

# Report from the South Australia Disability Employment Services Forum for Women With Disabilities



**Women with Disabilities South Australia (WWDSA)**

*for the*

**WWDA Disability Employment Services (DES)  
Consumer Engagement Project**

**Held on May 23, 2014**

**Venue City of West Torrens, Hamra Centre**

**1 Brooker Terrace, Hilton, SA**

*Prepared by Margie Charlesworth, on behalf of WWDA, June, 2014*

## About the Participants

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After expecting 10 participants we ended up with 5 participants. All are members of WWDSA, two of whom are currently employed, 3 work as volunteers in various areas within South Australia. All participants have been provided pseudonyms protect identification.

Sharon is a middle age woman acquiring her disability after having a stroke. Sharon has worked as an ASO2 for over 30 years, but despite her years of service and up-skilling herself she has been unsuccessful in progressing in her career. Coming through Sharon's account is her frustration of being constantly overlooked and denied the natural progression in her career that others without disabilities seem to be afforded automatically. Sharon had gone to a few Disability Employment services, only to be informed the service is only able to assist her into a new job.

Loraine, is a woman who has multiple disabilities. Loraine is one of many who remember the many progressions of the disability movements and has lived in both Melbourne and Adelaide during different parts of her life, assisting to shape the movement. Like many women with disabilities, Loraine is a perpetual volunteers, who has had exposure to many roles and has done so in the hope of some-day being paid for the work she dose.

Jayne is the second of the perpetual volunteers. A woman with a life-long disability Jayne is aware of the many myths that society holds about her based on the physical manifestations of her disability. Despite being a well educated women Jayne has not enjoyed much success in using the Disability Employment Services and so has taken charge over her own career destiny.

Tarah is probably our most successful participant in making the Disability Employment Services work for her. After working for ten years for an organisation, which showed very little support, Tarah speaks about how using a DES has assisted her to make her new job work for her. Tarah credits this to working temporarily in a space where everyone use a DES and that this enabled her to know what to expect when working with DES in her new position.

Beth can also be described as a perpetual volunteer. After acquiring her disability in a work place car accident, Beth has been labelled "unfit to work" via WorkCover and the only work she can now obtain would be in an Australian Disability Enterprises (previously referred to as Business Services, or Sheltered Workshops). Beth I currently involved with many civic and community minded groups, including community radio and the like, rendering the thought of working in any form of ADE absurd.

## Introduction to the Forum

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We began the day by introducing the subject of Disability employment services, as well as explaining that the proceedings of the day would be fed back to a larger report that Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) are currently working on. This was an important step as it gave room for each participant to understand where their feedback was going. It was obvious that those who were participating in the forum had good knowledge about Disability Employment Services as well as some of the program that these services were connected as well as whether or not the services and programs had either assisted or hindered them in obtaining meaningful employment.

The afternoon was spent talking with participants about the impacts the Federal Budget measures, if passed by the Senate, will have on women with disabilities – in particular young women with disabilities.

## The Forum Proceedings

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Sharon works in the public Services as an ASO2. Throughout the day she expressed her frustration of working in the same position for 30 years, and despite efforts and requests to progress in her career her Managers constantly denied her requests. This frustration heightened over the years as she watches how junior staff, even temporary staff were promoted before, and over her. However when she asks her Managers to explain why she is continuously overlooked for promotion she is stonewalled and told she is under qualified.

In referring to disability services, participant one explains that,

*“...my personal experiences with employment services, have been dreadful, dreadful. I approached them because I was in a placement that was a good fit for my skills and for my capabilities but then it was a Commonwealth Government funded thing and the funding stopped. So I was, who are the first people that go? So, I went to Disability Works Australia and said can you help me to find a job close to home that is suitable for my skill set. No, we can only help people that are unemployed, currently.”*

She goes on to say that the Disability Employment Services have explained to her that they will only assist her when she is looking for a new job. In other words, unless she quits her current job, DES will not assist her because they only assist people into employment.

## Existing Disability Employment Services

During the conversations, it was obvious that the participants had expansive knowledge of what programs and services existed in relation to employment services for people with disabilities. Disability Works Australia (DWA) is funded by both the Commonwealth and State Governments around Australia. The purpose of DWA is to “facilitate the provision of employment for people with disabilities”. It does so by providing potential employers a single access point to recruit future employees with disabilities, by linking them with Government funded Employment Services; such as the Disability Employment Service and facilitating those relationships<sup>1</sup>.

Sharon began her comments by talking about DWA and the Career Advancement Pilot Project. The Career Advancement Project is funded through the National Disability Employment Initiative (NDEI) which is also funded by the Commonwealth and managed by WorkFocus Australia. And the mission of WorkFocus Australia is to assist people who are disadvantaged<sup>2</sup> to obtain and remain in work. WorkFocus Australia is also responsible for the administration of JobAccess which is also funded by the Australian Government.

In mentioning these Services which are designed to assist people with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment, Sharon begins to speak about the inflexibility of these services and how it is not always conducive of a positive experience to the people using the DES systems.

*“I don’t think Disability Works Australia does us justice, because you need to be creative and flexible when it comes to people with disability. You just can’t have this rule, we will help you if you haven’t got a job, what about helping us maintain and manage. I am sure some of the other states would be more flexible with people that work.”*

Commonwealth Employment Service (CRS) is perhaps the longest serving service assisting people with disabilities into and to retain employment. Both Jayne’s and Tarah mentioned having contact with this service. For Jayne this contact was when she tried to work for herself as an independent Desktop Publisher. She recalls trying to use the service again a few years later, however the only assistance they claimed to be able to offer her was with developing a resume and job interview practice. She decided not to do either because she had already completed many courses when job preparedness was an inbuilt factor.

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<sup>1</sup> About Disability Works Australia <http://www.dwa.org.au/about.htm>; Cited June 5, 2014

<sup>2</sup> WorkFocus Australia is a program accessed by who are at a general disadvantage; including people with disabilities, people with mental illness, or an injury. From <http://www.workfocus.com/about-us.aspx>; Cited, June 5, 2014

Tarah appears to have had a different experience using the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, and says,

*“I have been through CRS a long time ago, they were ok, I was quite young and they offered me a fair bit, a Labour Government, so there was a fair bit of training and stuff going around. I didn’t have too many problems with them but I have been through quite a few, a number of others and for the most part they just kept redirecting me to training, do more training”.*

A final program in relation to employment which received a mention was Job in Jeopardy. Job in Jeopardy is a free service, available to those registered with a DES, and are at risk of losing their job through disability, illness or injury. The objective of Job in Jeopardy is to assist a person to keep their job via a DES by assessing what would enable the person to retain their job. This is achieved by reassessing the work place, or redesigning a job to fit the abilities of the employee and employer, as well as prescribing any equipment which may help the person in their job.<sup>3</sup>

## **A Positive Experience**

Tarah speaks about her positive experiences of using Disability Employment Services, called Multiple Solutions.

*“I worked in a place that only employed people with a disability working there. We had multiple solutions for three of us at once to try and do and get it happening but then I got all the equipment and that comes with me now. So I had an ok experience with doing that. There are limitations to what you can get through them and apparently there are further limitations because of the changes in the budget as to what it is they can do for you particularly around equipment services, they put you straight onto that equipment scheme in the Federal Government. They are not going to arrange it or broker for you. The employer will have to go and sort it out with the equipment people. So I am lucky I got my equipment through Multiple Solutions”.*

Tarah continues talking about how the Disability Employment Services have continued to support her in her new job. In referring to her role as a Community Development Officer at her new place of work,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/job-in-jeopardy>; Cited June 5, 2014

Tarah comments on how agreeable this new place has been in accommodating her additional needs for her to do the job she was employed to do.

*“From the outset they were very open any support you need and [they have been] very flexible. [As] community development office, I do a lot of manual tasks, the most manual thing I do is set up for exhibitions and hang art work and at the moment.”*

Tarah is also reflective of the ways that she has needed to call on her DES contact to come in and reassess her in the workplace to see whether extra supports were required. This was primarily because she recognised that co-workers were beginning to become overly concerned with her well-being, whilst she did certain tasks. She says,

*“I still have colleagues hovering around me, thinking that something is going to wrong. They don’t make it overt but they are there often trying to support me. But yeah, I have had a few issues here and that is why I called [my DES contact] to come in and do a bit of an assessment of the work place.”*

As a result of having her DES worker re-visiting the work place Tarah was able to gain support with having guidelines put in place around extra support which were not recognisable when she first began her new job. One of the things that needed attention was the temperature control of the office that Tarah is working. This is because Tarah is on a few medications which make it difficult for her to regulate her own body temperature.

*“I don’t want to have to keep saying, you need to turn it down, because I get fatigued, and I take a medication that effects my temperature regulation so if I get hot, I just get agitated, and I just can’t work anymore.”*

## **Education**

Both Jayne and Tarah have obtain University Level education. It is reasonable to suggest that both women took this path so that they became more qualified and certain of their next career move. The similarities between the women despite having very different disabilities are remarkably similar. After leaving a sheltered workshop Jayne commence what would be 20 years of undertaking different courses which led her to embark a University degree. Jayne says:

*"I spent a few years study, at first I stuck with computers, with the view to work as an independent contractor. But then I became interested in advocacy, so I went and Completed Certificates 3 & 4 in Community Services and Community Development. Ultimately this led me to undertake a University degree which also included an Honours Degree".*

Tarah has spent a similar amount of time studying. She says that many of the places she went to in her bid to find employment, kept redirecting her to re-train and study.

*I was like you know, in my late 20's, I was really well qualified, with certificates coming out the wahzoo. I had certificates in arts, I even had a certificate in conservation and partly studying towards bricklaying, self-defence, clerical processing, everything you can think of but still no job and then I got a State Government traineeship and it was meant to be for under 25's but because I had a disability, I got in over 25 but that gave me one year of work and then I didn't get a job. So then I decided to do more study and studied at Uni for 3 years and then did a lot of student placements and stuff until I got volunteer work and then I finally got a job and I have stayed in work since but I have used disability employment services to like maintain my job".*

## **Australian Disability Enterprises**

It is not possible to speak about employment nor Disability Employment Services, in relation to women with disabilities and not touch on the subject of Australian Disability Enterprises – previously referred to as Business Services, and historically, sheltered workshops.

Jayne is the second of our perpetual volunteers. At 43 Jayne spoke about how she felt constantly let down by Disability Employment Services. Her first experience was as a youth. She stated that owing to her Cerebral Palsy Accent and a lack of imagination on the part of those charged with assisting Jayne into meaningful and satisfactory employment, her first job was as a computer Operator in an Australian Disability Enterprise. This job also included training other colleagues to use the same programs. She also thought she earned the top wage of \$1.50 per hour.

Interestingly two of our participants Beth and Tarah have also worked within these Disability Enterprises. However these roles were very different because Beth was a Manager and Tarah's role was as an auditor. Tarah recalls,

*"I have been there, I used to work as an auditor in the disability employment services quality assurance framework and let me just say I have been a lot of places but I won't single out one but the culture has been pretty much the same everywhere".*

Beth talks about a work place injury and being put on work cover. She explains how now aside from her role as a volunteer for many community organisations, to obtain work from Disability Employment Services she would be pushed into an Australian Disability Enterprise. This is because Work Cover has assessed her as being at high risk.

*"I think, there is not a lot of options. In fact, I've have gone for jobs where I am the only person qualified and they don't say the other person had better qualifications, because they didn't and they can't. One of them was at a TAFE being involved in writing up a curriculum for disability studies and that is my area. I have got a degree in that and I am specialized in several areas. It is more than just recruitment, one of the things that you have to do when you tick the boxes is you have to, when you apply, like I have had an insurance payout, so that says that I am totally and permanently incapacitated. So no one will employ me under their work cover. No one, anywhere will employ me for that reason. In fact some organizations have refused to take me on as a volunteer because of my, because I am effectively too high a risk but having said that, I am quite capable of working, I do that as a volunteer. No one will employ me so the only option is a supported employment service. I will jump off the roof before I do that".*

## **Volunteerism**

As explained earlier, three of the participants were described as being perpetual volunteers. And while it's true to say that all of the participant had been volunteers, it is Loraine, Jayne and Beth, who found themselves in the never ending cycle of volunteering. While it is good to volunteer and everyone does so at some point in their live, very few individuals would settle for a life time of volunteers at multiple tasks.

Loraine is the first of our volunteers. She explains how important it is for her to give back to society. However, when talking about volunteering in South Australia Loraine states that "Volunteering here is a disgrace."

Loraine appear to be in the unique position of knowing that her employment status could change if she was to live in Melbourne. She recalls,



*“There has been attitude change, I have been involved in the disability movement since 1981, working in Melbourne in the disability resources centre and I then went to work in the Disability employment sector. The beauty of that organization, we all had a disability, all of us and we ran that.”*

Due to illness, Loraine returned to South Australia 12 years ago. Since then she has worked as a volunteer in different ways within her community.

*“I think volunteering should be put on this and not positive but as a negative here in South Australia because through, you think, ok I will go back and do volunteering and they will see that I am a good worker and that I am creative and that I have skills, no what they do, is they exploit you.”*

Loraine reflected on when she ran a book group at her local council for people who were either blind or visually impaired. After five years of running this group, her roll expanded to include duties as a Library Officer. When she expressed a wish to be paid for 15 hour per week, Loraine was told that she would never gain employment as a librarian. Sadly she was informed of this by two different libraries. When asked whether a reason was given for this remark, she said she could not recall one given. She elaborates,

*“I don’t know but I have been, it is like being slapped across the face and I am thinking, I am more qualified, I am more experienced, better than these people, I will turn up... I had hand surgery as I couldn’t drive, it was like 6kms along the highway to do my job”.*

Explained earlier was the fact the Jayne had put herself through many years of higher study. Unfortunately four years later Jayne still finds herself still volunteering. In recent months Jayne has found the courage to begin to charge for some of her time as she now runs sessions on women with disabilities, with a particular focus on violence abuse. While she has had some support with this from some services, Jayne notes that it is the Government sector that’s less than forthcoming in their willingness to pay for her time and expertise. Lorraine adds,

*“You know, it is interesting, that you say that, like Gillis Plains, we have problems, here we are blind citizens Adelaide branch with our national office because vision Australia is a major provider in Victoria, NSW and obviously I was a client of theirs in Victoria before I came here, terrific service in Geelong but here it is culturally changed, it is a very empowering organization. They used to have a sheltered employment and they were getting better rates of pay but they decided last year to close that down and I have been*

*against sheltered workshop but all of a sudden we are saying if you close it here, where will people go? I don't like sheltered workshops, I don't like the culture of them, I don't like segregation in workplaces for people with disability but the question comes back and I am having a fight with national office, yeah vision Australia have all been redeployed, no they haven't they all got sacked last week. They went to a transitional organization and have lost their jobs. It has been really disappointing, so what we were fighting 30 years ago is worse now. I don't know what to say, I feel so disillusioned, and then again, like I said with these SA health renal networks, there is a lot of them now and seems like they have imposed another organization like this health consumer alliance which acts as a broker for the government to whom they will pick and choose to sit on committees but these people are not amongst us. If you all said no, I will pick, I will respect that as it is amongst my peers but it is not happening, it is who is the compliant and complicit people and it offends me because we are missing out, so I am saying bugger it."*

## **Just Because...**

Both Jayne and Tarah spoke about how individuals, organisations and working groups would invite you to come and speak to them just because they have a disability or they have expertise in a subject area.

*"I am a lecturer [at a University] and I got emailed [to ask] if I could present in her topic and I say what do you want me to present about. And she wanted me to present about my disability and I basically told her to fuck off in the nicest possible way. I am your colleague, we are academic next together, these students are also students I teach and you want me to talk about my impairment to them and I am like that is totally inappropriate. I don't like the self-narrating zoo, the talking head about my disability, I have no problem with people doing that if they want to, I am just not a fan of it. That is how people suck you dry, they just parade you around as exhibit a and you never get paid and I mentor younger people with a disability and I always say set up a small business and if you get people asking for you to do motivational talks or talking about your disability, talking about when you lived in a group home. You have an ABN and you have a fee structure and you go, you really want me? This is how much I cost. For the most part it is working out but that is a whole other discussion about self-employment because it is an option but it is also hard."*

Jayne added the point about sitting on committees, boards and focus groups. Often sitting on committees or focus groups, alongside paid works from both the public service as well as NGO

organisations, who are there because of a job requirement. Therefore, many, if not all, meetings are held within working hours, and as such these people would be being paid, when people with a disability would be expected to not receive anything but maybe a taxi voucher. Jayne declares that,

*“Everybody wants you, as long as you are free!, They want your knowledge and your experience, but as soon as you ask them to pay you for your time the answer is often, ‘No’, but we will pay for your transport!”*

The issue with only having transport paid is that it fails to recognise and value of the experiences and knowledge that women with disabilities process. On a personal level one might suggest that being constantly asked to work and freely give their time does little for the self-esteem.