



PERSONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME (PSP): ISSUES AND INTERVENTIONS

Commenced on 1 July 2002, the PSP is administered by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and delivered by contracted NGO sector providers. The Programme is designed to assist people with complex and multiple non-vocational barriers to social and/or economic participation in the community, such as homelessness, mental health and drug or alcohol problems. Numerous studies have found Intensive Assistance (IA) (the highest assistance category of the Job Network) to be ineffective in delivering quality assistance or employment outcomes to highly disadvantaged jobseekers with non-vocational barriers to participation*. A recent report on IA released by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) found that participation in IA improved the likelihood of a jobseeker being in employment three months after completion of the program by only 0.6 percent**. Aiming to fill the service gap between short-term crisis assistance and employment assistance, the PSP provides holistic and ongoing support to consumers for up to two years. Kathryn Hufton, PSP Co-ordinator at Pioneer Clubhouse, points out that PSP is the first government program of its kind to address social outcomes, which is an extremely positive move.

Consumers are referred to PSP providers from Centrelink, following an initial assessment. This referral is made via the Employment and Community Services Network (ECSN) and once received, the provider contacts the consumer to arrange an interview. During this interview, potential participants are informed about the PSP, specifically participants' rights and obligations and the complaints mechanism. In the induction stage providers conduct a follow up assessment to supplement the assessment report provided by Centrelink and also conduct an initial counselling session. Providers work with participants to help them identify their barriers to social and/or economic participation and develop their own Action Plan to address those barriers. The Action Plan is a core component of the PSP. It details the activities and resources appropriate to individual participant's needs, the steps to be taken by participants, how their progress will be monitored and measured and identifies relevant timeframes. Over the course of the Programme PSP providers maintain regular contact with participants (minimum contact is once every four weeks). Providers assist participants to achieve the social and (where appropriate) economic outcomes detailed in their Action Plan, through the provision of ongoing counselling, referral, service coordination, advocacy, practical support, outreach activities and assessment.

There is a strong commitment to program innovation in relation to the PSP, from both the NGO and Government sectors. Within the NGO sector, the National Employment Services Association (NESA) has established a PSP Special Interest Group (PSP SIG). Dr. Gary Banks, MHCC Board Member and Managing Director of the Sydney Counselling Centre is the convener of the PSP SIG. Membership of the group comprises representatives from NESA member organisations that are PSP providers and a representative from both NESA and the MHCC. The PSP SIG terms of reference include:

- Promoting dialogue between NESAs and its members regarding the development and implementation of the PSP;
- Informing the NESAs Board and thereby facilitating NESAs efforts to seek to influence Government policy in the area of reforms and improvements to the PSP;
- Working in conjunction with the NESAs Board to encourage members to improve operational effectiveness, skills and outcomes relevant to the PSP***.

Within the Government sector, FaCS has established the Reference Group for the Personal Support Programme, which will provide the Government and FaCS with advice on design and implementation, significantly in the area of innovation and pilots. The Reference Group includes representatives from FaCS, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), Centrelink and advisers on significant issues including mental health, homelessness and Indigenous issues. Pilot priorities for 2002-03 include testing approaches that improve service provision to participants with specific needs (such as mental health or drug and alcohol issues), Indigenous consumers and participants in rural or remote areas.

The PSP is widely regarded as fulfilling a significant community need. PSP providers are committed to enhancing the Programme and have identified a number of issues and potential areas of improvement. There is a general consensus regarding the need to further develop and implement strategies for benchmarking and evaluation of the Programme. The need for increased funding and more structured guidelines in relation to appropriate referrals to PSP is also widely recognised. While some providers have found PSP outcomes to be realistic, others have found that the achievements of participants are inadequately acknowledged, specifically in relation to economic outcomes. For example those who move into paid employment but are unable to work more than 15 hours per week or those who attend a non-approved educational course (such as a one-semester TAFE course or a community college course) are not regarded as having achieved an economic outcome. It has been suggested that educational and employment outcomes would improve as a result of greater flexibility in the definition of what counts as a fundable outcome in these areas. Providers have concerns about potential conflicts between privacy legislation and professional ethics with respect to duty of care, duty to warn and record keeping. The cost of transport for participants accessing a range of services has become an issue and it has been suggested that the Government fund travel passes, which providers would distribute to participants on the basis of need. Due to PSP places being filled so rapidly, service provision to those on the waiting list has also become an issue. Additionally, while referring participants to appropriate services and coordinating their activities is an important part of the Programme, providers are concerned that their ability to act in this area is hampered by waiting lists for services such as Intensive Assistance (IA) and Department of Housing places (it is anticipated that the availability of IA places will be addressed in the third Job Network contract period, due to commence in July 2003).

MHCC members will be kept informed regarding the future progress of the PSP SIG. PSP providers interested in becoming involved can contact NESAs:

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* ACOSS, (2001), *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Job Network model*
 Davidson, P., (2002), 'Employment assistance for long-term unemployed people: time for a re-think', in T. Eardley and B.

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Eardley, T., Abello, D. and MacDonald, H., (2001), *Is the Job Network benefiting disadvantaged job seekers?*, SPRC Discussion Paper No. 111, January
Productivity Commission, (2002), *Independent review of the Job Network: Draft report*, Productivity Commission, Canberra

** Perkins, D., (2002), 'Outcomes and obstacles: the Job Network and disadvantaged job seekers' in *Brotherhood Comment*, Brotherhood of St. Laurence Newsletter, November, p.1

*** NESAs Special Interest Groups Terms of Reference, accessed at:
<http://www.nesa.com.au/specialinterest/index.cfm?fuseaction=specialinterest>

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