

Age

counts

Valuing our older workers



"The evidence that unemployment kills - particularly the middle-aged - now verges on the irrefutable. Losing a job after 20 or so years working is akin to losing a loved one or a limb. How would you feel if you lost your job because of your age?"

Chair of the House Employment, Education and Workplace Relations Committee, Dr Brendan Nelson (Member for Bradfield, New South Wales), reflected on this following the launch of the report, *Age counts: Issues specific to mature-age workers*, on 14 August 2000.

The House Employment Committee's inquiry grew out of its concern about the difficulties faced by mature-age people trying to re-enter the workforce or establish a business following unemployment. The inquiry began in March 1999 and focused on social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45. The Committee believed these issues were not sufficiently recognised and dealt with in the policy arena.

During the inquiry, the House Employment Committee received more than 200 submissions, held public hearings in most capital

cities and some regional centres, and convened a round table to consider developing a code of conduct on how retrenched workers might be supported. This round table brought together representatives from key Commonwealth agencies and peak labour and social services associations.

"Throughout the inquiry, the Committee was grateful that so many people wanted to share their own personal and emotional experiences. They believed it was important that we were aware of the incredible difficulties that face many mature-age workers when unemployed," Dr Nelson explained. "Without these honest accounts we would not have such a valuable report."

Age counts contains 38 recommendations that were developed from the personal and professional experiences presented to the House Employment Committee.

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The Employment Committee examined a number of the barriers faced by older workers, including how workers are retrenched. The Committee found that some people are so devastated by the trauma, their job searching is severely affected.

"We heard of cases where people are literally frogmarched out of a building or people are just given their last pay and off they go," Dr Nelson said. "They are given a redundancy package and no advice at all about where to go or what to do with it.

"Many have been through a harrowing experience and this has affected their ability to find another job quickly. Others have been given a more humane parting."

Deputy Chair of the House Employment Committee, Rod Sawford (Member for Port Adelaide, South Australia), explained that through the evidence that was presented to the Committee, it was clear that cultural myths and stereotypes do exist about workers over 45. This naturally adds to the difficulties facing many older job seekers.

"Some are so discouraged when they go out looking for a job that they give up trying," Mr Sawford explained. "It is much more devastating for those in rural and regional communities where jobs are already scarce and some people are forced into relocating and uprooting the whole family just to find work."

One of the key recommendations in the report *Age counts* is the development of a code of conduct for employers, so that retrenched workers are supported and given relevant and appropriate advice. The Committee also recommends that older workers at high risk of becoming long-term unemployed should have immediate access to early intervention and intensive assistance when eligible for the Job Network program.

A number of recommendations highlight the financial impact unemployment has on mature-age people, especially those who have dependant children and aged parents. Some retrenched mature-age workers still have house mortgages and the Committee recommends that these people should be given the option of accessing their superannuation contributions for a maximum unemployment period of 26 weeks, so they can meet their house repayments.

Other recommendations focus on the need for more flexibility with support services and policy guidelines. Proposals include allowing a retrenched mature-age person, under certain circumstances, to retain personal savings and to also receive Government income support; and changing the eligibility requirements for the Government's New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS).

The House Employment Committee was concerned at the number of barriers that many mature-age people face when seeking re-employment. These include age discrimination, perceived inappropriate or out-of-date skills, and difficulties faced by those job seekers in remote/regional areas without ready access to transport.

Another major concern for the Committee was the number of retrenched people who decide to start their own businesses believing this will provide them with future security.

"We encourage small business and want to see growth in this area, but it is very important that people be informed about the risks involved in starting up a small business," Mr Sawford said. "It isn't an automatic meal ticket.



The House of Representatives Employment Committee has made 38 recommendations in its *Age counts* report into issues specific to mature-age workers.

"People who are keen to establish their own business should also be allowed access to training so that their business is supported in its first two years. Otherwise the failure of the business can have an even more devastating impact, especially if it happens a few years after being retrenched."

The Committee was enthusiastic about developing options to allow mature-age job seekers to re-skill and upgrade their training. One recommendation suggests the use of training credits, tied to a specific job offer, thereby increasing a mature-age person's chances when applying for a job. Once hired, the training required would be at no cost to the employer.

Dr Nelson emphasised that the mature-age workers inquiry highlighted to all Committee members how important it is to value the experience and knowledge of mature-age workers.

"It is essential for any organisation to have a mix of age groups as this creates a healthy and dynamic workplace. With mature-age workers, we can all benefit from their wealth of experience, whether they undertake a role as mentor, decide to remain in the workforce or if they choose to seek work following retrenchment.

"We need to create a society that doesn't see age as a barrier. People should have the opportunity to have choices in life – and we should encourage this, not prevent it."

The report, *Age counts: Issues specific to mature-age workers*, is available from the House Employment Committee's web site at: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/eewr/OWK/index.htm

Copies of the report are also available through Government Info Shops in all capital cities or by telephoning Ausinfo, free call 13 24 47.