



Employment Explainer

The issue

People with Down syndrome have the right to work on an equal basis with others.¹ Despite this, people with Down syndrome continue to face systemic barriers to finding a job that pays them a fair wage.

These barriers include employment supports that do not work for people with Down syndrome, income support systems that disincentivise work, and attitudinal barriers of employers and the broader community.²

We know that people with Down syndrome want to work - NDIS participants with intellectual disability and Down syndrome have the highest percentage of NDIS plans with a goal to work (77%). Despite this, only 9% of NDIS participants with Down syndrome over 25 years old are in open employment, compared with 54% of participants overall.³ This tells us that the current system of supporting people into open employment is not working and needs to change.

69% of participants with Down syndrome who have a paid job are working in segregated employment, or Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). In fact, Down syndrome is the most represented disability type working in ADEs.⁴ Under Fair Work's Supported Employment

¹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD)

² Meltzer, A., Robinson, S., and Fisher, K. (2020) Barriers to finding and maintaining open employment for people with intellectual disability in Australia, Social Policy Administration, 54, pp 88-101.

³ NDIA (2022) Employment outcomes for NDIS participants, 31 December 2022, [NDIS231 Participant Outcomes Employment - Full report_fACC \(2\).pdf](#)

⁴ NDIA (2024) From ADEs to open employment, May, NDIA Practice and Leadership Branch, [From ADEs to open employment Report Accessible \(1\).pdf](#)

Services Award, people working in segregated employment can be paid as little as \$3.01 an hour.⁵

There are supports available to people with disability seeking work, principally the Disability Employment Service (DES) program. However, this program does not meet the needs of people with Down syndrome, reflected in the fact that only 3.1% of people supported by DES have an intellectual disability.⁶

Others, particularly those leaving school, may wish to pursue education and training to work towards the goal of employment. Unfortunately, many existing education and training pathways are not accessible for people with Down syndrome, making the transition to employment yet more challenging.

⁵ FairWork Ombudsman, Supported Employment Services Award 2020, Schedule D, [FWO - Award Viewer - MA000103](#)

⁶ Inclusion Australia (2022), DES Reform submission, https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Our-Submissions_2022_02_Submission-on-Disability-Employment-System-Reform.pdf

Our view

Every person with Down syndrome has the right to access skilled support to explore open employment, to work in a job that is right for them and be paid a fair wage for their work.

There is significant evidence that open employment leads to better quality of life outcomes for people with disability.⁷ Open employment is defined as a workplace where people with and without disability work together and everyone is paid a fair wage for their work. Employment can provide social inclusion and community connection, financial freedom and security and feelings of confidence, capability and being part of a team.

There are many people with Down syndrome working in open employment in a meaningful and enjoyable role, yet most people with Down syndrome who are in the workforce are in segregated employment and are paid a very low wage.

Like anyone else in the community, one pathway or one kind of job will not be suitable for all people with Down syndrome. People thrive in jobs that they are interested in and that focus on what they can do, rather than what they can't. Some people will need ongoing support and training in their job while some may need less support over time. Some will pursue training or formal education before work. It is important that employment and any supports to find and maintain a job are tailored to the person and their support needs to give them the best chance of success.

It is also important that Government and decision makers address the systemic barriers standing in the way of people with Down syndrome reaching their employment goals. This includes moving away from segregated employment and subminimum wages, designing services and supports to better meet the needs of people with Down syndrome and supporting work to address attitudinal barriers in the community.

"Having a job provides me with a sense of purpose and motivation. It structures my day, giving me a reason to get up each morning. In addition to this, employment allows me to earn money, meet new people, and learn new skills. I feel valued as a contributing member of my community. But the most important aspect of having a job is to help me maintain a well-balanced healthy lifestyle by incorporating work, mental, physical, and emotional well-being"

- Chris

⁷ Foley, K. R., Girdler, S., Downs, J., Jacoby, P., Bourke, J., Lennox, N., ... & Leonard, H. (2014). Relationship between family quality of life and day occupations of young people with Down syndrome. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 49(9), 1455-1465.



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What we want to happen

1. Phase out the subminimum wage

As recommended by the Disability Royal Commission, the Australian Government should lift minimum wages for employees with disability to 100% of the minimum wage by 2034.⁸

The Federal Government should begin a transition towards phasing out sub minimum wages, ensuring employees and employers are supported throughout the process so no one is left behind. This must be done in a considered way to avoid unintended consequences and ensure people with high support needs still have access to employment support and opportunities.

2. Support disability employment programs that works for people with Down syndrome

A new Disability Employment Services (DES) program will start on 1 July 2025 and will be called Inclusive Employment Australia. This new program must work to improve the way it supports people with intellectual disability. The new program must include disability employment providers that specialise in and understand people with intellectual disability, as well as added supports that will allow people with intellectual disability to maintain a job, such as ongoing support for employees in the workplace that can be adjusted up or down depending on need. This must also include education for employers on the reciprocal benefits of hiring a person with an intellectual disability.

Programs must not force anyone to work in segregated employment, or with a supported wage, but rather assume anyone who wants to work in open employment can do so with the right job and the right supports.

Programs that work should be funded on an ongoing basis. Down Syndrome Australia's Employment Connections Service is run locally by the state and territory organisations in QLD, VIC, ACT, TAS, WA, SA and NSW to connect potential employers to people with Down syndrome looking for work. Staff will work with businesses and employment agencies to show the benefits of employing people with Down syndrome, as well as help them to identify suitable jobs and provide support to recruit, train, and provide ongoing support

This program works in a way that many current Disability Employment Services do not: providing tailored and ongoing support that works with the community.

⁸ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability: Final Report (2023) Inclusive employment, education and housing, Volume 7, Recommendation 7.31.

3. The Disability Support Pension should support workers

The Disability Support Pension (DSP) provides financial support for people with disability that may be unable to work, or have limitations for work.

The DSP currently does not adequately support people with disability to find and maintain employment. The DSP places limits on the amount people can earn before their payments are reduced, and if someone is in paid work for a period of time they may lose access to the DSP altogether, creating a need to re-apply if their employment situation changes.

For people with Down syndrome this can be a huge disincentive work – people want to work for the connection to their community, pride and confidence as well as a fair wage, but do not want to risk losing the stability of the DSP if their job does not work out as planned.

We believe DSP reform should be revisited, specifically with a view to changing the administration of DSP so that people with permanent disability can retain the DSP as a support, being able to access payments as and when they need it. People should be able to remain 'on the DSP' even if they are in paid work and receiving no payments. This will provide a safety net should their job end or circumstances change such as a health event.

The following actions would further support people with Down syndrome to explore employment, work in a job that's right for them, and receive a fair wage:

4. Open employment first

People with Down syndrome can thrive in open employment, but to do so, they must be able to access skilled support, accessible information and peer support to understand their options and decide what employment might look like for them.

This could include mainstream supports such as DES improving their understanding and support of the needs of people with intellectual disability or having access to specialised support such as DSA's Employment Connections program.

DES, NDIS employment supports and other government funded services should only consider segregated employment after all other options have been explored including open employment and vocational training pathways.

5. Better support for the transition from school into education, training or open employment

People with Down syndrome need more inclusive support to transition from school into employment or education. Schools and vocational education institutions should provide accessible curriculum and assessment processes, as well as skilled support, including peer support, to navigate the transition from school into further education. This support should also include transitioning to open employment for the first time. For example DSA's Work Readiness program employs people with Down syndrome as employment ambassadors to support young adults with Down syndrome to identify their skills and strengths, learn how to create a resume and practice interviewing, and learn about workplace expectations. This type of support could also be provided to those leaving school or navigating other significant transitions.

6. Phase out segregated employment

As recommended by the Disability Royal Commission, the Government should transition away from segregated employment towards an approach in which people with disability work alongside people without disability and are paid the minimum wage.⁹

This should be a gradual transition in which employees and segregated employment providers are supported throughout the process. In particular, people who require support at work should have assistance to explore next steps, which could include open employment with support, training or other meaningful community involvement in inclusive settings.

⁹ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability: Final Report (2023) Inclusive employment, education and housing, Volume 7, Recommendation 7.32.