

Submission to the Productivity Commission regarding mental health

My name is Ewen Kloas, I am 57yo, live on Gold Coast Qld, currently an unemployed Australian citizen.

I am writing this submission to express my concerns with the impact of Job Agencies on my mental health.

I have been registered with job agencies as a compulsory compliance by Centrelink for 6 years now. I have a partial capacity to work, having osteoarthritis in both knees, other barriers are my age, 57, and not much work experience outside the building industry.

I have given up looking for work, after so many years of knock backs it takes its toll on me and I feel as though I have been thrown on the scrap heap. So, I live a life of existence on Newstart and conservation of what savings I have to keep myself from becoming homeless. Excessive rents, cost of living and a pitiful Newstart allowance makes for a high anxiety existence.

This is where the punitive Social Security system plays its role in exacerbating mental health. I am ok when left to my own devices but when I am forced into a program of compliance where I am not serviced and wastes my time at the expense of the tax payer, I get highly stressed and anxious, continuously, day to day. I am talking from my personal experience of long term unemployment.

Some examples:

Fortnightly appointments with “job agencies” [sic]

In 6 years being registered with many different agencies, I have not been sent to one, not one job interview from an agency. Every fortnight, by compliance with the threat of Newstart allowance suspension/cancellation if I miss it, I must attend these useless appointments for a 3-10 minute talk to be sent on my way with the only outcome the date and time for my next appointment. In the long term this is psychological torture and it affects me greatly where I once had a panic attack in the office and walked out halfway through the appointment and got a suspension. I felt useless and just a unit for the agency to make money off and felt degraded and dehumanised by the constant nothingness in a system that does nothing to help me gain employment. I went home and couldn't get out of bed for days and couldn't answer the constant calls from my agency via sms to reconnect. It took its toll on me.

Job agencies [sic] not being “job agencies”:

I have too many examples to put in here but this one for me was the final straw on constant let downs.

Agencies constantly build up my hopes and say they will assist me to find a job, their mantra is “we will help you but you must do your bit as well”. All well and said but they are full of false promises. After much consultation with my new agent, we came to the conclusion that a drivers job was best suited for me, so I did my research to find there is bus driving work in the local area. I asked for assistance through funding available to gain a MR license and the agent even found a driving school for me to attend. My funding was rejected by the manager, \$900. So that prospect was coldly dropped and there is now a relationship breakdown and my appointments now are solely tick and flick with little conversation at all.

Employment funding discrimination against DES (Disability Employment Services) participants compared to jobactive:

DES and jobactive funding come under two different jurisdictions. The former being more stringent than the latter. You would think that people with disability would have more funding options to help them into work but this is not the case.

With jobactive, funding can be given to a participant where it will be used to help them into any work, to get them job ready, whereas DES participants actually have to have a job to go to before they get funding.

I see this as discriminatory against people with a disability, especially when a large percentage of people are forced onto Newstart because the bar is set so high they can't get on the disability pension. They might only have a minor disability and put into DES for a poorer service.

Also, it is up to the discretion of the job agency when and who they provide funding to, so this is open to corruption and discrimination as well. Sometimes the agency fears they may not get reimbursed for funding so they don't access it. Or, they might just not like you.

Compliance and the psychological impacts of the threat of a penalty.

I have been penalised a few times with suspensions and only on one of these occasions was it my own doing and that was the case I mentioned above which I was not penalised because I had a reasonable excuse. When the sms comes at 4.55pm that your payments have been suspended, not knowing what for, it makes for high anxiety, especially when you know you've done nothing wrong. 99% of my suspensions have been an error on my agencies behalf. So, we live our lives daily with the unknown threat of non compliance.

Privatisation of the unemployment industry:

I was first on unemployment benefits in 1981, the old Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) was my number one place to gain employment all my working life when I worked the building industry, they did their job, they lined up job interviews for me and where so helpful it was a place to hang out to see the jobs come on the board and network with others. CES was government run! CES did not run for profit! Privatised job agencies are a sham compared to CES, privatised agencies are inhospitable places when you are forced there by compliance, placed in the too hard basket, and treated like a unit, they are to be avoided at all costs. Their main concern is for their own existence and get away with doing as little as possible. I can only access the one office I am registered with and must attend the same office fortnightly, whereas the old CES I could access any office anywhere in the country with NO COMPLIANCE! NO FEAR! This measure has cost unemployed people their freedom of movement, I can only go out of my living zone for 2 weeks at a time because if I miss an appointment I get penalised. So much for travelling to look for work, which I often did to seek work afar.

I could go on and on.

Bring back the government run CES, cut the compliance regime, and privatisation has only hurt the unemployed. Also, raise Newstart to the Henderson poverty line at least and measure the annual increases in line with wages.

To finish with, Australia used to be a compassionate country, we looked after each other with an abundance of work opportunities and the old CES actually got me a lot of work. Australia has lost its soul. Economics and the bottom line is king at the expense social justice. I am leaving Australia, the country I am no longer proud of. I can now access my superannuation and have enough money to live overseas in a more affordable country until retirement. The psychological impacts of compliance, the stigma of being unemployed and being locked into a sham of an unemployment industry has had its toll on me, I can live a life overseas, not struggle for existence in Australia. There, I can say I am living on my hard earned superannuation and not “bludging” on the dole. I just wanted a hand into a job after exiting the building industry which caused my osteoarthritis.

Regards,

Ewen Kloas