Department of Social Services
GPO 9820 Canberra ACT 2601

Via email: DESConsultations@dss.gov.au

**A new specialist disability employment program**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Exposure Draft of the Request for Tender regarding the New Specialist Disability Employment Program. Through this short joint submission, we would like to focus on a decentralised approach and the role of the Australian Capital Territory specifically in the development and trialling of a new specialist disability employment program.

**About us**

Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI) is an independent organisation delivering reputable national systemic advocacy informed by our experience in individual advocacy and community and government consultation. We provide dedicated individual and self-advocacy services, training, information and resources in the ACT.

As a Disabled People’s Organisation, the majority of our organisation, including our Board of Management, staff and members, are people with disabilities. AFI speaks with the authority of lived experience. It is strongly committed to advancing opportunities for the insights, experiences and opinions of people with disabilities to be heard and acknowledged.

AFI operates under a human rights framework. We uphold the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and strive to promote and advance the human rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in the community. AFI is a declared public authority under the Human Rights Act 2004.

ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability aims to improve the quality of life for people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities by providing support and information to their families, carers, schools, employers and other organisations.

ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability also aims to increase awareness of the abilities and needs of people with Down syndrome and intellectual disability through our programs, events and activities. We work actively within the community to assist in the removal of barriers for people with a disability to access mainstream services.

**People with disability in the ACT**

Around 1 in 5 Canberrans has a disability. People with disability, in general, have not benefitted from the positive employment trend in Australia over the last two decades. In the ACT, while there has been a slight increase in the percentage of people with disability (between 15 and 64) in the labour force since 2015, the figure lags well behind the percentage of people without reported disability. People with disability in the ACT are also more likely to be employed on a part-time basis.

People with disability are also overrepresented in the bottom two income quintiles in the ACT. In short, people with disability are needing to increase their disposable income by at least half to achieve the same standard of living as people without disability. Over the past five years, Canberra has experienced above-inflation increases in the prices of many essential goods and services. This additional financial strain is compounding the financial pressures people with disability face every day.

It is our experience that employment policy for people with disability has been constrained by its sole carriage by the Australian Government with limited and unclear roles for the States and Territories and municipal government. The States have some key levers including taxation and proximity to employment creation and relationships with State and Territory chambers and business and commerce. They are also heavily involved in procurement in industries which offer entry level jobs.

The Commonwealths main buy in is funding its employment services and manage income support.

For that reason, we would support untethering some of the funding in the new program from employment providers and building a fit-for-purpose offer to Disabled People’s Organisations and Disabled Representative Organisations to work in a systemic and evidence-based manner with State and Territory business chambers, large employers and local and State Governments.

This funding would be used to foster disability employment through innovative programs, information, projects and policy responses. Disability peak bodies not only have heft and leverage, but the lived experience expertise that employment providers could not provide on their own.

In addition, we welcome the focus on pre-employment support in this reimagining of Commonwealth Employment Support. We would also advocate for a renewed focus on the general activation of people towards an employment outcome. Research shows that the degree to which individuals are interconnected and embedded in communities has a powerful impact on their health and well-being. Despite evidence that social and economic participation are linked, there has been a narrow focus on employment outcomes for people with disability and little focus on building social connections and participation through, for example, sport, recreation, volunteering and community life. This is problematic on many levels including sustainable employment outcomes. For example, there is evidence to indicate that people who are connected and engaged socially or through organised activities develop soft skills, resilience, and connections.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are invaluable when it comes to finding and/or sustaining employment.

As such, we advocate for an increased focus on peer support, self-advocacy, and community development – even when an employment outcome is some way off. People need holistic attention to additional circumstances such as stabilising housing, transport arrangements and connection to social networks as well as the accompanying soft skills to become job ready.

Finally, we would like to stress the suitability of the ACT as a pilot site to target collaborative and joined-up employment programs that involve DPO and DROs. Not only does the ACT have a one-tier system of government, but it also has a history of policy innovation across disability and business via the work of the Inclusion Council. This would require focusing and resourcing at the disability community end.

For further information please contact Craig Wallace, A/g CEO Advocacy for Inclusion on Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org or Shannon Kolak, CEO ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual Disability on ceo@actdsid.org.au.

1. See Skinner, J., Zakus, D.H., and Cowell, J. (2008). “Development through sport: Building social capital in disadvantaged communitied.” *Sport management review 11*(3): 253-275. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)