



## SUBMISSION

### Employment White Paper - Consultation

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## About South East Community Links

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.

## Submission Summary

South East Community Links (SECL) welcome the opportunity to participate in the Employment White Paper Consultation.

This paper highlights the findings and recommendations of the Community Employment Connectors (CEC) program delivered by SECL, which focusses on improving outcomes for those who face challenges in securing employment. CEC program 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.

Employment is a vital part of economic independence, general wellbeing and health. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more unemployed people are likely to remain so long term, that is, they will remain unemployed for 12 months or longer. Based on the industries most affected, many of them will be women, young people and unskilled jobseekers.<sup>1</sup>

Research also shows that long time unemployment, especially the young demographic, can create scarring effects whereby the probability of future unemployment increases and lifetime earnings decrease.<sup>2</sup>

Lateral economics calculated the cost of scarring caused by a delayed transition to full-time employment among young Victorians to be between \$60 million and \$100 million per year. This figure is made up of a \$60 million loss of income and economic productivity, about \$20 million in costs to the health system and **other services, and a \$24 million loss in non-economic wellbeing such as mental health** impacts.<sup>3</sup>

### Challenges in employment can be individual or structural.

#### Individual challenges

Apart from obvious vocational challenges (lack of English and/or education and training, skills and work experience), there are multiple personal challenges including family violence, health and housing issues, caring responsibilities, criminal records, substance dependence, intergenerational unemployment, lack of private transport, financial hardship. There are also personal challenges that are experienced by a number of community groups such as those experiencing no confidence, trauma experienced by refugees, veterans and young people in out-of-home care, albeit in different circumstances.

**Structural challengers** refer to the condition that no matter how high the individual's qualifications may be, elements within the social and economic structures make it difficult for the individual to obtain

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<sup>1</sup> Raja Junankar, Actions to avoid unemployment in a post-coronavirus economy, 2020, accessed 22 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Jordan Glatt and Phanindra Wunnava, 'Help not wanted: the dismal science of youth unemployment's scarring effect', *iBusiness*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018, p. 52; Harvey Krahn and Angela Chow, 'Youth unemployment and career scarring: socialpsychological mediating effects?', *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2016, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup>Lateral Economics, Youth resilience and mental wellbeing: the economic costs of delayed transition to purposeful work, report for VicHealth, Melbourne, 2018, pp. 6–7.

employment. These elements include racial discrimination, immigration status, gender discrimination, lack of jobs, transportation, neighbourhood/location, and general structural factors.

While structural challenges are common to everyone, other challengers may be specific to particular groups, such as poor English proficiency among refugees. Also, the personal circumstance of each individual is unique, resulting in a unique set of challenges for each person.

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.

The Productivity Commission notes that disadvantage can be viewed through the lens of social exclusion, where people are denied access to opportunities and resources due to a combination of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low income, inadequate housing, high crime, poor health and family breakdown. These problems are often the result of personal and family circumstances interacting with the wider economic and social environment. When they combine, they reinforce one another and can create a cycle that is difficult to overcome.<sup>4</sup>

### **Complex challenges need intensive services tailored to an individual-holistic, wraparound service**

Some individual employment challenges can be addressed logistically. For example, child care, English classes and further training can be arranged.

Other barriers, such as low confidence, experience of trauma or a criminal record are harder to overcome. Individuals facing multiple and complex challenges to employment need more intensive support which takes a holistic approach and provide wraparound services tailored to their circumstances. A holistic approach addressing all aspects of an individual's life is more likely to get that person into a position where they are work ready and more likely to remain employed.

We need a flexible approach – a person might come to us who has experienced mental illness, family violence, trauma or substance abuse and we need time and resources to address personal and work-related issues in a coordinated manner. Flexibility is vital; it is not a one-size-fits-all model. We share the stories of Amal and Julia to highlight the importance of this approach.

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<sup>4</sup> McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia, pp. 2, 7

Amal currently holds a Bridging Visa and is therefore ineligible to receive Centrelink payments and support from Workforce Australia.

She is a victim of family violence and is currently living in Crisis Accommodation.

Amal has mental health issues which has been accentuated due to the Covid pandemic.

She has 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, suicidal ideation and limited English proficiency, skills and education

Identified as a priority, CEC support worker has referred Amal to the SECL's Housing and Financial Counselling programs. The support has also linked her up with local health services and community house where she has been involved in community and group-based activities.

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

Julia arrived in Australia in August as a refugee from war torn Ukraine and is on a Temporary Protection Visa. She 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 and depression
- English language
- No driver's license
- Access to 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.

Julia's self-esteem has improved, and she is confident of gaining meaningful employment in the near future.

## **Recommendations:**

- SECL recommend that the needs of unemployed people experiencing disadvantages be at the centre of the policy and system design.
- We recommend moving away from a punitive approach to long term unemployment towards the use of flexible, strength-based service delivery models delivered through trusted place-based community organisations. This allows local providers with local solutions to meet the needs of local workers and employers.
- We recommend people be supported post-employment to create the optimal environment for people to remain in work.
- 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.

In support of our recommendations, we suggest the system design include the following elements:

- Consideration of the multiple challenges to employment faced by vulnerable people so that service response can be tailored to an individual's needs.
- Our experience has shown that to be 'employment ready' it is vital to first address the personal challenges and barriers to employment through coordinated, flexible service provision. Being 'employment ready' is at the core of being able to obtain, and importantly, retain work.
- As the largest provider of financial counselling in diverse communities in Australia we know that relationship to money is important. We recommend post-employment support for people with more complex needs include a financial capacity building response.