**Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

# Submission No 163

**Name** Mental Health at Work (mh@work)

**Submission made by**

☒ Australian with disability in work

☒ Australian with disability looking for work

☒ Australian with disability who would like to work

☒ Carer/family member of Australian with disability  
 Organisation

☒ Academic/social policy practitioner

☒ Other  
 Please describe:

# Submission regarding Older Australians / Australians with Disability / Both

### **Your experience**

**Have you (or the person you are submitting on behalf of) experienced employment discrimination?**

Yes

**Did you take any action in relation to the employment discrimination you experienced?**

Yes

**Please tell us more, for example, what action you took and how effective you felt it was; or why you chose not to take any action.**

I have had several experiences of employment discrimination over my career, for mental health reasons, physical health reasons, appearance, gender.

It was in only one instance ( gender) that I made a complaint to the Equal Opportunity Commission (1995). After mediation I was encouraged to take my compliant further, however due a death of an immediate family member at the time, though having appropriate evidence submitted, I did not pursue the matter.

**Did your experience of employment discrimination impact on your participation in the workforce? (For example, did you have to stop work, change jobs or take sick leave?)**

No

**Please tell us more**

With subsequent experiences of discrimination, I have continued to ensure that somehow I have been working.

### **Barriers**

**Do you think older Australians/Australians with disability face barriers when they look for work or are in a job?**

Yes

**If yes, or not sure, what do you think these barriers might be?**

Absolutely - access, transport, movement difficulties because of their disability, mental health issues, stigma, fear, lack of skills and resources. Employers not willing to employ people with disabilities due to fear, lack of skills on how to manage these situations, workplace culture not conducive to embracing vulnerability or difference, bullying, toxic work environment. Perceived challenges in making appropriate accommodations and adjustments for the disabled. Seems too expensive and too hard.

Lack of education, leads to lack of motivation. Perception that older Australians are stuck in their ways, they have "lived" their life, time to give the young ones a go. Not as technologically skilled as younger people. Less fit than younger people.

**Does employment discrimination have an impact on gaining and keeping employment for older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

**Are there any practices, attitudes or laws which discourage or prevent equal participation in employment of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us more**

There are many practices and attitudes that discourage and/or prevent employment for older Australians & Australians with disabilities. Starting with workplace cultures not being conducive to embracing disability or vulnerability, not having a supportive, safe workplace environment that allows people to be human and manage their challenges.

Few organisations have practices, systems and policies that walk the talk, where ceo's and executive board members are role modelling desired behaviours where age and disability is viewed as diversity and a part of the human journey. Policies, practices and systems are not EMBEDDED. When new leadership come in, if this isn't on their agenda or a personal issue it is often put in the too hard basket - even though OHS law states otherwise.

**What are the incentives and disincentives for older Australians/Australians with disability to work?**

**Incentives:**

Whose perspective is this questions aimed at?

in an overall response if older Australians and Australians with disability are able to work (most want to, we have the right to) work is important to wellness, it is critical for connectedness and a sense of belonging, structure, support, identity. Not all cultures are conducive to promoting, preventing and intervening early with respect to health and wellness, all to often being reactive, doing something when a crisis strikes.

Incentives: work helps health, which is linkedin to productivity. Individual is connected, able to earn an income, contribute to community and feel sense of self-worth, self-esteem, participating in life.

**Disincentives:**

Discrimination, bullying, disrespect, lack of compassion and understanding from others. Costs, lack of support, training at work.

### **Good practice**

**Are there examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability?**

Yes

**Please tell us of examples of good practice in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability in work that you are aware of.**

Cleanforce - a subsidiary of Wise employment services is an excellent example of employers recruiting and supporting people with severe mental illnesses to work and be nurtured to wellness. 80% of the workforce, has a severe mental illness (Schizophrenia, bipolar etc) in this industrial cleaning business (a successful commercial entity, that is a million dollar business after 14 years - In Preston, Melbourne). After several years, many are ready for the open market! One person left after 4 years or so, went onto university and graduated as a doctor. There are many such positive and inspiring stories of recovery through work and connectedness with supportive people).

### **Solutions**

**What action should be taken to address employment discrimination against older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Industry needs to be educated to address stigma that pervades around disability. We need to educate employers and provide them with the "how to employ and retain people with disabilities and health challenges in a supportive/supported framework). Nurture employers and employees with a disability on developing/creating cultures that are conducive to embracing vulnerability, to focus on what people can do, not on limitations, create a hopeful, optimistic environment that builds on a persons strengths.

**What should be done to enhance workforce participation of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

As above.

Employers need to have strategic processes that create a philosophy that is naturally inclusive of older Australians and those with a disability. From a whole of organisational cultural perspective to the individual, management, team.

Workplaces - small to medium are often forgotten in this space and yet many would be willing to help but also may be short of resources, funding and time. Community, government, stakeholders need to work collaboratively to enhance participation.

**What outcomes or recommendations would you like to see from this National Inquiry?**

Having the voices of older Australians and those with physical health issues, mental health issues, their carers at the centre of the outcomes as drivers, to help them/us become more self-determined, being given the life-skills, tools and support to be authors of our own lives.

To help employers to understand that fear can be replaced with confidence and not continue with ignorance. That reaching out can be rewarding on human, social and financial terms.

This is a long journey, there are no quick fixes of silver bullets. We need to work together, all the different voices and stakeholders to stop reinventing wheels and wasting money and scarce resources in an already demanding environment. Developing strategic ways forward on this issue that encourages, industry to work in collaboration with older Aussies and those disabled about what would work, what doesn't and how things can be changed. Including more research and evaluation from our academics to develop evidence based approaches.

Addressing the word " disability" this is such a stigmatising and negative word - for some a self-fulling prophecy. Mental illnesses/Physical illnesses can of course and are debilitating in circumstances, but...... we are still people..labels such as this is a most concerning issue. AT least having a discussion to address this specifically, an ideal would be to have another word that is more positive in it's place.

# Organisation or Government Agency Submission

### **About you**

**What is your role within your organisation?**

Owner

Manager

Human Resources Manager

Other

**If other, please tell us your role within your organisation**

Advocate, mental health and suicide prevention in the workplace educator, consultant

**What is your experience of providing work/services/advocacy for older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Many years (16) in the mental health sector at local, state and national levels. Inaugural chair of beyondblue's blueVoices (which oversaw the many subgroups of disorders, very much including older australians and those with disabilities ( one such group I had at the executive was "Maturity blues" - for depression and anxiety in our older Australian's. I have also been a committee/advisory group member on several academic research studies focussing on the elderly, determining level of mental illness, carer quality and level of mental health literacy. More recently am working with NDIS via Mental Health Australia, Deakin University, RANZCP - supported decision making.

**Do you have any case studies of the experience of older Australians/Australians with disability working or looking for work?**

yes - many, positive and negative... as per the Cleanforce example. We also have a university ( The ANU, National Mental Health Institute for Research) = all academics from the executive officer (a professor) have a mental illness or cared for someone with a mental illness. They have developed fabulous evidence based eHealth interventions: mood gym, ecouch.

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), Disability Australia....

Wild at heart is another example that is a tiny community musical arts network, with a few employees. Many have a lived experience of a disability, the people that this network works with are from these groups. There are others that I could add and would be happy to provide in more detail if required.

**What are the impacts of employment discrimination on older Australians/Australians with disability working or looking for work?**

Impact health and wellness, increasing levels of suicide and suicide risk. Depression and other mental illnesses can be triggered by employment discrimination as this starts in our young. If employers discriminate, futures are at stake,connectedness, purpose, social inclusion, income, loss of relationships, loss of identity and self-worth. Much research is available to demonstrate that this is a fundamental social health determinant that has enormous impact on people - especially those most marginalised.

### **Barriers**

**Do you think older Australians/Australians with disability face barriers when they work or are in a job?**

Yes

**Please tell us more**

Attitudes within the workplace, lack of empathy, understanding, fear, not knowing what to say or do, or not saying or doing. Bullying is a major risk factor to suicidal behaviours and mental illnesses. Manager's lack knowledge or support to make appropriate workplace accommodations and adjustments for employees discussed here. Policies, practices, systems etc don't embrace or embed more compassionate and understanding ways of working with people.

**Is employment discrimination a barrier (please tick all that are relevant):**

While working in a job

While looking for work

While dealing with recruitment companies

**Please tell us more**

As above... lack of understanding, compassion, fear that this is too hard and difficult to do, to implement, to support. Will take too long, be too much of a burden, be expensive This set of views starts with the recruitment consultant/company in many instances ( i have worked in this role in a previous role) - the challenge is they have to "place" a person in a seat to receive payment/remuneration. Quality of fit isn't looked at - even if the person with the disability has the better fit of skills and expertise...It is a numbers/quantity kpi that drives these organisations.

**What impact does employment discrimination have on older Australians/Australians with disability gaining and keeping employment?**

The negatives have been briefly outlined above.

Taken further - the individual who is receiving the discriminatory behaviour and whose health is impacted commences a ripple effect, others in the person's radar, at work, at home, community is impacted. Especially if they become mentally unwell, at risk of suicide....the cascading downward spiral of health cumulates and ends up having enormous impacts on human, social and economic levels

**Are there any practices, attitudes or laws which discourage or prevent equal participation in employment of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

**Please tell us more**

Recruitment processes ( attitudes of consultants and their relationship with their client - the employer) not everything is documented, there are practices that can screen out people. Attitudes/stigma/fear plays into this first step and continues....

**What are the incentives and disincentives in employing older Australians/Australians with disability?**

**Incentives**

As above

**Disincentives**

As above

### **Good practice**

**Are there examples of good practice in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability in work?**

Yes

**Please let us know about practices you are aware of.**

As above

### **Solutions**

**What action should be taken to address employment discrimination against older Australians/Australians with disability?**

As above

**What should be done to enhance workforce participation of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

As above

**What outcomes or recommendations would you like to see from this National Inquiry?**

As stated previously