

Disability Support Pension Should Be a Gateway to Greater Supports

Introduction

The supports made available to people with disability in this country are bare and being stripped back. This does not have to be the case. It is a choice. Australia's social security system should be designed to ensure that every person who relies on it is supported to advance their life. Currently, the Disability Support Pension (DSP) does not do this. Instead it is part of a structure that actively disables us further.

Issues

People with disability in this country experience extraordinary rates of poverty. 38% per cent of us have an income of less than \$384 per week, which is about 33% below the poverty line. About 42% of working age people with disability rely on a government payment as our main source of income, compared to 8% of those without disability.¹

We are discriminated against in the labour market and programs intended to support us aren't helping.

The largely coercive and punitive nature of Disability Employment Services (DES) has made what should be a genuinely helpful program an expensive failure,² with only 1,848 people achieving a 52-week employment outcome in June 2021.³

Only 274 of these were DSP recipients, while 743 were receiving the JobSeeker payment.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Data tables: Income supplementary data tables', *People with disability in Australia*, 2 October 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/data?page=3>, accessed 12 August 2021.

² Boston Consulting Group, *Mid-term Review of the Disability Employment Services (DES) Program Draft Report*, 26 June 2020, DSS, Canberra, <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-programs-services-disability-employment-services/mid-term-review-of-the-disability-employment-services-des-program>, accessed 12 August 2021.

³ Department of Social Services, 'DES Data 30 June 2021' [dataset], *DES Monthly Data*, 6 July 2021, Labour Market Information Portal, Canberra, <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/MonthlyData>, accessed 8 August 2021.

A Voice of Our Own

Of the roughly 315,000 people in DES in June, 254,000 were forced to participate as a condition of their social security payment, and an additional 239,000 people with disability were in the even harsher jobactive program.⁴

Currently the DSP is inaccessible to many of the people who need it most, forcing us to rely on unemployment payments that leave us in deep poverty, despite the many barriers we face in finding and keeping secure and fairly paid work.

Those of us who are able to access the DSP feel constantly under threat of being pushed off it, while trying to survive on a payment below the poverty line and manage the extra day-to-day costs of being disabled.

The payment should act as a stable, liveable income floor, undergirding a range of public services and supports that work together to give people with disability the opportunity to determine the direction of our lives to the greatest extent possible. It should ensure that no person with disability is left to languish on an unemployment payment.⁵

The DSP should be a gateway to greater supports

Like all social security payments, the DSP should guarantee that every person with disability is protected by a genuinely safe safety net, and not excluded or penalised. The system of income support payments needs to be part of a much broader ecosystem of supports to address the higher rates of poverty and social and economic exclusion we experience.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Australia has recognised the social model of disability as the appropriate way to understand the disadvantages and discrimination imposed on us.

The public care about our wellbeing and want people with disability to live with dignity. The DSP should not be the single form of support the government provides for people with disability. It should afford greater access to, and expansion of, social supports that do not end with Centrelink.

⁴ Department of Education Skills and Employment, 'jobactive and Transition to Work (TtW) Data – June 2021' [dataset], *jobactive and Transition to Work (TtW) Provider Caseload by Selected Cohorts*, 4 August 2021, Labour Market Information Portal, Canberra, <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/EmploymentRegion>, accessed 8 August 2021.

⁵ Unemployment payments should not leave anyone living in poverty; however, the poverty line is higher for people with disability than the general population. Even a dramatic improvement in the adequacy of unemployment payments is not a justifiable reason for people with disability who do not have paid work to be stuck on JobSeeker, Youth Allowance or an equivalent payment.

A Voice of Our Own

The DSP's inadequacy must be viewed through the lens of the social model, and both access and payment levels should reflect this. Social security payments should be used as an essential tool in advancing and upholding our rights.

Recommendations to ensure the DSP is a gateway to greater support

Immediate changes can and must be made to improve the lives of people with disability who rely on income support:

- Link the DSP rate to the Henderson Poverty Line plus 25 per cent to provide a reasonable standard of living for people with disability who need income support.
- Amend eligibility and income test rules to ensure the DSP acts as a lifelong, instantly accessible safety net for people with disability when we are out of paid work.
- Use DSP recipient status to provide straightforward access to other programs and supports, such as free higher education and training, fully subsidised mental and dental healthcare, public and community housing and free or heavily discounted specialist care and medications.
- Address the severe disadvantage and financial stress caused by housing unaffordability in Australia, particularly for those of us forced to live on sub-poverty level income support payments, including by substantially increasing public and community housing stock.
- Make changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule to provide for fully subsidised specialist appointments where the purpose of the appointment is diagnosis or documentation for the purpose of a DSP application.
- Provide adequate, ongoing funding for community groups and organisations to support people with disability and their families with resources and advocacy services.
- Complement the DSP with a strengthened NDIS that adheres to its founding principles by removing age limits, expanding access, retaining person-centred approaches and working with First Nations people to co-design culturally safe support and care programs.
- Protect people from exploitative workplaces by transitioning away from ADEs and guaranteeing that an array of models are developed to ensure people in sheltered workshops are granted appropriate opportunities and pathways to open employment, and supported to pursue self-directed paid work if desired.

A well-designed social security payment is essential to enhance the wellbeing of every person with disability in Australia.

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**PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY
AUSTRALIA**

Position Statement

A Voice of Our Own

The immediate changes described above would not make the system of supports in place for us as strong and caring as it should be. They are a first, interim step to immediately improve our lives and substantially alleviate poverty.

The government must work with us, our carers and community organisations over the longer term to develop a comprehensive system of supports that provide a good quality of life and lay the foundation for dismantling the many structural forms of discrimination and disadvantage that disable us.

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