



Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA)

Update Report September 2005

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) is the peak organisation for women with all types of disabilities in Australia. It is a not-for-profit organisation constituted and driven by women with disabilities. It is the only organisation of its kind in Australia and one of only a very small number internationally. WWDA is inclusive and does not discriminate against any disability. WWDA is unique, in that it operates as a national disability organisation; a national women's organisation; and a national human rights organisation (more information about WWDA can be found at the organisation's extensive website: www.wwda.org.au). Please find below a brief Update Report from WWDA for the month of September 2005. If you have any questions, or would like more information on anything in this report, please email Angela or Carolyn at: wwda@wwda.org.au.

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WWDA applauds government initiatives which will assist women with disabilities to participate in the workforce in greater numbers, and in meaningful, appropriately remunerated positions. As signalled in bulletins in the past several months, we have considerable concerns that the current Welfare-to-Work 'reforms' will not bring about such an outcome. Much of WWDA's work over the past month has been concentrated on briefing politicians and the public about the inequities which are apparent in these reforms.

1. NATSEM Research on Workers with Disabilities Released

The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW), with the endorsement of more than 60 women's organisations, engaged the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to undertake modelling to look at the "Distributional Impact of the Welfare-to-Work Reforms on Australian with Disabilities". The resultant report was launched at a Press Conference at Australian Parliament House on 13 September.

The outcomes reported make sobering reading. People with disabilities who apply for the Disability Support Pension (DSP) on, or after 1 July 2006, and who are assessed as having the potential to work for 15+ hours per week in the general workforce, will be placed on Newstart Allowance (NSA). Those on NSA will face a

raft of negative impacts, amongst which are:- more stringent entry-level income tests (perhaps necessitating drawing down their assets until they reach the eligibility threshold); a base level income support which is \$46 (\$20%) per week lower than their DSP counterparts; loss of their disability support allowances at much lower levels of income earned, and lowered tax free thresholds.

The more alarming parts of the research revealed that the government will claw back a large part of their earnings in tax, so that disposable incomes of people with disabilities will be negatively impacted. Single adults with disabilities will lose up to \$122 a week in 2006-07, compared to those on the DSP. When their earnings are between \$50 and \$300 per week, the effective marginal tax rates they will pay will range from 65 % to 75%.

Of greater concern is the fact that people with disabilities are as having the **potential** to work irrespective of the actual **availability** of suitable work. Many people with disabilities face considerable practical restrictions which limit job choices. Women with disabilities face the further restriction of gender discrimination.

If you would like an e-copy of the report, send your request to sudata@optusnet.com.au.

2. Thanks to supporter of NATSEM Research

Our appeal for funding support to enable NATSEM to undertake the modelling was heeded by a number of organisations and individuals. WWDA is grateful for their understanding of the importance of employment for women with disabilities from both the individual and national economic viewpoints, and that they backed up this understanding with donations. We sincerely thank the **Reichstein Foundation, Perpetual** (Canberra Branch), **Salwood Asia Pacific**, and **Didactic Enterprises**, as well as a number of individuals.

3. Impact of NATSEM Research

NATSEM's reputation and standing meant that the report was heeded by politicians and the media. Coverage of the findings was reported in a range of newspapers, and on radio and television. In addition Government backbenchers were given an in-depth briefing by NATSEM director, Professor Ann Harding, NFAW spokesperson, Marie Coleman, and WWDA spokesperson, Sue Salhouse on 14 September. The matter was raised in Parliament with questions asked by a number of opposition and cross-bench politicians.

Also on September 14, delegates representing the three women's secretariats (which convened the original forum at which it was decided to engage NATSEM) met with the Hon. Kevin Andrews (Minister for Workplace Relations) and the Hon. Kay Paterson (Minister for Family and Community Services). WomenSpeak Secretariat was represented by WWDA President, Annie Parkinson, and Rebecca Vassarotti, with Sue Conde and Ros Kinder from the Australian Women's Coalition, and Erin Wood and Kerry Ann Dear from Security4Women). The meeting was very positive with a useful exchange of information between the delegation and the Minister. The delegation was able to raise a range of issues in a constructive and positive manner.

Discussions with backbenchers and opposition members continue, as do negotiations with key ministers. Minister for Workplace Relations has already signalled that there will be some changes to the NSA requirements for some categories of single parents. As yet similar concessions for people with disabilities have not been announced. So far, the announced adjustments seem to be made in a piecemeal fashion, and details of their administration are vague. The consortium of women's organisations believes that a **Senate Review is needed**. A press release calling for such a review is at Item 12 in this Bulletin.

Legislation on both the Welfare-to-Work and Industrial Relations 'reforms' is expected to be tabled in mid-October. The women's secretariats are planning a forum at this time, so that ongoing strategies to get the best outcomes for disadvantaged groups can be discussed further.

4. Increase the impact by adding your voice

It is important that all politicians know the level of concern about the proposed 'reforms'. Please write to your local politicians (go to <http://www.aph.gov.au> and follow the links to your electorate); to the Hon. Kevin Andrews, Minister for Workplace Relations (Kevin.Andrews.MP@aph.gov.au) and to the Hon Peter Dutton (minister for Workforce Participation (Peter.Dutton.MP@aph.gov.au)).

The politicians need to know that:

- people with disabilities face many restrictions as to job choice, and that women with disabilities face gender discrimination as well;
- the Mutual Obligation requirements for the NSA will need adjustments for those for whom suitable jobs just do not exist;
- the compliance regulations and NSA withdrawal need to be relaxed where people are unable to fulfill their mutual obligation;
- the disability supports (Pension Card, Health Care Card) need to be continued at least to a comparable level of total income as for those on the DSP (currently earnings of \$706 per week).

5. ACOSS National Advocacy Day at Parliament House

The Advocacy Day on the Welfare-to-Work 'reforms' held at parliament House on 15 September was very successful. WWDA extends our thanks and congratulations to ACOSS (and ADFO). The strategic planning had been meticulous. A large number of organizations' delegates participated. WWDA was represented by Sue Salthouse and Christina Ryan (also representing ACTCOSS). Participants were organized into groups according to their State/Territory representation. Each group had a tight timetable of appointments with individual politicians from their relevant State/Territory, so that more than 50 politicians had extensive briefings on the concerns of disadvantaged groups about the proposed Welfare-to-Work and Industrial Relations 'reforms'.

6. Telecommunications Lobbying

The Telecommunications Disability Communications Representation (TEDICORE) Policy Advisor, Gunela Astbrink, has been leading Telecommunications representatives of the peak Disability Bodies in presenting our concerns about the ramifications which the full privatization of Telstra may have on provision of services for people with disabilities. Ms Astbrink and Sue Salthouse gave a number of politicians briefings on these concerns.

Chief amongst these concerns is the need to preserve and extend the Universal Service Obligations to ensure equity of access to the Standard Telephone Service for people with disabilities; to preserve additional services which Telstra currently provides (such as the Disability Enquiry Hotline, the Disability Assistance Helpline, Centre for Accessibility (which undertakes a raft of activities/research on Telstra internal services), and to ensure the continuation/improvement of a Disability Equipment Program.

The 2 days of lobbying took place at the time when the 5 relevant pieces of legislation were being debated in both Houses. Ongoing dialogue is being conducted with Ms Astbrink.

The matters remain urgent and current, even though the legislation enabling the Transition to Full Private Ownership has now been passed.

The TEDICORE document *Best Practice in Telecommunications for People with a Disability in Australia*. Is available at http://www.tedicore.org.au/publications_best_practice.html; and the TEDICORE Position Paper *People with a Disability and Telecommunications – Moving forwards after the possible sale of Telstra*, can be obtained from TEDICORE, Ph & Fax: (07) 3876 0880, Email: g.astbrink@gsa.com.au.

7. Senate Inquiry into Telstra sale legislation

Interested parties were given only three days' notice to submit to an inquiry of the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee into the Telstra (Transition to Full Private Ownership) Bill 2005 and related bills. WWDA made a submission to this Inquiry. A copy is available on application to sudata@optusnet.com.au. The WWDA submission reiterated comments made in its 2003 identically titled Submission to the same Committee; and reiterated the substance of the two TEDICORE papers mentioned in Paragraph 6.

8. Telstra Disability Forum Report

The second 2005 meeting of the Telstra Disability Forum was held on 12 September 2005. Margaret Cooper is the WWDA Telecommunications Group at that Forum. Amongst issues discussed were:

- the interim report of consultants looking at the need for clarity of wording in contracts, especially to minimize disadvantage to people with judgment related disabilities
- the WWDA proposal to extend the current Budget Pay package offered by Telstra, to include Payment Cards accepted at Post Offices, similar to cards offered in some jurisdictions for regular installment payments of the cost of household utilities, such as water/sewerage;
- the perennial challenges of access to payphones. 80% of Telstra's public payphones now have SMS capacity. 243 TTY Payphones are installed nationally. Their location can be found on <http://envinsaonline.mapinfo.com.au.ppol>
- the Big Button phones now available through the Disability Equipment Program, and the proposal to develop a Big Button mobile phone currently under consideration.

9. TEDICORE Report

Blind Citizens Australia has auspiced the TEDICORE project for the last several years. After the September meeting, TEDICORE will be auspiced by the Australian Federation of Disability organisations. Louise Bannister is the WWDA Telecommunications Group representative on TEDICORE. Matters discussed were:

- a Training and mentoring project to raise the standard of contribution of consumer representatives to advisory groups in telecommunications;
- an Optus/University of Newcastle project investigating the usability of mobile text telephony equipment;
- payphones
- the ACIF CECRP/WC19 Accessibility Information Working Committee, which has had a chequered, frustrating, prolonged life. The process has been costly in terms of lost work time for consumer representatives. Negotiations with companies have been difficult. Compromises have been necessary to enable progress to be made;
- lobbying of politicians, and ongoing dialogue
- the launch of the Vodaphone 'Simply Vodaphone' ,mobile designed to serve the requirements of older users;
- progress reports from meetings of a range of commercial and consumer telecommunications organizations.

10. Review of Commonwealth Disability Strategy (CDS)

The Commonwealth Disability Strategy (CDS) was introduced in 1994 to provide Australian Government Departments and agencies with a planning framework to ensure access to all federal programs, services and functions for people with a disability. The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) recently appointed a Consultancy firm (Erebus International) to undertake a review of the CDS. WWDA prepared a submission to this Review.

If anyone would like a copy of the Submission emailed to them, please contact the WWDA Office via email on: wwda@wwda.org.au

A Summary of the Recommendations in WWDA's submission include the following:

1. WWDA favours a strengthening of the CDS to introduce targeted programs to encourage the employment of women with disabilities.
2. Strengthen the CDS so that strategies and incentives which address the employment inequities which exist for all people with disabilities can be supported. Targetted supports are needed to address the exacerbated inequities which exist for women with disabilities. Increased workforce participation rates at higher levels of income will enable greater whole-of-life equity for people with disabilities.
3. Increase levels of support for people with disabilities so that they can participate in mainstream programs, services and facilities.
4. Support disability organisations to build capacity so that they can increase levels of systemic advocacy and participate more fully in decision making processes which affect their lives.
5. Maintain/increase programs which raise awareness of the information access needs of people with disabilities.
6. Set up a feedback mechanism so that information about agency success in the provision of access to programs, facilities and services, including complaints incidence and resolution rates are publicly available.
7. Strategies to address these barriers (which recognise their disproportionate impact on women with disabilities), need to be put in place and/or strengthened.
8. Put strategies in place to address: the lack of portability of disability support programmes; the linking of disability supports to income supports; the double discrimination which affects women with disabilities; research into impediments to uptake of Vocation and Educational Training programmes; and reinstatement of the collection of disaggregated data in all areas affecting people with disabilities accompanied by appropriate remedial programmes to address disparities revealed.
9. Strengthen the resourcing of the Disability Rights Section of HREOC.

11. Case Studies on Employment Experiences

Following a request on [wwda-discuss](#) for our list subscribers to relate their Job Search and Employment Experiences, we were inundated with replies. They continue to 'roll in'. Thanks to everyone who responded. At present there is no need for further responses. The large number of replies and the similarities of difficulties experienced. indicate that this will be a challenging part of the Welfare-to-Work 'reforms'. Major problems cited centred on the lack of understanding shown by employment service staff, by employers and by colleagues. (Disability) Open Employment Services have expressed their concerns about finding placements for their current caseloads, let alone for the increased numbers expected after 1 July 2006. Although there will be increased incentives for Job Network and DOES' personnel to place people with disabilities in jobs, and some additional money for training programs – this may all be misdirected action if attitudinal problems are not able to be addressed.

The dossier of case studies was forwarded to Erebus International to give the consultants an understanding of the experiences of female job seekers with disabilities. They have indicated that the information will be of use to them in the review process.

12. Media Release 28 September – Call for Senate Review of Welfare-to-Work

**NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN WOMEN - MEDIA STATEMENT
WELFARE TO WORK- CHANGES ADD CONFUSION- NEED FOR REVIEW
What Women Want Consortium calls for Comprehensive Senate Review.**

“The confusing range of temporary opt-outs to his Welfare to Work policy announced on 21 September by Employment Minister Andrews will add to administrative complexity, and develop inequitable comparisons” spokeswoman for the consortium of women’s organisations Marie Coleman said today.

“The consortium supports the policy objective of encouraging sole parents and people with disability who have the capacity to do so to move from welfare to work. Our concern has always been with the strategies proposed.

“Having met with Ministers and officials and examined the recent changes the consortium of sixty plus national women’s organisations considers that the public interest will be served, and the genuine concerns of informed people best resolved, through a comprehensive review of the policy in the Senate.

“The legislation is likely to come to the Parliament in the second week of October. The legislation is likely to be bare-bones only, with the administrative details later laid out in guidelines and Regulations, which the Parliament can’t examine.

“There are unresolved issues surrounding the situation in rural communities and the availability of child care. There is lack of clarity about Newstart Allowance accepting part-time study to enhance employability as meeting activity requirements, there are inequities about loss of access to pensioner concession cards. A particular concern is the need for improvements to the Austudy Payment to allow sole parents and people with disabilities to study part-time. The list goes on”, Mrs Coleman said.

The consortium urges the Government to set up a Senate Committee to review the Welfare to Work policies before the legislation is passed so that the problems can be ironed out in advance or implementation.

“The What Women Want consortium considers that the public interest will be served, and the genuine concerns of informed people best resolved, through a comprehensive review of the policy in the Senate.”

Sue Salthouse, speaking on behalf of Women with Disabilities Australia, said: “WWDA is alarmed at the lack of detail in the deceptively compromising statements coming from the Minister on 21 September. The Minister has acknowledged that some groups, such as the parents of children with disabilities, will need ‘adjustments’ to their Mutual Obligation requirements. But there has been a frightening silence about adjustments needed for women with disabilities who face even greater restrictions on their workplace choices. Tinkering at the edges of the policy will only exacerbate the inequalities already inherent in it. The only way forward is for it to undergo a concerted re-examination at the level of a Senate review.”

The What Women Want consortium will hold a Canberra workshop in early November to examine the Welfare to Work legislation and the Industrial relations legislation, so the sixty plus national women’s organisations and their members can be properly informed.

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