



**O.W.L.'s**

**Older Women Lost in housing**

*Equity to affordable, secure safe & appropriate housing*

**Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services**

**Submission on**

**Inquiry into the Employment of People with Disabilities**

April 2017

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Committee Secretary **Hamish Finlay**

**Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services. Inquiry into the Employment of People with Disabilities**

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### **Introduction**

Penny Leemhuis welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services Inquiry into Employment of People with Disabilities in the Act.

Penny welcomes the opportunity to appear as a witness at the public hearing to be held in May 2017.

~ 1 ~

Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services. Inquiry into the Employment of People with Disabilities. Public Submission. 3 May 2017 Penny Leemhuis

## About Penny Leemhuis

Penny is a social activist and housing affordability advocate for older women (O.W.L's) who are, or who are at risk of homelessness. Particularly Penny's work focuses on the systemic social and economic inequalities experienced by older women. Her work raises awareness of the issues related to lower wages, low superannuation, less time in the workforce and disability.

As a person with a physical impairment Penny has a lived experience and upstanding of advocating for the rights of people with a disability.

Her professional experience includes; applying best interest principles as a steering committee member, strengthening my communication skills as a Lifeline Crisis Supporter and managing small projects independently and as an employee for not for profit organisations.

## Summary

This paper was compiled based on personal lived experience, professional and academic qualifications. The interactions between older women with disabilities and access to appropriate, sustainable, meaningful and financially equitable employment are collectively referred to as a tragedy of commons. The promise of improved access to equitable employment for older women with disabilities is defined in the recommendations.

## Terms of Reference

### **1. The applicability of the ACT public service of recommendations and findings from the report *Employing People with a Disability in the APS* published by the UC Canberra.**

It is the opinion of the author based on personal and professional experience that the recommendations are indeed applicable. Coming from the state of Victoria many of the recommendations suggested in the UC report have been implemented since post 2008. While adapting the workplace in terms of physical accessibility is crucial, it is the cultural 'human' factor that holds the greatest power in employment for people with disabilities. Policies may be adapted and part of organisational procedures however without the underpinning commitment by leaders and managers the policies are little more than words on paper.

## Recommendations

- Training for managers in effective person based communications. Many not for profit organisations and universities run short courses or single unit education on the skill of artful communication.
- Workshops that are interactive designed, developed and presented by people with a disability. Such workshops have the capacity to break down stereotypes and covert prejudice.

- Promoting the benefits to businesses and organisations of employing people with a disability. There is a growing body of research that supports employment of people with a disability as contributing to the diversity and culture of inclusion.
- Critically a workplace culture is set by the example of behaviour of managers and leaders. Training and workshops attendance needs to be evaluated on the transference of knowledge gained to the workplace.
- ‘Champions’ (people with a disability) who have the capacity and willingness to promote and exemplify the benefits of employing people with a disability.
- While team building exercises are popular among organisations and businesses simple measures such as; an afternoon playing lawn bowls with people with disabilities has the potential to break down barriers and raise awareness of inclusion. This is an example of a real life situation that I worked on with community and businesses and wheelchair sports Victoria. The event proved to be highly successful.

## **2. Relevant experiences and learnings from Australian State, Commonwealth and international jurisdictions**

It has been the author’s professional and personal experience the learning and cultural change is a continuous process. As a project officer for Access for All Abilities a number of key recommendations identify realistic and achievable outcomes in including people with a disability in the employment sector.

### **Recommendations**

- Workplace committee’s that include people with a disability on the board.
- Adapting environments to suit people with a disability not vice versa
- Working together with managers or leaders and the person with a disability to establish a flexible work plan that is mutually beneficial. For example working from home if necessary. Shared job roles eg; two people sharing a job each working part time
- Training for all staff on person based communication as per recommendations listed in item 1.
- Workshops for all staff as listed in item 1.
- Training on use of language that is appropriate

## **3. Gender related matters that interact with employment of people with disabilities**

Older women face a number of challenges in obtaining and maintaining financially viable employment. Extended periods of time out of the workplace while they raised families, lack of technology skills, age and reduced confidence in applying for positions are exacerbated by an older woman having a disability. Limited financial resources further complicate the situation as transport costs and access to training, educational or diploma level qualifications are out of reach for many of these women.

### **Recommendations**

- Programs that enhance self-esteem and build confidence
- A gender specific job agency for older women that offers referrals for training, grant applications, resume writing access to businesses, agencies or APS job advertisements.
- Shared job roles
- Flexible working hours
- Incentives for employers to employ older women with a disability

**The author's personal reflection on the likelihood of being able to obtain and maintain financially viable employment as an older woman with a disability.**

It is highly unlikely that this will occur. I have extensive experience in the community sector, skills and knowledge that are desirable by many organisations and agencies, a BA in Community Development and Counselling and yet – the inflexibility of workplaces and reluctance to employ an older woman with a disability relegate me, like many others to the hidden, underrepresented and forgotten. It is a loss to community and society as a whole.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I would be happy to discuss any of the information contained in this submission or provide more detail.