

ACN 114 027 986
PO Box 190, Surry Hills, NSW 2010

28 March 2023

Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services

To the Select Committee,

GetUp welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services.

As an independent movement of everyday people who care about climate justice, economic fairness, First Nations justice, and media and democracy, we're conscious of Australia's failing employment services system, and the opportunity the Committee has before it to steer the path forward.

GetUp has run campaigns seeking to reform Australia's cruel welfare system for more than a decade. Our members – many of whom are themselves on income support – have taken hundreds of thousands of actions to seek justice for people lumped with Robodebts, raise the appallingly low rates of income support, and overhaul employment services.

In 2020, 430 GetUp members shared their experience of JobActive – we have included select relevant responses on page 4 of this submission. This month, 25,434 GetUp members signed a [petition](#) calling for a supportive, public, and voluntary employment service. We are also co-authoring a report examining the problems and solutions in employment services with the Antipoverty Centre and 21 unemployed people, who were consulted via workshops held across the country. We are happy to provide the findings of that report by supplementary submission if it is of use to the Committee.

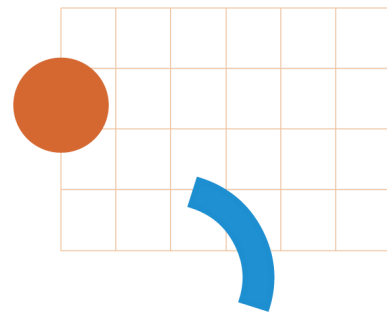
If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Chido Dunn

Campaign Director





Submission

Overview

The fundamental failings of Australia’s privatised employment services system are well-established. Billions of dollars of public money are being syphoned into a scheme that is not only failing to support people into work, but is undoubtedly causing them harm through time-draining busywork, constant threats of payment suspension, and notorious programs like Work for the Dole.¹

The current privatised model incentivises employment services providers – many large for-profit corporations – to focus their programs primarily on revenue generation. This comes at the cost of participants, who are forced into often futile, and sometimes harmful, job search activities. Hundreds of stories submitted by GetUp members subject to JobActive recount distress caused by employment services.² Surveys of people in employment services repeatedly reveal high levels of dissatisfaction, while academic research has found that people subject to mutual obligations take longer to find work.³

A poor quality service is made worse by a strict regime of penalties and payment suspensions. The Targeted Compliance Framework effectively forces people trying to survive poverty to spend precious time participating in a failing program, while creating a captive market for employment service providers, further reducing accountability to participants.⁴

In light of the above, the \$7 billion committed in funding to private employment services providers⁵ is a colossal waste of public money. By almost all accounts, the scheme is causing more harm to people on income support and the wider community.

Recommendations

Given the fundamental problems in employment services, any solution must be bold, transformative, and created in genuine consultation with people locked out of work.

¹ Obligation Without Opportunity, *Anglicare Australia*, August 2022.

² Not safe for unemployed workers – stories, *GetUp*, 2020.

³ Voices 2: results of a survey of people who use JobActive, ACOSS, 2022; New finding: jobseekers subject to obligations take longer to find work, *The Conversation*, 15 June 2021.

⁴ JobActive: the private investment firms profiting from Australia’s unemployed, *Getup and Michael West Media*, 28 October 2021.

⁵ Tony Burke flags parliamentary inquiry to consider overhaul of Workforce Australia jobs program, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2022.



We must move away from a model that compounds poverty and punishment to one that genuinely helps, and considers the individual circumstances, strengths and aspirations of each person.

With this in mind, GetUp recommends the following:

- 1. End compulsory “mutual” obligations activities.** Any re-imagining of employment services must end compulsory participation, which has been proven beyond doubt to be a failed strategy.⁶ Instead, focus should be placed on designing a high-quality service that truly meets the needs of people seeking work, encouraging participation rather than forcing compliance. We also reject suggestions to offer top-up payments for participation – for people living in deep poverty this constitutes coercion.
- 2. Re-nationalisation of employment services.** A publicly-owned model would eliminate corrosive profiteering and re-focus employment services on its stated purpose: to support people out of work into appropriate and meaningful work. We don’t have to imagine it: a successful blueprint exists in the Commonwealth Employment Services (CES), which helped reduce unemployment to record lows.⁷ A new public service must not replicate the CES but build upon it, working in genuine consultation with people experiencing unemployment.
- 3. Accessible, integrated support.** Unemployed people face multiple and overlapping barriers to their wellbeing and participation in the workforce. Employment services should be integrated into an ecosystem of supports, including health, legal, education, housing, and union support. This integration would address the significant mental and time burden on people seeking support from multiple disconnected services.
- 4. Income supports above the Henderson Poverty Line.** Not being able to put food on the table, have a secure place to call home, and afford healthcare are barriers to work. Any plan to address unemployment in Australia must include a liveable safety net that allows people the breathing space to build skills or search for jobs.

Benefits to the public

A voluntary public employment service would provide multiple benefits to the wider community, including:

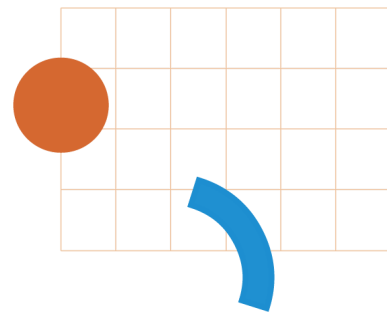
- **Addressing long-term unemployment:** A high-quality and effective employment service is an important part in addressing long-term unemployment, which remains stubborn despite declining overall unemployment.⁸ A 2023 Anglicare report found that one in ten people seeking work don’t have recent experience or qualifications, face other barriers to work, and spend about 5 years looking for work.⁹ Alongside a plan for public

⁶ Obligation Without Opportunity, *Anglicare Australia*, August 2022.

⁷ What was the Commonwealth Employment Service? Why are people calling for it to return?, *ABC News*, 31 August 2022.

⁸ Jobs Availability Snapshot, *Anglicare Australia*, January 2023.

⁹ Creating Jobs, Creating Opportunity, *Anglicare Australia*, January 2023.



job creation, a public employment service could connect people with barriers to work with appropriate support, training, and jobs.

- **Public money for public good:** Right now, the public is footing a \$7 billion dollar bill¹⁰ for a system that fails people, and primarily benefits private providers – many of whom are profitable corporations. An effective employment service would be a responsible investment of public money that returns value to the community, rather than funnelling it into corporate profits.
- **Jobs for the future:** A public employment service would be far better placed to connect people seeking work to priority workforce areas for the community. By coordinating with other federal agencies, this service can identify and assist areas and sectors with greater workforce needs. This will be vital as we face multiple new challenges.

In addition to these broad principles, we wholeheartedly endorse the recommendations made by the Antipoverty Centre – a collective of activists, advocates and researchers with direct, contemporary experience of poverty and unemployment.

Getup member testimonials

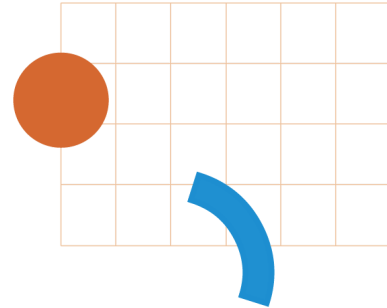
These case studies were submitted to GetUp anonymously in 2020, and published with permission [online](#). GetUp is in the process of compiling contemporary case studies in collaboration with the Antipoverty Centre, and is happy to provide them to the Committee at a later date.

Content warning: some of these stories mention suicide and self-harm.

“Had payments cancelled due to their errors, multiple appointments were made I showed up each time only to find no one there (Pre Covid). Called the staff member, no answer. It took multiple phone calls and explaining to get back on track. I’m studying trying to improve my job prospects and I’ve been told it’s not enough, 40 hrs per FN is required, website says 30 hrs and I’m doing a min of 30 hrs a FN. Reporting makes me feel like a criminal, like I’ve done something wrong. I live in fear that at any moment we can be cut off because of error or not meeting their obligations.”

“I became legally blind a few years ago and lost my job, my independence, my home, my driver’s licence, my sense of self. I’ve had multiple surgeries to restore my vision. Before this I had full time work and my highest level of qualification is a PhD from an Australian university. Because I’m undergoing treatment with the possibility of improved vision I was put on Newstart and told to apply for work instead of NDIS. My disability employment provider wants me in casual and unstable work and makes it difficult for me to attend appointments by changing details. They have told me I need to change my view of what I’m capable of, they have no understanding of my disability nor knowledge of my abilities. I’m well educated and I know

¹⁰ Tony Burke flags parliamentary inquiry to consider overhaul of Workforce Australia jobs program, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2022.

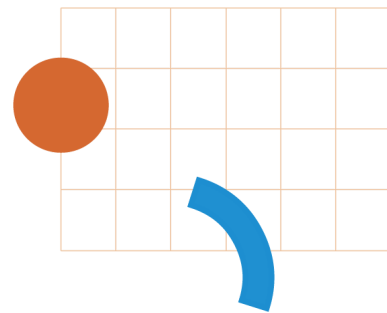


they're abusing their position to gain from my disadvantage but this is the way the Government's system functions and I'm just another number to them. They perpetuate an image of unemployed people as uneducated, lazy, and reluctant to work. Employment gives you purpose, liberation, and identity. These are fundamental human needs."

"I am a retired school Principal. I set up a not for profit called Eagle Arts Youth Support to help school refusers to get paid or volunteer work once they had left school. The 5 young people all tell horror stories of Employment services. Mostly they make no effort at all to help young people get work. The young are left dangling for months till some one takes their plight seriously. Interviews seem to be phone interviews, not in person. Then the Employment service cancels these interviews at a moment's notice. Clients sit for hours on the phone to re connect."

"Centrelink referred me to ██████████ in 2020. My first appointment was to be in person in North Ryde. To help with my anxiety as I have a visual impairment I sometimes visit unfamiliar locations, so the week before I went to the address given. To my surprise their office didn't exist at that location. As payments are suspended if you fail to attend appointments I was very concerned. I called the office phone number on their website & it went to a different company. I called the central phone number & was told I would get a call back. I got an email saying "due to call numbers we are unable to return your call". I called Centrelink to ask why I was being told to attend an appointment at a location that didn't exist & they were "baffled". Centrelink advised that ██████████ would call me back to clarify. When they did, they were annoyed with me, did not apologise, canceled my appointment and rescheduled it for 2021. They said my new appointment would be in North Ryde & the address would be provided later. In January 2021 I was given an appointment at the same false location. On the day of my appointment ██████████ called me & said they were having 'technical difficulties' at that location and asked me to go to another office 10km further away. When I finally had my appointment I was 3 minutes early & told to come back later. They didn't understand my disability & laughed at me when I told them my credentials. I felt it was all an attempt to suspend my welfare payments."

"The system broke me honestly, I'm just lucky to have a supportive family which is a luxury that many don't have. I left school after grade 10 due to my worsening anxiety this led to counseling which I had to rely on my parents to pay for as I was only getting \$130 a fortnight on youth allowance ultimately the counseling didn't help since everyone of my councilors kept moving away and I eventually gave up, I was forced into work for the dole where one of the regular customers would follow me after I finished working that day (thankfully mum worked close so he never found out where I lived) an older man wanted me to volunteer at a Red Cross which he ran I was lucky to escape that because he started making creepy advances and at one point put his hand really high up on my leg it was unnerving. I've done numerous job readiness courses all as stupid and as pointless as the last I was finally able to do a graphic design course which is something I'm interested in it was a certificate IV and so now I'm barred from doing anymore courses unless they're lower level so no pursuing diploma for now even if I could afford to. Recently I got employment through a path internship program and when the owner found out my age and that she'd have to pay me more than originally thought she let



me go two weeks after the path ended. Currently my mental state is the worst it's been and I want to find employment but I'm not sure how much longer I can take this system."

'[REDACTED] had no Work for the Dole places available, so they sent me to a warehouse ~2h away in spite of my stated medical problems. Had to crawl home from the station. Couldn't stand on my own for 3 days!'

"Since the start of 2020 I've received texts every few weeks that say 'This is a reminder of your appointment on such and such a date'. Its become a bit of a joke to me because almost every time, we haven't actually made that appointment. What isn't a joke, is that then I've gone to the office where more than once, they've told me my appointment time has been rescheduled, so its been a wasted trip, or, I've been ready for their call, and then no call has come through. Then this text arrives, 'You seem to have missed a requirement, call this 1300 number to have your payment restored' This has happened repeatedly since the start of 2020. I've been through my own very traumatic lockdown experience but these people do not care. They don't have the capacity to care."

"Forced into a job that left me traumatised and feeling suicidal based on past experiences which was a role I specified was just about the only type of work I wouldn't accept. Had jobs identified and suggested which I have been happy to apply for, been nominated by [REDACTED], along with God only knows how many others only to get no response, no phone call, no nothing. It gives you a bit of hope, lifts your spirits, only to be constantly let down. Now expected to find a way to the office for monthly mutual obligations meetings when I can't afford petrol, can't afford to put money on myki, can barely afford to survive. They over promise and seriously under deliver, and it's literally heartbreaking and devastating."

"Years ago, the job agency found a great "opportunity" for me, I had to drive 70KM each way, for two weeks, as trial for a new job. at the end they told me that they didn't need my help anymore, they just needed some designs that I did for them in that time. I lost a couple of hundred dollars in the end. It was a great experience in never trusting the system."

"My employment services provider was called [REDACTED], and was connected to the [REDACTED]. I worked two days a week and received a partial payment from Centrelink. Just before Christmas one year I worked for two weeks, full time, to cover my co-worker's holiday. Immediately after that my Centrelink payment was stopped and I was unable to apply for it again. I assume [REDACTED] received a payment for finding a job for me! In my three years with [REDACTED], they never found me a job, an interview, or a training course. I expected more from a religious charity with tax free status."

"For nine years from 2003 I worked as an employment consultant' in a 'job network' agency. During that time the industry became more and more geared to the need to make profits rather the needs of the unemployed. I believe that for the industry to return to a people focussed service, private business must be excluded."