



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADJOURNMENT

Employment: People with Disabilities

SPEECH

Tuesday, 20 August 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Cox, David, MP

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Mr COX (Kingston) (10.39 pm)—Tonight I would like to address an issue that reflects on the character of Australian society—how we treat our disabled citizens. Lincoln once said:

You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.

This is apt in light of the Howard government's decision to cut people off the disability support pension while simultaneously cutting funding to employment services for the disabled under the Job Network. The implications of the combined effect of these two policies have not been considered by ministers Vanstone or Brough. It is a double whammy for the disabled. By shirking its responsibilities, the Howard government is consigning thousands of disabled job seekers to a life half lived. Labor believes that government has a responsibility to assist those citizens who face physical or intellectual barriers to employment.

Under its new Job Network contract, the Howard government is cutting funding to those providers who supply specialist employment services, and this includes services to the disabled. In a joint submission sent to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the specialist providers estimated that their funding under the new arrangements would be cut by between 35 and 60 per cent. On a case by case basis, the implications are astonishing. According to one provider, where a specialist provider places a 'B' level client—that is, a person who is classified as the most disadvantaged—and that person retains employment, then under the current system the provider would receive approximately \$9,450 in funding. Under the new contract, the provider would receive approximately \$4,885. With only \$4,885 available, the provider cannot afford to provide anything like the quality of service that is possible under the existing contract.

The government is taking a 'one size fits all' approach to job seekers facing the most barriers to employment. Under the new contract, specialist providers will be required to accept a fixed fee from the government for their services. Previously, specialist providers could put in bids to reflect increased costs. The new fees, even with supplements for particular clientele, are still significantly less than the current arrangements. Another submission made to the government in relation to assistance to disabled clients states:

Early investment in ... employment versus possible lifelong unemployment is [a] very good financial investment not even considering the personal and social benefits.

The government needs to take responsibility for providing the disabled with the means required to get a job; otherwise, those with disabilities are left abandoned.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend those specialist providers around Australia who dedicate themselves to helping people with disabilities find jobs. Australia is indebted to these people. The quality of the services provided by specialist providers is evidenced by the high ratings received by specialist providers under the Job Network's star ratings system. Five-star ratings were awarded to 25 organisations that provided intensive assistance across Australia. Of those 25 organisations, 10 were specialist providers.

By providing the appropriate level of funding to specialist Job Network providers, we as a society are enabling those with disabilities to actively participate. Cutting off people with disabilities from employment services says something disturbing about the character of our society. I call on Minister Brough to increase funding for specialist services under the third employment services contract.