

# Mental health stigma blocks jobs

MPs call for awareness and action.



**STANDING OUT:** Stigma isolating job seekers with mental illness

**A** national education campaign is needed to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and help sufferers into education and employment.

In its latest report, *Work wanted*, the House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee has called for a comprehensive, multifaceted campaign in schools, businesses and communities to raise awareness of mental ill health and break down discrimination.

One in five Australians has experienced a mental illness in the past 12 months and the employment rate for people with such a disability is around half of the general population.

Tabling the report in the House of Representatives, committee chair Amanda Rishworth (Kingston, SA) said such a campaign is needed as stigma is consistently rated as the key barrier to entering the workforce by people with a mental illness.

“This is not the first report to note the entrenched stigma surrounding those with a mental illness,” Ms Rishworth said. “Nonetheless, the committee was struck by how pervasive stigma remains.”

The report found the stigma associated with mental illness is often based on incorrect assumptions that people with mental ill health have limited capacity or will to participate, or that they will be disruptive and dangerous.

Witnesses to the inquiry reported that disclosing mental ill health lowered the likelihood of selection for interview or appointment to a position.

“When you have a mental illness, employers think of you as a liability,” New South Wales Consumer Advisory Group CEO Julie Hourigan-Ruse said. “Some of them think that you’re likely to be an axe-murderer.”

The committee called for government support of social enterprises that assist people with a mental illness into the workforce, the extension of the primary school mental health program KidsMatter into high schools, and better

## LATEST

### NEW CHARITIES COMMISSION

A new national regulator for the charity and not-for-profit sector is set to become fully operational from 1 October 2012, replacing a number of overlapping state, federal and territory oversight bodies.

The Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission (ACNC) will provide a central point for the registration of Australian charities, determine charitable status and public benevolent institution status, and provide a free, searchable charities register to the public.

It will also investigate allegations of misconduct and inappropriate activities by charities.

The ACNC will begin by only overseeing the operations of

Australia’s charities, but is intended to extend across the entire not-for-profit sector from 2014.

However decisions about what tax concessions are available to a charity or not-for-profit organisation and the collection or enforcement of taxes in the sector will remain the responsibility of the Australian Taxation Office.

The House Economics Committee is inquiring into the exposure draft legislation establishing the new regulator and is expected to report back following the parliament’s winter break. •

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## NEWS

training for education providers to assist students with mental health issues.

Deputy chair Rowan Ramsey (Grey, SA) said fostering a supportive educational and work environment through these measures is crucial to help people with a mental illness participate fully in society.

“The loss of employment, or the inability to engage in it in the first place, because of mental illness is a debilitating barrier which can lead to disconnection from society and exacerbate the original condition,” Mr Ramsey said. “The cost to society of this disconnection is far higher than the cost of positive programs to engage these people.”

The committee also called for a communication campaign to clearly lay out the eligibility and workforce participation requirements that apply to the Disability Support Pension for people with a mental illness.

Ms Rishworth said a third of DSP recipients have a mental illness, and fear of losing access to payments is holding many back from the workforce.

“The system must encourage and engage rather than discourage and disengage job seekers,” she said.

“Participation requirements need to be sufficiently flexible for people to venture into employment without the fear of losing their benefit entitlement and in the knowledge that there is a safety net for them should a job not work out.”

Ms Rishworth said given the high prevalence of mental illness in the broader community and current workforce shortages in parts of the country, helping more people with a mental illness into work would have broad economic and social benefits.

“The statistics are such that, even if we ourselves do not experience a mental illness, we will certainly know someone close to us who does.

“It is in everyone’s interest to help job seekers with a mental illness secure sustainable employment.

“They want to work, and work is part of their recovery – and this report shows that there are ways for them to find work.” •

## LINKS

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THINKSTOCK



**TENDER SUBJECT:** *Australia Network controversy continues*

## PM’S DEPARTMENT DISPUTES TENDER CONFUSION

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has denied there was an “atmosphere of uncertainty” about the role of cabinet during the Australia Network tender process, which was scrapped in November 2011.

Responding to a critical report from the Auditor-General on the tender process, the department’s deputy secretary Renee Leon said the Prime Minister had advised the final decision would come back to cabinet before the tender was released.

“The department’s view is that there was no uncertainty,” Ms Leon said. “The Prime Minister had made clear – and as the report indicates ministers had agreed in October – that it was to come back to cabinet.”

However the Auditor-General Ian McPhee disagreed, telling federal parliament’s Public Accounts and Audit Committee his investigation clearly found confusion about the role of ministers in choosing a preferred tenderer to operate the network.

“I think we have put a fair bit of evidence in there to say there is quite a deal of uncertainty amongst ministers about the processes both before the tender arrangement and subsequently,” Mr McPhee said.



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