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Employment options vital for all people with disability

The Federal Government's NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-2020 seeks to increase the rate of participants in paid employment from 24% to 30%, approximately 36,000 people, by mid-2023.

This goal is wholeheartedly supported by National Disability Services (NDS), the peak representative body for disability service providers, along with other representative bodies within the disability sector.

However, NDS disagrees with the views of some advocate groups who have called for the closure of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) – organisations that provide supported employment, calling them 'sheltered workshops'. Disability Enterprises are not 'sheltered workshops' – an emotional and offensive reference specifically used to conjure images of 19th century conditions.

Disability Enterprises provide meaningful work for around 20,000 supported employees, the majority of whom have severe or profound disability. No employee with disability is forced to work in a Disability Enterprise, all have chosen to do so.

"The fact is, Disability Enterprises offer a choice for people who would otherwise often be excluded from any employment," said NDS CEO, David Moody.

"The programs Disability Enterprises operate are specifically geared to the needs and abilities of their supported employees and offer additional benefits that allow them to gain valuable vocational and social skills as well as friendships with and support from workplace peers.

"Some misconceptions surrounding Disability Enterprises have to be dispelled. The findings in a recent decision of the Fair Work Commission clearly identified the social and economic benefits of supported employment in Disability Enterprises.

In its [Supported Employment Services \(SES\) Award Review Decision](#) of December 2019, the Fair Work Commission made the following observations (see paragraphs 245 to 253 and 359):

"... we consider that the employment opportunities which the supported employment sector provides to disabled persons is of immense value to Australian society. We have

summarised in detail the uncontradicted evidence given in witness statements made by numerous disabled persons and their carers/family members concerning the personal importance to them of employment in ADEs. Those statements make it clear that disabled persons place great weight upon the companionship, stimulation, independence, learning opportunities and the sense of dignity, achievement and self-worth which supported employment provides them. For the carers and family members of disabled persons employed in ADEs, the support and respite which employment in ADEs provides them, and the positive personal effects such employment has on the disabled person, is regarded as being of huge worth. It is also necessary to emphasise that ADEs are not just employers of disabled persons in the normal sense, but also provide a range of additional support services which an ordinary employer does not, including training in life-skills as well as vocational training, counselling and behavioural support, and transport assistance.”

“Some organisations in the disability sector (such as PWDA) deprecate supported employment and characterise it as “segregated employment”. For them, open employment should be the objective in all cases, and supported employment does not sufficiently facilitate that objective or indeed acts as an impediment to its achievement. We do not agree.”

“Numerous disabled persons and their carers have given uncontradicted evidence that the loss of supported employment would result in social isolation, boredom, financial detriment, a loss of skills development opportunities and a diminished sense of self-worth amongst disabled persons, with a significantly greater burden being placed on their carers and other family members. There is no evidence that this would be ameliorated by any compensating increase in open employment for disabled persons.”

Mr Moody said that, “NDS asserts that supported employment must remain as one of a continuum of employment options for people with disability.”

Ends.

Media contact:

Steven Gosbell | 03 8341 4394 | steven.gosbell@nds.org.au

NDS CEO David Moody is available for comment.

National Disability Services is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. It represents service providers across Australia in their work to deliver high-quality supports and life opportunities for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes over 1050 non-government organisations which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.