into-work/#:~:text=WISE%20Ways%20to%20Work%20is%20a%20WISE%20Employment%20program%20based,i dentify%20suitable%20opportunities%20to%20pursue>

¹⁷ <https://www.kindredclubhouse.org.au/>