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PARENTS OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY ARE FEARLESS – NOT FRIGHTENED

Statement by Mary Lou Carter, Secretary of Carers Alliance:

“Many of our members are parents of adult children with intellectual disability employed in Australia’s Disability Enterprises (previously called ‘sheltered workshops’), our families send out a call to the Senate to respect our family members’ right of choice – the most basic of human rights – and support the passage of the BSWAT Payment Bill through the Upper House.

“We are fearless – not frightened – when it comes to protecting the jobs of our sons and daughters with intellectual disability.”

Ms Carter, who has been attending the current Fair Work Commission discussions into the process of designing a new instrument for wage assessment for Disability Enterprise employees, said the Courts are an unsatisfactory tool for fashioning public policy.

“The legal system is such that only lawyers and government-funded disability rights activists know the rules. Our family members are expected to just play along. That’s a whole new world for parents trying to protect their children’s right of choice.

“More importantly, some 9,998 workers with intellectual disability have had no say about either this BSWAT Payment Bill now before the Senate, or the forced imposition of an alternative Supported Wage assessment tool by the end of April. Forcing services to use a wage tool that would cause closure due to financial insolvency would mean some 70% of those people could soon be unemployed. Then they would have no employment income and have to pay for day services – if they could get them - or be forced to stay at home in the care of their families.

“Parents know exactly what’s at stake if their adult children with intellectual disabilities lose their jobs in Disability Enterprises. It’s not just about the money, it’s the loss of dignity that work provides. It’s the poverty, the loss of social interaction with their peers, the loss of their sense of achievement and inclusion as valued members of their community, the loss of their self-esteem and pride.

“It’s about the denial of their right of choice -

1. The right to choose whether they take any compensation – to which they might be entitled - by opting out of a class action in which they were included by legal artifice, without consent or consultation; and
2. To choose to continue working in their current jobs, earning a fair wage consistent with their capacity. If the actions of the ideologues force closures, then our workers cannot choose what no longer exists, because more time is needed to develop an alternative wage tool.

“Many people currently working in Disability Enterprises contend these choices have been denied them because of actions unilaterally taken by funded rights activists, the lawyers and the unions, without any reference to the major stakeholders: the workers with an intellectual disability themselves, their parents, families and carers.

“You would have to be there at the Fair Work Commission hearings, witnessing the ideological fight by funded advocates, lawyers and unionists, to feel how family members are depicted. If some of the workers now employed in Disability Enterprises can work in open employment, that’s great for them. But the majority cannot, and neither they nor their jobs should be demeaned, disparaged or jeopardised in this way.

“Families of Australians with significant intellectual disabilities are deeply frustrated by a system that can mount an argument based on rights, and yet, in the course of that argument deny the basic right of choice to our nation’s most vulnerable workers.

“These are our children, our family members. We are frustrated by the process, and lack of it, but we are fearless – not frightened – when fighting to protect our ADE’s. We know the value of jobs for these workers, especially when so many able-bodied workers cannot get jobs.

“We don’t talk about disability; we live it.”

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