

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by - HUGH PACKARD - 2002/1 Churchill Fellow

THE 2002 BLAKENEY MILLAR CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP

To study overseas innovations and best practices in providing employment options for people with disabilities in isolated, rural and remote locations. A specific emphasis of this fellowship was to investigate employment options that are developing in countries with significant, modern, softwood industries, similar to those established and developing around Tumut in southern NSW.

INTRODUCTION

Each year The Blakeney Millar Foundation will fund a Churchill Fellowship that is of direct benefit to the development and enrichment of Tumut in southern NSW, but only if such an application is made that meets all the requirements for a standard Churchill Fellowship. I wish to acknowledge the sponsorship provided by the Blakeney Millar Foundation and commend them on having the vision to support the development of the community they represent through this collaborative partnership with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

I also wish to thank my employer, Valmar Support Services Ltd., for supporting my Fellowship in so many ways, not the least of which was allowing me to vacate the role of CEO for three months during a period of significant growth in the organisation. Robin Reid, my relieving CEO, not only kept the organisation moving in the right direction while I was away, but also provided me with one of the references for the Fellowship (although he could have provided all three). It would be fair to say that without Robin's support, mentoring, knowledge of both the timber and disability fields, and friendship over the past 14 years, neither Valmar nor I would have been in a situation to be able to participate in the Churchill Fellowship.

As an elected representative on Tumut Shire Council, I would like to thank the Council for giving me leave of absence for the duration of the fellowship. The General Manager of the Council, Chris Adams, as one of my referees, saw the advantage to Tumut, not only of having one of the councillors away for three months, but also of my project. I truly felt I represented my community as I travelled overseas.

I must also thank Associate Professor Gwynnyth Llewellyn from the University of Sydney, who in supporting my application, as my professional referee, added significant weight and credibility to my bid for the fellowship.

Louise Halsey did a sterling job as my Churchill mentor, preparing me for the realities of three months on the road.

Every location and service I visited made me feel welcome, and put aside time and resources to make my visit a professional success. I would however like to particularly acknowledge the assistance of Linda Perry from Vela Microboards in BC who helped get me on my feet at the commencement of the fellowship, the staff from the University of Montana's Rural Institute, James Meehan and Gail Fanjoy from KFI in Maine, and Liam and Nicole Connolly in Ireland who made contacts for me prior to my arrival and assisted so much during my stay.

Finally I wish to thank my family, especially my wife Lisa, for her administrative, professional, and navigational input, and for her continued love and support, before during and after the fellowship.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2002 Blakeney Millar Churchill Fellow	-	Hugh Packard, B.A., Grad.Dip.R.P.
Address	-	PO Box 433, TUMUT, NSW, 2720
Phone	-	02 69474 150(w) 0428 680 889(mob)
Email	-	valmar@tpgi.com.au
Position	-	C. E. O., Valmar Support Services Ltd

Project Description:

To study overseas innovations and best practices - Canada, USA, Republic of Ireland, Sweden and the UK – in providing employment options for people with disabilities in isolated, rural and remote locations, with a specific emphasis on any development in innovative employment practices linked with modern softwood processing industries.

Highlights & Key Lessons of the Fellowship

British Columbia – Disability services in this Canadian Province, far from being the leaders in disability employment they were a short time ago, had recently suffered a crushing blow as an unintended side-effect of mainstream minimum wage legislation, and had almost completely ceased to operate any supported employment services, with a consequence being a huge increase in under or unemployment for adults with disabilities who otherwise had enjoyed a productive working life. The Australian Government is currently undertaking a major disability reform process involving supported employment so the sobering lessons to be learnt from the BC experiences could not be timelier. In short if the wages bar is raised too high, too quickly for supported employment, rather than moving en mass to open employment, people with disabilities will fall out of the employment environment altogether.

Montana/Wyoming - Through meetings with a number of staff with the University of Montana's Rural Institute of Disability Studies and Chuck Sperry from The Rocky Mountain Centre for Economic Democracy I had my eyes opened to the very real benefits of "self-employment" for people with disabilities in isolated locations, and in large centres. Self-employment, where the support agency facilitates and supports a person with a disability to become their own boss, in a field in which they have a natural interest, is as yet not widely accepted as an employment option in Australia. As the Australian Disability Reform process proceeds there are excellent opportunities for this employment option to be further investigated and developed, especially for people in isolated locations.

Ontario - Discussions with service providers in Ontario made two things very clear...

1. Supported employment relies on its existence on having a legislative environment that encourages this type of employment option. At the very time I was there the whole supported employment sector was awaiting to see if they were going to be supported to continue operations. There appeared to be a real risk that this Province may follow BC in allowing supported employment to wither on the vine.
2. Business / Disability Service Partnerships, an option being encouraged in Australia, will only survive the test of time if they are based on a sound commercial footing with a financial return to the business and more that simply a feeling of altruism.

Maine – In Maine at Millinocket I saw just how much can be achieved in individualising supports for people with disabilities, both vocational and non-vocational, by a small rural disability service, KFI. This award winning service has proved that size, location, and to a large degree funding need not be barriers to excellence in service provision. KFI demonstrates that the philosophy underpinning an organisation is crucial in shaping the eventual services provided. Additionally the KFI experience

demonstrated that flexibility in the funding of services, perhaps more even than the level of funding provided, is essential to best meet the needs of the people the funding seeks to assist.

Ireland – Despite most services being well behind Australia in providing real work for real pay, some organisations in Ireland are running “demonstration projects” in supported employment that within their charter, seek to provide valued work in an integrated setting, and most importantly, give a net financial return to the economy as a whole. The economic modelling coming from these projects will prove very interesting for the disability sector in Australia

Sweden – Samhall AB, a very large supported employment provider covering all of Sweden, is an example of one extreme as a solution to finding work for people with disabilities. Although much in Sweden would not transplant readily to Australia, there are lessons to be learnt in the area of industry enterprise, industry partnerships and enterprise change.

The UK - My time in the UK was limited, and the summer holidays impacted on the availability of key staff, as did a national strike by local government community service workers. Despite this I was able to establish that a general move away from supported employment to open employment under a time-limited outcome driven funding system was resulting in most people with moderate or severe disabilities missing out on employment as an option in their lives. This also is timely as Australia moves to implement a system of individualised Case Based Funding for disability employment services.

Dissemination & Implementation

Nationally:

- I sit on a national committee, funded and supported by the Commonwealth Department of Family & Community Services, called the Business Services Implementation Group, and already I have furnished them with written reports on the relevant areas of my fellowship. As this group continues to work through the Disability Reform Process over the next three years, key findings from my fellowship will be used to inform the development of policy and funding decisions.
- Since returning I have spoken at one national ACROD conference on disability employment held at Coffs Harbour, where 400 managers and key staff from around Australia heard my presentation on the fellowship and my key findings.

Statewide:

- Upon returning I was invited to sit on a NSW ACROD/DFaCS sponsored working group seeking to find practical solutions to assist as many supported employment services to implement the current reforms. This body has had its first meeting and will meet every two months for at least two years.

Regionally:

- I have spoken at two regional meetings since returning, one in Deniliquin and the other at Wagga, and I am booked for others.
- My organisation, assisted by the knowledge gained overseas, is mentoring and working with a number of other disability services in southern NSW to meet the reform agenda changes.

Locally:

- All the lessons learnt from the fellowship will be used to inform the next round of strategic planning undertaken by Valmar Support Services Ltd., and hence assist to shape hands-on service provision in the future in Tumut and the surrounding shires.

PROGRAMME

During May, June and July of 2002 I visited with the following organisations and people.

CANADA

Vela Microboard Association of British Columbia. - Surrey, B.C., Canada

Linda Perry – Executive Director

Port Alberni Association for Community Living - Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada

Catherine Waddington - President

Nicole Waddington - Vela Microboard Consumer, Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada

Mainstream Association for Proactive Community Living – Burnaby, B.C., Canada

Jordan Thurstan - Executive Director

Glenn Thibeault - Employment Coordinator

Mennonite Central Committee Support Care Services - Abbotsford, B.C., Canada

Peter Andres - Regional Manager

Chilliwack Society for Community Living - Chilliwack, B.C., Canada

Brenda Gillette – Executive Director

Shuswap Association for Community Living - Salmon Arm, B.C., Canada

Greg Cheyne - Executive Director

Goodwill Toronto - Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Gagandeep Kaur Nagra - Vocational Services and Human Resources Coordinator.

U.S.A.

Rocky Mountain Centre for Economic Democracy - Florence, Montana, U.S.A.

Chuck Sperry - Executive Director

The University of Montana, Rural Institute of Disability Studies – Missoula, Montana, U.S.A.

Nancy Maxson - Logistics Coordinator

Mike Flaherty - Organisational Consultant

Roger Shelley - Organisational Consultant

Opportunity Resources Inc. - Missoula, Montana, U.S.A.

Jack Chambers - Executive Director
Peter J. Hathaway - Director of Vocational Services
Rich Lloyd - Wood Products Manager

Katahdin Friends Inc (KFI) - Millinocket, Maine, U.S.A.

James Meehan - Executive Director
Gail Fanjoy - Director of Development

IRELAND

Mid West Health Board, Vocational Training Services - Newcastle West, County Limerick, Ireland

Donald Cooper - Training Coordinator

The Brothers Of Charity, Mid Western Region - Newcastle West, County Limerick, Ireland

Noel Wilmoth - Area Manager

Charleville & District Association for the Handicapped - Charleville, County Cork, Ireland

Connor Coonahan - Chief Executive Officer

Rehab Group - Sandymount, Dublin, Ireland

Clíodhna O'Neill - Service Development Coordinator

SWEDEN

Samhall AB - Stockholm, Sweden

Christer Mahl - Planning Director

U.K.

WTCS Ltd. - Barnstaple, Devon, U.K.

Katrina Lang - Facilitator

FELLOWSHIP REPORT

Bearing in mind the aim of my Fellowship was...

“to study overseas innovations and best practices in providing employment options for people with disabilities in isolated, rural and remote locations, with a specific emphasis on any development in innovative employment practices linked with modern softwood processing industries.”...

I must state at the outset that I feel I did not find the “best practices...in innovative employment practices linked with modern softwood process industries” I had been hoping and expecting to find. Due to a range of factors, varying from country to country, I found more to bring back to Australia as cautionary tales than best practices, particularly relating to supporting people with disabilities in employment.

I did however find a number of trends, repeated from place to place, that in a very broad sense might suggest some strategic opportunities for disability employment in Australia. Additionally whilst visiting and discussing disability employment issues, many other ideas on service delivery to people with disability in all the other areas of their lives were brought to my attention, and invariably discussed and investigated. This broadening of my focus, as well as being almost inevitable, provided a more rounded view of the disability support systems operating in each location I visited.

In writing the body of this report I was faced with the question of format. Do I simply list each place I visited, and note the content of my discussions? Or do I report by country, state, province or county? Rather than do either, and to try to enhance the report's readability, I have settled on reporting under five headings, two of which are drawn directly from the key words in my project brief, and the other three arising out of the broader scope of my Fellowship that developed along the way, with my conclusions and recommendations also reported under these headings. Hopefully this will draw my disparate observations and experiences together into something of use to the widest range of people.

1. Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Linked to Modern Softwood Industries

The town in which I live and work, Tumut NSW, is the centre of one of the largest softwood growing and processing districts in the Southern Hemisphere, hence my interest in this area of investigation. This aspect of my Fellowship also drove my choice of geographical areas to visit. British Columbia, Montana, Maine, and Sweden all have large timber industries, and Ireland's is emerging.

It is perhaps ironic that this element of my Fellowship, that had such a great influence on its' format, proved to be the area that I found the least positive ideas to bring home. Indeed, in only one case did I find employment linkages with modern softwood industries that even equalled those already established in Tumut and other places in Australia.

In Montana, Opportunity Inc. operates a Wood Products division that provides “real work” for people with disabilities in a range of timber processing operations, such as docking, grading, multi-ripping, chipping, packing and minor manufacturing. The employees of this operation work in a true industrial setting, carrying out jobs that otherwise would be done by mainstream workers at the local sawmills, and are paid a productivity based wage. The business has grown rapidly over the past decade, but must purchase all timber, process it, and then sell it back to the

sawmills. Much of the time of the senior support worker with this business is therefore spent sourcing and marketing timber, and a large amount of capital is tied up in inventory.

I visited a number of other “timber divisions” of disability services carrying out woodwork, furniture manufacture and furniture restoration, none of which were operating as viable enough businesses to warrant detailed discussion. The most promising idea from these services was outdoor furniture restoration, which was proving to be quite successful.

Samhall in Sweden has developed strong links with companies using softwood products to manufacture furniture, and operate as contractors to these major companies, but they are not involved in the sawmilling end of the production process. The work they do is high value, valued and utilises modern equipment. Although not directly linked to sawmilling, there certainly are lessons in the broader business/disability sector relationships to be learned that will be discussed under a later heading.

In British Columbia the timber industry was in disarray and reeling from an import duty of 27.22% introduced by the USA the day before I arrived. The forest industries in BC are huge, and this shock was being predicted to lead to even less employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the sector. To quote from **Jim McNulty of The Province, Friday May 3rd, 2002...** *“the big question...is how to save BC’s huge forest industry when companies must begin paying cash for the duties on May 23...and where 50,000 workers now face the chop.”* (Page A29c)... and quoted in the same paper, Vancouver based lumber analyst Charles Widman said...*“the value added industry is going to get slaughtered”*. (Page A41)

This Value Added sector of the lumber industry is the area where most employment for people with disabilities occurs, so this development was a sobering reminder that as support agencies move to find more mainstream employment opportunities for people with disabilities, they become ever more exposed to the vagaries of the broader economic environment.

In most places I visited, the Occupational Health & Safety Aspects of employing people with disabilities in timber processing industries was cited as one of the major impediments preventing more vocational activity taking place. Linked with this was the issue of Workers Compensation Insurance costs. Where services did not have a strong focus on providing “real work” for “real wages” there was no incentive to move employees with disabilities into what were seen as dangerous, economically exposed and potentially very-costly-to-insure jobs in timber processing.

Conclusions

- Aligning employment with a volatile industry, such as timber milling/processing has the potential to secure “real employment outcomes” for people with disabilities, but it is inherently risky, both in terms of economic exposure and safety related issues.
- Generally disability support services will only move away from “safe” traditional sheltered employment options if there is a legislative requirement for a strong focus on real employment.

Recommendations

- Disability support services in Australia should consider establishing employment options linked to the timber industry because this can deliver excellent work outcomes, however consideration must be given to maintaining a broad base of work, and to ensuring OH&S issues are fully considered.
- The Federal Government should be kept aware of the possible detrimental impacts of OH&S legislation on the disability employment sector as it moves into ever more real employment in industrial enterprises.

2. Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities in Isolated, Rural and Remote Locations.

Apart from the options discussed above relating to employment in the timber industries, I investigated a number of alternative options for providing employment for people with disabilities in more isolated areas, that can be summarised under the three headings of Self Employment, Individualised Funding for Open Employment and Business / Disability Industry Partnerships.

2.1. Self-Employment

Traditional thinking in the disability employment sector has seen sheltered employment develop, and more recently support in open employment. The University of Montana and the Rocky Mountain Centre for Industrial Democracy have even more recently been championing the concept of Self Employment as a far more empowering and economically sound approach to finding gainful employment for people with disabilities. This concept has particular relevance in more isolated and remote communities where small populations would preclude the establishment of congregate sheltered employment services, and the lack of any jobs in open employment make placing people with disabilities extremely difficult.

Conclusions

In brief Self Employment has been shown to...

- Provide real work that individuals with disabilities enjoy and find rewarding, as it is in areas that interest them, rather than in sheltered settings doing whatever work is at hand.
- Enable people with disabilities to build equity in their businesses and lives, hence becoming more empowered economically
- Provide employment for people in isolated areas with high unemployment and low job prospects.

To prosper however, Self-Employment needs the following...

- A government-funding regime that is flexible and enables creativity in application.
- An insurance environment that enables micro businesses to exist.
- A disability income support system that enhances rather than inhibits self-driven income generation.

Recommendations

- The Commonwealth Government be encouraged to allow Case Based Funding to support Self-Employment
- Avenues be developed to assist people seeking Self- Employment to obtain insurance cover at a realistic price.
- Valmar – the organisation I manage – commence work on seeking Self-Employment opportunities for people with disabilities

2.2. Individualised Funding for Open Employment

Australia is currently implementing a system of Individualised Funding called Case Based Funding for Commonwealth Funded employment support, hence this area was of particular interest to me.

A number of the locations I visited, BC, Montana, Maine and the UK, had individualised funding regimes that at their best enhanced and empowered people with disabilities to move into open employment, but that also had the potential to support people into underemployment, unemployment and/or loneliness. My impressions of these various systems are as follows....

Conclusions

- Individualised Funding that is strictly outcomes focused, and time-limited does not provide good, durable outcomes, but rather leads to inappropriate responses and short-term placements.
- Individualised Funding that is flexible in application across all disability supports, will not tend to develop Open Employment outcomes, but will tend towards the safer sheltered employment or day-program option.
- Individualised Funding for employment that is recurrent, but at a low level, will tend to support part-time work where the person with a disability becomes underemployed and where often loneliness and isolation are reported as side effects.
- Individualised Funding that has progress payments based on duration of employment will tend to disadvantage those people with disabilities with even slightly complex disabilities and support needs.

Recommendation

- ACROD (Australia's peak body for disability support organisations) monitor the implementation of Case Based Funding, paying particular attention to the Commonwealth Disability Census Data relating to hours of employment and duration of employment.

2.3. Business/Disability Service Partnerships

A range of these partnerships had been initiated in the past in many of the places I visited, but there was unanimous agreement that they only lasted if they were underpinned by the clear demonstration of mutual economic gain to both parties.

Conclusion

- Businesses are in the business of making money, and any altruistic partnership will not be durable unless it can also clearly demonstrate a net return to the business.
- Charity and philanthropy are ephemeral while profit persists.

Recommendations

- Underpin any future Business Partnership undertaken by Valmar with clear statements of the economic gain to the business partner.
- Report these observations to ACROD and DF&CS.

4. Support Opportunities for People with Disabilities in Isolated, Rural & Remote Locations

People with significant disabilities require support in all areas of their lives to achieve independence and community integration, not just in employment. Many of the organisations I visited provided supports in these non-employment areas, and I was therefore able to make some useful observations.

Vela Microboards in BC are overseeing a method of service delivery that, although developed initially for people with complex and challenging needs who had been unable to have these needs met by the existing service support system, was proving to be an extremely useful vehicle for providing effective services for people in isolated locations.

In brief, Microboards are very small services that receive funding, oversee service delivery and acquit funding, whilst providing service to only one person with a disability. Usually the Microboard is made up of family and friends of the person with a disability and hence the idea is a more formal extension of the “Circle of Friends” concept. Microboards, through their non-bureaucratic structure, their large amounts of voluntary input, their intimate knowledge of the communities in which they operate, and of course their understanding of and commitment to the person with a disability that they serve, are at their best able to deliver cost-efficient, individually tailored, responsive and culturally appropriate services to people with very high support needs in extremely isolated locations. They do however rely on significant amounts of informed, on-going and voluntary input from a number of family and friends, hence in many cases where this is not able to be harnessed, or is non-existent, or people burn-out, Microboards are not appropriate.

In the Australian setting Microboards could provide another opportunity for some people with disabilities, however the Public Liability Insurance issues could be a systemic hurdle.

KFI in Maine is a support service that, although being based in an isolated and depressed rural location, has won national awards for excellence in genuinely individually focussed support. Of all the services I have seen, in Australia and overseas, they are the ones who have most closely been able (and prepared) to match their philosophy with actions. The quality of their outcomes have been recognised at many levels, and although they are based in a small struggling timber town, they are opening branches throughout Maine, including in the State Capital.

With permission from KFI, I will set out their Philosophy Statement, and their Top Ten Lessons Learnt, to demonstrate how and what they have achieved.

Philosophy Statement

“ KFI is committed to assisting individuals with disabilities to exercise their choices resulting in growth and personal independence. We will assist each person to become productive and involved in the community in a way that satisfies and enriches both the individual and the community. The personal support which make this possible will be provided in the most integrated, efficient, compassionate and least intrusive manner available.”

KFI's Top Ten Lessons Learned

1. **Forget Money.** The greatest changes cost nothing – values, philosophy and flexible schedules work wonders.
2. **Understand how simple it is.** We try to make process too difficult. The question to ask is: what would we want if we were the person needing supports (because for many of us, some day we will be)?
3. **Find a new scapegoat.** The funders do **NOT** block the way. You can do what you want (with some compromise) within the current funding restrictions.

4. **Ask Hard Questions** of yourself and give brutally honest answers.
5. **Provide services in the person's community** - don't truck them to your community.
6. **Do it one person at a time.** To change a "program" is overwhelming. To make it possible for one person at a time is doable and exiting.
7. **Start with the ideal and compromise id necessary.** Don't start with the compromise.
8. **Realise that space determines services.** No matter how noble your intentions, a big room will become your " day services" centre.
9. **Change will be confusing** to everyone and to a certain degree make life more difficult. But look at the results.
10. **Win support by convincing everyone of the gains for people.** The Hendsbee Principle, named in honour of Gloria Hendsbee, a 20 year veteran employee who fought tenaciously for change if she thought it benefited people with disabilities.

Conclusion

- There are a number of services, and service types that would warrant further investigation for "transplanting" into Australia. They may not be able to be imported without adaptation to the Australian disability support environment, hence closer investigation would be warranted.

Recommendations

- ACROD NSW and ACROD National be encouraged to bring a representative from Vela Microboards and KFI to Australia to speak on their services at the appropriate forums.
- Valmar Support Services Ltd consider the KFI Philosophy Statement and Lessons learnt as an aspect of their ongoing strategic planning.

5. Trends in Disability Support of Broad Relevance to Australia

This is my final "catch all" heading, under which I hope to capture a range of issues that I feel are worthy of mention and perhaps further investigation. I will not report here with conclusions and recommendations, simply with observations and ideas.

Rehab Group in Ireland has commissioned extensive and detailed economic modelling to clarify the real economic value to a community of employment participation by people with disabilities. The full copy of this report would be worth obtaining, both by ACROD and the Commonwealth Department of Family & Community Services.

The Enterprise Mix evident in supported employment services in the USA, Ireland and Sweden demonstrated a move away from manufacturing/marketing/creating products to service sector enterprises and contracted piece-work. All these countries reported losing manufacturing functions to prisons, cheaper international competitors and automation.

Quality Assurance Systems for disability services were in place or were being considered in most of the places I visited, however none appeared to be as well considered and tailored to the realities of the sector as that currently being introduced in Australia. I feel there is a significant opportunity for Australia to market our QA system internationally.

The Size of Organisations I visited, even in extremely remote locations, was much larger than I expected. In almost all areas a "small" service had at least 100 consumers. In Australia there are many "small" services with 10 or less consumers. Apart from Microboards, I did not find any services so small. Why this is so is unclear, but Australia certainly appears to be out of step in maintaining a constellation of mini services, with the attendant administrative inefficiencies.

Wage Determination for Employees With Disabilities, a burning issue in Australia, was not even on the agenda in any of the places I visited. Nowhere seems as hung up on the notion that people with disabilities must be assessed and paid exactly what they are worth as employees. Some places pay full mainstream wages to all, with the government picking up the losses by the businesses; others pay almost full mainstream wages, also with deficit funding; others pay a crude productivity based wage, but with minimum wage rates much lower than Australia: and yet others pay every employee with disabilities an extremely low, flat “allowance” regardless of productive capacity, with other income support structures picking up their living costs.

Australia appears to be leading the world in our attempts to develop a fair, transparent and effective wage determination tool, however almost everywhere I visited had major philosophical reservations about assessing a persons’ productive capacity. The standard response was that this was potentially an invasion of privacy and a demeaning and discriminatory practice that singled out people with disabilities from the mainstream workforce. Interestingly as noted, in some places the response to this was to pay everyone a full wage, and yet in others to pay everyone almost no wage.

I came to the conclusion that Australia is very different in this area, especially in regards to our industrial relations environment. When this is combined with the Australian income support system

(Disability Support Pension), taxation system and the Australian notion of a “fair go”, the response to this issue here is bound to be uniquely Australian.

The British Columbian Experience following a dramatic and large increase in wages to people with disabilities in Business Services. For over a decade BC had a provincial government that had actively supported the development of a strong disability service sector, including business services, day programs, open employment and deinstitutionalised accommodation support. The Canadian federal government has almost no role in any aspect of disability support.

In 1995 provincial legislation was passed making it illegal to pay sub-minimum wages to any employee. This legislation was not aimed at the disability sector, but at the whole labour market. Indeed the advice given by the appropriate minister at the time was that business services were not captured by this legislation and should continue with business as usual. A test case was however run and won by a person in a correctional institution who was being paid sub-minimum wages. After this determination by the courts, all business services were directed to either pay minimum wage to all employees with disabilities, or to sever their employer/employee relationship with people with disabilities.

At about this time there was a landslide change of provincial government, with the new government refusing to accept any responsibility for the problems in this area left by the previous government.

I visited with five service providers, including the largest in BC and a range of smaller ones, and spoke with a number of consumers and/or their families, and the story was consistent from all angles. The result of this sudden and dramatic rising of the bar has been that almost all people previously in Business Services have moved into either totally non-vocational day programs, are unemployed, are in long-term “training”, or are voluntarily doing for free the work they did previously as paid employees.

In a number of places I observed people with disabilities who clearly had the ability and interest to work, watching TV in group settings, maintaining local parks as volunteers, participation in vocational training for jobs that did not exist, and generally being part of a system that reluctantly was under utilising their potential. None of the staff I spoke to were happy about the situation.

Despite the most pressing of imperatives to move as many people as possible into open employment, this was not happening. In part this was due to the low levels of funding and the block nature of the grants, but more because the minimum wage decision had made any entry-level jobs extremely difficult to find. One organisation I visited supports 500 individuals, of whom only 10 were in open employment placements, with the balance being in day programs of one type or another. Prior to the minimum wage changes, 300 were in employment, and 200 in day programs. The organisation's government funding had remained unchanged, but their overall income level had been reduced significantly as they moved out of income generating business services.

Although this is an extreme case, the BC experience has shown me one possible future if the bar is raised too high, too quickly for business services. Rather than a huge step up into open employment, there has been a resurrection of the old Activity Therapy Centre model of service provision, with significantly worse outcomes for many people with disabilities.

Insurance Issues, currently much in the news in Australia, were not a major concern for most of the services I visited, other than the increasing Workers Compensation costs as businesses became more business-like. In BC, the government had initiated a scheme whereby if a service were to be contracted by the government to provide support to people with disabilities, that organisation would immediately be covered by the government's public liability insurance. This insurance environment had enabled Microboards to thrive.

My general conclusion on insurance is that a range of innovative and effective support options such as Microboards and Self-Employment would be difficult to introduce in Australia, simply through the insurance environment inhibiting their development. Work is already underway to improve the insurance environment in Australia, and ACROD must remain vocal and clear on the insurance needs of the disability sector. It would be wrong to see the future of disability support shaped more by the vagaries of the insurance companies than by the dreams and aspirations of people with disabilities and those who support them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During my Fellowship I achieved much of what I set out to do, fell short in some areas, but learned more than anticipated in others. In addition, I came across ideas and services that I had not considered prior to departure. The experience was of great value to me professionally and personally, and I hope it will be able to be translated into benefits for people with disabilities in both the Tumut region and the wider Australian community.