



## Key Mental Health Related Issues to address in developing an Australian version of the JOB ACCOMMODATION NETWORK

### Purpose

On the basis of workshops, provide advice on a framework to guide development of an Australian version of the Job Accommodation Network. The suggestions and issues raised here are drawn from forum discussions and feedback from a questionnaire circulated to participants following the forums.

### Broad Goals of an Australian JAN Website (from Mental Health Perspective)

In relation to mental health:

- Contribute to improved mental health literacy (accurate knowledge, awareness of mental health issues),
- Provision and promotion through information of the benefits of employment of people with mental disability (for individual, organisation, societal),
- Provision of a wide range of information to support the employment of people with mental disability (for employee, employer, employment services).

### Information – What kind of information should be included?

*What are mental disorders?* Information about symptoms, causes and risk factors, prevalence, how they affect people with the illness, treatments and medications including information on the effects of the medications on behaviour.

*The Business Case* – why employ people with mental disability? Reference to evidence based research in appropriate language, personal experiences, corporate responsibility, staff benefits, and examples from organisations (small, medium and large; private, public and third or not-for-profit sectors).

*The Environmental Context* – issues surrounding mental illness like community stigma, social support, attitudes within the workplace of co-workers, and the role of job coaches and/or peer support workers. The tensions around employee disclosure and the importance of confidentiality. Consumers expressed that they would be more willing to disclose their mental illness to an employer with some knowledge of mental health issues.

*Information on the Roles of Different Sectors* - Federally-funded primary health care services (GP's and allied health services), Federally-funded employment, education and training programs (DSP, Newstart, etc), Federally-funded welfare programs (PSP, JPET, Mobility Allowance, workplace modification etc) and information on tax (ATO) effects for employers and employees; state-funded services (including disability, supportive housing, employment, vocational and training, mental health and hospital in-patient care). Roles of disability employment service providers, Job Network, rehabilitation service providers, and other specialist service providers. The not-for-profit mental health services – organisations like SANE Australia, *beyondblue*, Mental Illness Fellowship of Aust. and more generalist providers like Lifeline.

*Information on Local Services* - Links to the websites of other organisations that can help: this information may be organised according to the states/districts where these are located.

*The Legislative Framework* – DDA, OH&S, EEO, Vocational Rehabilitation. The idea of a legal hotline was raised to provide support in this area - especially needed by small and medium businesses which do not have in-house legal services. This is a significant barrier and the web of overlapping and

conflicting Federal and State legislation would be de-mystified to some extent through an advisory service.

*Workplace Accommodations* – suggestions, case studies to illustrate examples of success. Important that suggested accommodations are reasonable, achievable, and are evidence-based. They should also be designed to support help-seeking. There may be a more preventative role for Employee Assistance Programs.

*Strategies to Reform Workplace “Culture”* – these should target attitude change, breakdown of stigma and creation of awareness. Links to relevant programs (ie *beyondblue* workplace program).

### **General Comments/Suggestions**

While there was good support for the establishment of an Australian version of the US JAN website, employers at the forums felt it was unlikely to be successful if it were not supported by active education and information programs, an advisory service and a telephone information service. Most employers expressed the view that they would not voluntarily explore a website without such support to ‘kick-start’ the process. The complexity of the issues and the (non)availability of time to undertake the necessary research were identified as factors. Again, investing the considerable time necessary to employ an individual with a mental illness versus the time to employ a person without disability was seen as a cost which business could not shoulder without support. The smaller the business the less likely time would be invested in undertaking the web-searching necessary for successful outcomes.

The social marketing, education and information programs have already been addressed in the body of this report. The discussions in the forums pointed to the need to provide face-to-face advisory services. The level of community and employer understanding of the needs of those people with physical and intellectual disability has changed significantly over the past few decades in Australia. It was felt such a change in relation to people with mental disability or a mental illness was only just beginning. Local service providers or indeed a national service provider such as Centrelink with appropriately skilled staff could be utilised to provide the advisory service.

The telephone information service could act as the alternative (to the website) first point of contact for employers and others seeking assistance. Some participants felt that the ability to talk through the issues, particularly the business case and the legal issues, and highlight where the information can be accessed was essential to the Government’s objectives. The telephone service could then where further assistance was necessary refer to the advisory service.

In addition to a complimentary suite of programs and services, it was felt that if the JAN website is to be an effective tool, it needs to be heavily promoted, so that interested parties know it is available. The utilisation of the US JAN after ten years of operation, when compared with the size of the US employment market, would suggest that there is a need for heavy promotion and that to be effective in rising participation rates for people with disability, a suite of complimentary services is required.

While beyond the scope of the forum discussions, the functionality and usability of the proposed website needs to be built upon sound IT&T process management methodologies. The complexity of the information outlined here plus the legal issues associated with inaccurate or outdated information or referral pathways makes the design and development of a website a complex issue. Furthermore the user requirements (employers, service providers and consumers/employees) will vary considerably.

From the MHCA’s review of the US JAN a number of observations have been made. There is:

- limited and in some areas out-dated information on mental illness and disability;
- limited information of medication or the efficacy of evidence-based treatment; and
- duplication of information from specialist or expert sources.

These issues can be largely overcome by linking the JAN website with the peak providers in key disability areas – mental, intellectual and physical – and with the Medical Information Service (MIMS). The MIMS database is updated on a bi-monthly basis and available in electronic and print versions. Contractual arrangements would be necessary to ensure the legal responsibilities and quality

assurance processes of the relevant parties are addressed. Links to other providers (national, state and local) would need to be managed actively to ensure the currency of information.

It also apparent from our review of the US JAN, that a number of state-based JAN's have been developed. In a nation of 300 million there would seem to be good reason to have website services for the larger states, however in a nation of 20 million it would be preferable to have agreements with other jurisdictions to promote and develop a single web-portal.

Furthermore the MHCA would encourage the DEWR to establish a user-group drawn from the current external advisory groups (DisAG, Employer Roundtable etc) to guide the project management team on the design and development of the Australian JAN.

Finally, but important in the design and build phase and early operation of the Jan and related services, systematic evaluation processes must be established. At a minimum these processes must provide feedback on the usefulness and usability of the site to feed into on-going improvement of the site. Evaluating the intermediate and longer term outcomes from the JAN and related services should also be undertaken to ensure it meets the program objectives.