



SPEECH – Assistant Minister Prentice

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Intended	Assistant Minister Prentice
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I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders – past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge:

- Donna Faulkner and Rick Kane of Disability Employment Australia.
- providers, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests.

Thank you for the invitation to speak at your 2016 Disability Employment Conference.

This conference comes at a transformational time for the disability sector and this is one of the reasons I was pleased to be reappointed Assistant Minister for Disability Services following the recent election.

I am delighted to be able to work with groups such as Disability Employment Australia as we continue our unprecedented program of reform to support people with disability to maximise their potential and participate as equal citizens in our society. Assisting people to participate in the workforce is an integral part of this. Employment is important for our economic security. But it is also more than that. A job gives us a sense of independence and self-worth. It contributes to our physical and mental health and helps to shape our sense of identity.

I firmly believe the work we are doing to help people with disability to find and maintain a job makes a positive impact in their lives. And you are all here today because you share that view.

Since becoming the Assistant Minister in February, I have met and consulted with many of you. What has struck me from our discussions is the level of dedication, passion and expertise you all bring to the challenges of your role. This conference is an

opportunity to continue those conversations, build relationships and share our knowledge, so that we can continue to support and encourage better outcomes for people with disability.

As I mentioned, this is a time of great change for people with disability and for those working in the sector. Just last month, on 1 July, the National Disability Insurance Scheme went from trial phase to national roll out. This is historic and worth taking a moment for reflection.

The NDIS is the most significant economic and social reform in our country in decades and I trust all you who worked so hard and for so long to make it a reality are justifiably proud of what you have achieved.

For people with significant disability, the NDIS will be life changing – giving people choice and control over the services and support they can access. And indeed it is already changing lives for the better, as we have heard from participants in trial sites. But this is only the beginning. By 2019 when the scheme reaches full implementation, almost 460,000 Australians will have individualised support plans through the NDIS.

However, we must remember that figure only accounts for about 10 per cent of all people with disability.

The NDIS is just one part of the Government's approach to supporting and empowering people with disability. The Scheme sits under the National Disability Strategy, Australia's overarching framework for disability reform. The Strategy has been endorsed by the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. Its vision is for an 'inclusive Australian society that enables people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal citizens'. The Strategy is framed around six key policy areas for improving the life outcomes of people with disability. They include:

1. Inclusive and accessible communities
2. Rights protection, justice and legislation
3. Economic security
4. Personal and community support
5. Learning and skills
6. Health and wellbeing

While all six outcome areas are equally important and interconnected, it is the third – economic security – that I would like to focus on today. We know the majority of people with a disability want to work, and we must do all we can to break down the barriers to enable them to do so.

The benefits of employing people with disability are well documented. They value their work, they take less leave, have fewer accidents and stay in jobs longer than other workers.

People with disability boost staff morale and enhance a sense of teamwork. And given one in five Australians has a disability, employing people with disability better reflects the diversity of our society.

These facts need to be broadcast far and wide so that Australia does better when it comes to helping people with disability into the workforce. It is an area in which we can and must improve.

The *2015 Survey of Disability, Aging and Carers* tells us that last year just over half of people with a disability were participating in the workforce (53.4%), compared to more than 80 per cent (83.2%) of people without a disability. People with disability are less likely to be in full-time employment, they are more likely to be unemployed, and they face longer periods of unemployment.

The Government's Disability Employment Services programme (or DES) is designed to provide this support, and reduce the disparity in employment outcomes for people with disability. DES funds 132 organisations to provide employment support to people with disability. More than 180,000 people are currently registered in the programme and about 134,000 are active participants at any one

time. But with less than one-third of DES participants remaining in employment three months after completing a period of assistance, there is clearly room to improve.

That is why the Government is undertaking work to reform DES.

Many of you here today would have participated in the Disability Employment Taskforce's two rounds of consultation conducted last year. I would like to thank you for your contribution. Feedback from groups such as Disability Employment Australia has highlighted some key areas of focus.

They include:

- Giving participants more information, choice and control.
- Enabling service providers to deliver high quality services.
- And the need to better engage with and support employers.

This consultation and feedback is helping to shape the reformed Disability Employment Services. The Department of Social Services will be consulting further with Disability Employment Australia and other relevant peak bodies, as it fine-tunes policy proposals for the new DES contracts which start in 2018.

While the work of the Taskforce will help us improve Disability Employment Services for the next contract period, we continue to look for improvements that we can make under the current

contracts, to help service providers focus on your crucial core business of finding employment for people with disability.

We have already taken a number of steps to increase flexibility for job seekers and allow providers to focus on delivering high quality services, including through red tape reduction measures worth more than \$14.5 million to service providers.

In response to your feedback I am pleased to be able to announce today a further four changes to the current DES programme which will take effect later this year.

1 – Firstly, eligible volunteer job seekers will be able to access a DES provider outside their Employment Service Area.

As you are aware, currently participants are restricted to using a provider in the Employment Service Area in which they live. This change gives more choice and control to participants – echoing a key feature of the NDIS. And by removing arbitrary barriers it will also allow providers to grow their business, and help to develop a more flexible, open and competitive market.

The next three policy changes that I am announcing are aimed at further reducing red tape for service providers.

They include:

2 – Simplifying the administrative rules when recording permitted breaks in a participant’s employment. This will make it easier for DES providers when extending the outcome period for participants who need more time due to events outside their control.

3 – We are also increasing the time providers have to record a job placement from 28 days to 56 days, giving them more time to collect and record required evidence.

4 – And the last change I am announcing today is that the simplified requirements trialled in the Ongoing Support and Job Plan trial will now become standard practice.

This trial relaxed some of the reporting requirements relating to the delivery of Ongoing Support. It has effectively reduced administrative burden on providers without compromising services to participants.

- Specifically, providers will be able to interact with participants by telephone, video conference, email or even instant chat rather than just face-to-face.
- We will also reduce the minimum frequency of Job Plan updates to every six months instead of quarterly.

The trial has been running from 1 April 2015 and was due to end on 30 September this year. Its adoption as an ongoing part of the DES programme is an example of how the Government is listening to the concerns from providers and making changes. It reduces red tape so

providers can focus their energy on achieving the best employment outcomes for participants.

Of course, DES is just one of the ways the Government supports people with disability into employment. The other two main initiatives are Australian Disability Enterprises and Australia's mainstream employment service – jobactive – which is administered by the Department of Employment.

About 20,000 people are employed by Australian Disability Enterprises. These organisations provide supported and segregated employment to people with moderate to severe disability as well as about 200,000 people with disability access employment services through jobactive.

I would also like to briefly mention our relaunched JobAccess website. The site has been redeveloped to be a more accessible gateway to employment services for people with disability. The changes will help jobseekers and employers to quickly source individually tailored information.

In conclusion, the Government knows there is still significant work to be done to support more people with disability into the workforce. I have outlined some of the work my department and the Government is doing to reform the Disability Employment Services programme. The measures I have announced today focus on empowering

participants and improving provider services. We are giving participants greater access to services and more control. For providers, we are removing red tape to allow them to operate with more freedom.

What I have not discussed in great detail today, is the third priority identified by the Taskforce: the need for greater engagement with employers. While the Government is considering what we can do to encourage employers to hire people with disability, DES providers will always have a crucial role in engaging employers.

And so, I would like to leave you with these questions:

- What are you doing to encourage employers to consider hiring a person with disability?

and

- What more can you do?

All of us here know the benefits of employing people with disability – both for the employee and employer.

Let us all spread the message as far as we can.

Thank you.

As the previous speaker Keran Howe said – the best people to promote the benefits of employing people with disability – are the

people with disability themselves – so I would like to leave you with a recent YouTube video promoting the Paralympic Games. Many of you may have already seen it, but it is worth watching again – very inspiring.