

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (10:21): On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Employment, I wish to make a statement concerning the committee's inquiry into mental health and workforce participation.

On 3 March 2011, the Standing Committee on Education and Employment adopted terms of reference to inquire into barriers and opportunities as to enhancing the participation in education, training and the workforce of people with mental ill health. The committee have received over 40 submissions and continues to welcome submissions from employers, service providers, clients and their families, and experts in the field of mental health.

The committee have conducted site inspections in Melbourne and commenced a program of public hearings and site inspections in Melbourne and Canberra. I take this early opportunity to thank those organisations that hosted the committee and provided some very interesting oral and written evidence to the inquiry. We are seeing some creative and exciting programs helping people with mental illness to get into the workplace. The committee plan to hold further hearings in Adelaide, Whyalla, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, with other locations to be announced in due course. There can be no disputing the fundamental role of employment in the lives of all Australians who have the capacity to undertake it. Work provides economic independence, dignity and a sense of purpose. Many people suffering from mental ill health fail to fully realise their potential because of existing barriers in place; however, they are often capable of achieving at the highest levels in their chosen fields.

The terms of reference of the inquiry focus on what can be done to support people with mental ill health to find and engage with education, training and workforce opportunities. The adequacy of services for people who are afflicted with mental ill health and find themselves on disability support payments is important, but this inquiry is about what can be done to help people avoid the disability stream and minimise impediments that keep people on disability payments in cases where they might otherwise be able to enter education, training or the workforce. This inquiry is about fostering and supporting meaningful and continued engagement with communities and education, training and workforce opportunities. Without pre-empting the committee's report and recommendations, one important factor in minimising contact with the disability support payment system is the ability to intervene early in cases where a person suffers an episode of mental ill health. Intervention does not just refer to access to mental health support; it is about bringing in employment, training and education opportunities at an early point. An important part of our inquiry will be exploring opportunities to integrate the mental health system with education, training and employment systems. Early intervention is about how quickly someone who has suffered an episode of mental ill health can be exposed to and brought back into employment, training or education.

Another important issue in supporting people with mental ill health back into the workforce or education and training is addressing the stigma that accompanies mental illness. The committee will be looking at this issue. Stigma relates not only to the prejudices relating to mental illness held in wider society but to self-stigma, as these views are reflected back upon and sometimes eventually owned by the person who suffers mental ill health. The stigma accompanying mental illness manifests itself in, among other things, issues of disclosure.

The focus has been on employment but, as I mentioned, we are also having a focus on education and training. We have already heard evidence about the impact of an episode of mental ill health when a person is younger. It may disrupt their schooling in year 11 or year 12, an important time for getting the literacy and numeracy skills required to take on a job. That is why the committee is looking not just at employment but also at education and training, which are enablers to move people into the workforce. That will also be a focus of the committee. We are looking forward to visiting more examples of organisations that provide employment opportunities to people who suffer mental ill health.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the secretariat, who have put together a very exciting program so far. We look forward to continuing this very important work and making some recommendations that will make a difference to the lives of people with a mental health issue who are trying to access employment and education.

