



## SUBMISSION

**Parliamentary Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services**

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## About South East Community Links (SECL)

Our Mission: 'Every person counts, Every system fair'

Since 1970 SECL has operated in one of Melbourne's highest multicultural and fastest growing regions. Based in the South East of Melbourne SECL's reach is mainly in the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, and Shire of Cardinia.

Our services include:

- Community Employment Connectors program
- Emergency Relief with a focus on working to address the underlying cause of the crisis.
- Generalist Case Work to work with people to set goals and engage in society.
- Homelessness & housing support for young people.
- Family violence support and early intervention programs.
- Financial Counselling with expertise in generalist, family violence financial counselling and Problem Gambling Financial Counselling.
- Resettlement services to support refugees and asylum seekers learn and grow in our society.

South East Community Links (SECL) welcome the opportunity to contribute the experience of our community to this inquiry.

We share the following insights and client stories in response to the Terms of Reference.

**(a) The implementation, performance and appropriateness of Workforce Australia Employment Services;**

In August 2021, SECL began delivering the *Community Employment Connectors* (CEC) program that aims to support CALD and young participants facing barriers to entry and re-entry to employment pathways particularly in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Community Employment Connectors are proactively working within local communities and service systems to help disadvantaged CALD and young jobseekers to prepare for and secure employment through the provision of information, referral and connection supports. We ensure that the participants know where they can go to find the information, advice and support they need to move into sustainable employment.

Our participants report their experiences with our CEC program as stark contrast to Workforce Australia Employment Services performance and appropriateness. The story below is typical of our participant's daily experience and showcases the deficiencies of Workforce Australia.

Sahil registered with a Workforce Australia (WFA) provider before he sought assistance from SECL's Community Employment Connectors Program.

Sahil stated that his expectations upon registering with WFA soon turned from excitement to despair.

He shared some of his experiences, and how he felt whilst with Work Force Australia:

- staff had not listened to his concerns about his current situation
- he was threatened with the risk of losing his Centrelink payments should he not "do the right thing"
- intent on sending him to any job vacancy that was available without any consideration to his experience, skills or personal circumstances he was assigned 3 separate Employment Support workers over the short period of time he was there which added to his stress
- Sahil did not feel seen or heard; he felt no compassion or empathy was shown to his plight

Upon registering for support with SECL's, the employment support worker had the time to sit down with Sahil and openly discuss his personal situation. They created a plan of how best to create a pathway that would lead to meaningful employment while taking into account all the barriers that he is currently facing.

CEC Support worker and Sahil explored all employment options and was able to gain casual employment for 20 hours a week.

This has allowed Sahil (and his wife) to commit to all their medical appointments which could be made in the afternoons or on his non-working day.

*Feedback from Sahil: "Thank you for supporting me in such a difficult time and understanding my situation. I am very grateful to now be working and for the patience you showed."*

In support of the importance of a flexible approach to working with CALD Australians seeking employment SECL provide the following excerpt from the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council report into responsive services 2014-15:

*People from CALD backgrounds experience numerous challenges when entering the workforce due to a range of factors. The Multicultural Access and Equity: Building a cohesive society through responsive services report indicates that CALD community views on the responsiveness and effectiveness of employment services were consistently negative.*

*People were frustrated with the lack of flexibility of employment services, their inability to produce positive outcomes for newly arrived migrant and refugee employment service participants and the lack of a tailored and creative approach that would take previous overseas qualifications and experience into consideration and recognise skills.*

*With the changes to the Commonwealth Government's Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) payment, more asylum seekers will be accessing mainstream employment services. These individuals are likely to have limited Australian work experience, may lack qualifications recognised in Australia and will need supports and services to improve their language and employability skills.*

*Some local services are adopting measures to identify avenues to provide supports to people from CALD backgrounds with access to essentials including housing, access to food and financial support. A Taskforce (People Seeking Asylum at Risk) has been established by Dandenong local government to coordinate the work of these local services. Employment services need to understand the challenges experienced by this cohort and provide requisite supports. These supports may include referring people to appropriate community-based services, coordinating and supporting them to access language services and the like. Creating tailored education and employment pathways for these individuals will also address some of these issues.<sup>1</sup>*

After working with many community members like Sahil SECL's experience has identified how participants' experiences and outcomes contrast based on the different service delivery models. We share these comparisons in the table below.

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<sup>1</sup> Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), Multicultural Access and Equity: Building a cohesive society through responsive services 2014 – 2015, accessible at: <http://fecca.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2015/08/Multicultural-Access-and-Equity-Report-2014-2015.pdf>

<b>WorkForce Australia</b>	<b>Community Employment Connectors</b>
Mandatory participation	Voluntary participation
Workforce Australia (aggressive title)	Community Employment <b>Connectors</b> (inviting title)
Conveyor belt approach, feel treated like a number	CEC program is demand driven and flexible in scope, time and resources to address complex needs
Penalties for Non-Compliance	No penalties
Forced and inappropriate Job placement (ASAP, within limited timeframe)	Job placement sought for client but not enforced (mutually agreed)
Short term goals (focused primarily on employment)	Long term goals (focused on all aspects of human wellbeing)
Employment outcome focussed	Holistic approach (client-centred) leading to employment outcome
Employment consultants under immense pressure due to unreasonable KPI's leading to staff turnover (set by department)	Targets are based on the complexity of needs leading to staff satisfaction and retention
Constant fear of losing Centrelink payments	Not linked to Centrelink in any way
Inflexible brokerage (only available once employment is obtained)	Flexible brokerage available (pre-employment / training/pathways. Purchase of key tools i.e. laptops, mobile phones)
Unapproachable Department Management (Follow hierarchy of management)	Hands on Department Management (approachable management from the department e.g. attend regular community of practice meetings)
Competition within WFA service providers	Collaboration between all CEC providers (based on catchment areas and participant's needs)
Constant fear of losing contract based on inflexible and strict contractual obligations	Re-assurance from Contract Manager
Medium risk of losing numbers, funding and staff mid- contract	Low risk of losing contract mid -term
Consultant/participant ratio (1:60+)	Consultant/participant ratio (1:30)
Restricted access based on visa status, must be a recipient of Centrelink payments	Access to people with work rights regardless of visa status

**(b) the extent to which Workforce Australia Employment Services delivers services in a way that is fair, leaves no one behind, respects individuals' diverse needs, and supports job seekers into secure work, in particular, its support for long term unemployed and young people;**

Depending on their visa status many newly arrived migrants have limited access to Workforce Australia services, leaving behind people who are unfamiliar with our system to find work alone.

Workforce Australia Guidelines Stipulate: Note: *Visa holders with working rights attached are eligible for employment services if they are in receipt of an Income Support Payment that would otherwise make them eligible for Services.*<sup>2</sup>

This restriction means many people on Bridging Visa E with work rights who are ineligible for income support are also locked out of employment supports, creating additional barriers to employment. We share Amal's Story to highlight the importance of providing support irrespective of visa status.

Amal currently holds a Bridging Visa with work rights but is ineligible to receive Centrelink payments and support from Workforce Australia.

She is a victim survivor of family violence and is currently living in Crisis Accommodation. Amal's mental health issues have been further compounded by the extended lockdowns experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. With no family support and also been dependent on donations/handouts/emergency relief for the past year. She has also accumulated over \$5000 debt from her friends.

Amal's immediate goals are to settle into permanent accommodation and become financially independent. Her long-term goal is to complete a qualification in Social Work.

Upon her initial assessment with the Community Employment Connector (CEC) Support worker, Amal opened up about her challenges of being a new migrant.

Some of these include cultural differences, fear of racism and discrimination, loneliness, lack of self esteem and feelings of Suicidal ideation, and her lack of English, skills and education.

With her well being Identified as a priority, Amal was referred to the SECL's Housing and Financial Counselling program and linked her up with local health services. She was also connected with community house where she has been involved in short courses and group-based activities to improve her skills.

The CEC program continues to provide Amal with job searching skills and it is expected that she will gain employment soon, which will bring her closer to reaching her long-term goal of obtaining a qualification leading to employment in her chosen field.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=Workforce+Australia+Guidelines+pdf&rlz=1C1GCEA\\_enAU890AU890&sxsrf=ALiCzsZ\\_XoGt-fkiDISLI-KIq4Z1EG24IOA%3A1669160549958&ei=ZV59Y7ylOobB4-EP1p2I-A4&ved=0ahUKewj8zpzN-8L7AhWG4DgGHZZOCe8Q4dUDCA8&uact=5&oq=Workforce+Australia+Guidelines+pdf&gs\\_lcp=Cgxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAQAzIFCCEQoAEyCaghEBYQHhAdOgoIABBHENYEELADogUIABCABDoGCAAQFhAeOggIABAWEB4QDzoFCAAQhgNKBAhBGABKBAhGGABQhhJY3B1g1SB0AXABeACAAfMBiAHTBplBBTAuMS4zmAEAoAEByAEIwAEB&sclient=gws-wiz-serp](https://www.google.com/search?q=Workforce+Australia+Guidelines+pdf&rlz=1C1GCEA_enAU890AU890&sxsrf=ALiCzsZ_XoGt-fkiDISLI-KIq4Z1EG24IOA%3A1669160549958&ei=ZV59Y7ylOobB4-EP1p2I-A4&ved=0ahUKewj8zpzN-8L7AhWG4DgGHZZOCe8Q4dUDCA8&uact=5&oq=Workforce+Australia+Guidelines+pdf&gs_lcp=Cgxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAQAzIFCCEQoAEyCaghEBYQHhAdOgoIABBHENYEELADogUIABCABDoGCAAQFhAeOggIABAWEB4QDzoFCAAQhgNKBAhBGABKBAhGGABQhhJY3B1g1SB0AXABeACAAfMBiAHTBplBBTAuMS4zmAEAoAEByAEIwAEB&sclient=gws-wiz-serp)

**(c) other matters in relation to Workforce Australia Employment Services.**

Community Employment Connectors practitioners at South East Community Links deliver an employment program that addresses the effect of unemployment and poverty in the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey and Cardinia Shire. Our region encompasses many of the most disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria.

As a local provider with a flexible approach to connecting people with employment we have found that:

- 52% of community members we work with were born overseas
- 41% reported being unemployed more than 5 years
- 94% experience multiple (more than 5) barriers to employment
- 51% of people accessing our service obtained work
- 64% undertook some form of training.

Julia's story shows how a flexible, human centered approach creates the environment for education and employment.

Julia arrived in Australia in August as a refugee from war torn Ukraine and is on a Temporary Protection Visa.

Julia lost her husband during the war and arrived here with her 4-year-old daughter.

She suffers from Trauma (post-traumatic stress disorder), and other mental health issues including anxiety and depression.

When the Community Employment Connector (CEC) support worker first met Julia, (through an interpreter) she was totally devoid of confidence and outwardly showing all the signs of trauma.

It was obvious that there were other factors in Julia's life that had to be addressed before any type of employment was an option.

The CEC program allows for flexibility in its delivery and not under time constraints for any non-vocational barriers to be addressed using a holistic and person-centered approach.

This delivery model allowed for the CEC support worker, with Julia's input, to address as a priority, the following issues:

- Trauma (Post traumatic stress disorder)
- Anxiety
- Depression
- English language
- No driver's license
- Childcare

Julia is now attending English speaking classes and has on-going support for her mental health and well-being (organized by CEC support worker) and has registered for the learner-driver program.

The CEC program purchased a laptop for Julia and is now providing her with skills for employment.

## Findings

- Unemployed people facing disadvantage are more likely to achieve sustainable employment if they receive adequate support services to get them work ready.
- Working in one of Australia's most multicultural communities SECL understand the importance of trust. People accessing our services have consistently provided feedback of negative experiences with Workforce Australia providers, making statements like:
  - Being treated 'like a number'
  - That their service is 'tick and flick'
  - They are more interested in the stat than finding me a job
- Many providers are not local, leading to a lack of understanding of local issues. Despite many attempts we have found reluctance on the part of these providers to work collaboratively.
- Trusted, local services that know their community create lasting and meaningful employment outcomes, as demonstrated on page 7.

## SECL recommendations:

- We recommend a review of the Workforce Australia program stringent mutual obligations on participants which act as impediments to employment.
- Everyone has a right to work. We recommend Workforce Australia services be made accessible to all people, irrespective of visa status.
- We recommend a more flexible approach to produce positive outcomes for newly arrived migrants and refugees, with consideration given to tailored and creative approaches that factors in prior overseas qualifications, experience and recognized skills.
- To rebuild trust in Workforce Australia and remove profit driven outcomes we recommend that services be provided by place-based organisations, who know the needs of their community and local employers.
- We recommend moving away from a punitive approach to long term unemployment towards the use of flexible, strength based service delivery model such as the CEC program, which have proven effective in to producing strong outcomes for people.