



**A•S•U**  
**Australian Services Union**

## **ASU Submission**

### **Inquiry into regional skills relocation**

### **House Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations**

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**TERMS OF REFERENCE:** Inquire and report on the applicability of government employment politics to address skills shortages in regional Australia by focussing on opportunities to support the relocation of unemployed workers from areas of high unemployment to areas experiencing skills shortages.

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Australian Services Union [ASU] is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 120,000 employees.
- 1.2. The ASU was created in 1993. It brought together three large unions – the Federated Clerks Union, the Municipal Officers Association and the Municipal Employees Union, as well as a number of smaller organisations representing social welfare workers, information technology workers and transport employees.
- 1.3. Today, ASU members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations and especially in the following industries and occupations:
  - Local government (both blue and white collar employment)
  - Social and community services
  - Transport, including passenger air and rail transport, road, and air freight transport
  - Clerical and administrative employees
  - Call centres
  - Information technology
  - Electricity generation, transmission and distribution
  - Water industry
  - Higher education (Queensland and SA)
- 1.4. The ASU has 11 Branches and members in every state and territory of Australia, as well as in most regional centres. The Union has approximately equal numbers of males and females as members, although the proportions vary in particular industries.
- 1.5. The ASU believes the answers to the question of how we motivate people to relocate to areas with skills shortages are common sense. People will move to access career opportunities, working conditions and lifestyle, strong and supportive communities, access to services and rewarding jobs.
- 1.6. Rather than just throwing money at the person, though relocation allowances are important, we need to take a holistic approach to attracting and retaining people to work in these areas. To this end in this submission we have identified some of current problems as to why regional communities are having problems attracting workers and have suggested a number of initiatives that will remove barriers and incentivise workers relocating to these areas.
- 1.7. The submission focuses on three industries; local government, water and electricity, as these industries are both large employers and service providers in rural and regional communities and industries where the ASU has coverage.

## **2. Rewarding jobs in rural and regional communities**

- 2.1. The local government, water and electricity industries that are located in regional areas where there is also high demand, high paying industries (such as mining in Western Australian) are experiencing problems retaining their skilled workforce. For example mining companies need electricians, mechanics and other tradespeople and can offer significantly more money than the electricity industry or a local Council can. We are finding that an electrician may start working at the electricity authority but they often leave to work for the local mining company.
- 2.2. A variety of measures are needed to meet this problem. These industries will never be able to compete with the short term financial incentives offered by the mining industry so instead they need to show there are long term and other short term incentives to be gained from working in the local government, water and electricity industries. We think this can be achieved by promoting the career opportunities in the industry and planning career pathways so that job in the electricity or water industry is perceived as offering secure long term employment with opportunities for promotion. Short term incentives can include training opportunities and workplace conditions.
- 2.3. Another way to meet this problem is to reduce the water, electricity and local government need for skilled professionals, and this can be achieved through job and work redesign.
- 2.4. In many cases significant components of a professional or skilled workers job can be undertaken by lower skilled workers with a bit of extra training. Work can be redistributed across a team of people, one skilled professional and a number of assisting clerical staff, semi-skilled or para-professional staff. This reduces the need for skilled specialists as their time is used more efficiently. It also gives workers in the lower classifications opportunities for training and development and eventually promotion into skilled roles. The ASU recommends the federal government support these industries in undertaking job and work redesign to reduce their need for skilled professionals.

## **3. Career path planning and opportunities in rural and regional communities**

- 3.1. One way to attract people to relocate is by offering opportunities that advance people's careers. We know from experience that people are very willing to move for exciting opportunities that will advance their careers. If we are to attract people to rural and regional towns then the jobs need to be career opportunities, not temporary stop gaps in response to an urgent skills crisis. The way to go about this is by undertaking workforce and career path planning that means workers who relocate to these areas have access to training and mentoring opportunities so that they can develop their skills, and have access to pathways to promotion within the local industry or community.
- 3.2. Career path planning is particularly important for low skilled workers, who are the people urgently needed in WA mining communities. Why would someone move across the country to work the cash register in a McDonalds and why would they stay for any extended period of time (that would justify the expense of relocating them)? We know that people are generally not willing to relocate for any prolonged period of time for

the same unskilled position they can obtain at home. That is why mining companies have had to bring in people from other countries on 457 visas to fill these positions. These jobs can be made to be attractive if relocation also involves opportunities to gain further training with a clear career path to a more skilled job.

- 3.3. It was once the case in local government that you could enter the sector in a low skilled position and follow a career path that could theoretically take you up to senior management. This career structure meant working for the local Council was a sought after job and earned the employer Council's strong loyalty and service from their employees. The contracting out of services over the last two decades put an end to career path planning at many Councils, but it remains a good approach for organisations to recruit and retain staff).
- 3.4. We think people will relocate, and stay in regional communities if the right career opportunities are planned in local companies or the Council, or across the community. This is the case for unskilled as well as skilled workers.
- 3.5. *Recommendation:*  
The federal government work with local industry, local government and Skills Councils to design employment opportunities that include access to training programs and clear pathways to promotion.

#### **4. Lifestyle change**

- 4.1. In media statements responding to the launch of this inquiry Darren Buchannan, Queensland director of Hays Recruitment argued that we need to promote jobs in rural and regional areas as a lifestyle change. <sup>1</sup>
- 4.2. We agree with this statement. There are a range of industrial mechanisms that can support lifestyle change, or rather having a life, in rural and regional areas. These employment conditions should be standard in all workplaces, regardless of location, but we know they aren't and in a competitive labour market rural and regional communities need to be leading the way in employment practices the promote work-life balance.
- 4.3. *Family friendly workplace conditions*  
The provision of family friendly workplace conditions such as paid maternity leave, childcare provision and flexible working arrangements are essential in any workplace. They are especially important in this context where we are asking people to relocate from communities where their friends and families live, to a new location without these support structures. We know, for example, that many people rely on grandparents to undertake some or all of the child care responsibilities in the working week.

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<sup>1</sup> Airlie Douglas, 'Inquiry examines relocation as answer to skills shortage', ABC Rural Western Australia, Monday 1/3/2010, <available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/wa/content/2010/03/s2833446.htm>>

4.4. In 2009 the ASU undertook a survey of our female members and asked a question about access to childcare. The answers from people who didn't access childcare are indicative of the child care situation for many Australian working families. Many women said that they relied on partners, grandparents, or other family members to look after their children when they were at work because childcare was "beyond their financial ability", or as one woman explained it was too expensive and wasn't available in the hours she needed because she worked shift work. We can see from these responses that the provision of affordable childcare and flexible working conditions is critical to attract people with families to relocate.

#### 4.5. *Phased in retirement*

One measure that has proved attractive for the ageing workforce are working arrangements that phase in retirement, such as part time work, working from home and other flexible arrangements. This might be attractive to people seeking a retirement lifestyle change whilst also allowing them to participate in the workforce in some capacity.

4.6. These are just two examples of employment practices that promote work- life balance and are attractive to key demographics that regional communities should be targeting to relocate. Local industry, government and unions should work together to come up with a suite of employment conditions that would make regional jobs competitive in the national labour market.

## 5. National recruitment website for local government

5.1. One of the difficulties in attracting people to relocate in the local government sector is a lack of awareness of opportunities within the sector. The sector is very fragmented and while people may hear about local opportunities they are unlikely to hear about job vacancies across the country or in another state. This is particularly the case for people employed in the lower classifications.

5.2. There is a clear need for national co-ordination and promotion of vacancies. The ideal mechanism would be through a website that advertises local government jobs to current local government workers. This website should treat people already in the sector as an internal applicant allowing them to apply first for job vacancies before applicants from outside the sector. As well as raising awareness of job opportunities in rural and regional areas, a website would generate loyalty to the sector and encourage local government workers to seek career opportunities within the sector rather than in the private sector or other tiers of government.<sup>2</sup>

#### 5.3. *Recommendation:*

The Federal Government in co-ordination with peak local government bodies establish a national job vacancy website for local government workers seeking new opportunities within the sector.

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<sup>2</sup> The local government sector is currently experiencing problems retaining employees and is facing a skills crisis in key professions town planners, building surveyors and more. The government is currently investigating the issue of retention in the sector and in October 2009 released its 'Draft local government workforce strategy' for comment from the sector. The ASU has contributed a response, which includes the idea of a national recruitment website for local government. Our full submission is available at [http://www.asu.asn.au/data\\_man/submissions/asu-response-fedgovt-lg-workforcestrategy2010-0304.pdf](http://www.asu.asn.au/data_man/submissions/asu-response-fedgovt-lg-workforcestrategy2010-0304.pdf)

## **6. National portable continuity of service scheme for local government**

- 6.1. Rural and regional Council's need experienced local government workers to run local services. Yet workers with those much needed skills and experience wanting to relocate to another state are disadvantaged by the lack of a national scheme for continuity of service, as soon as they leave the employment of one Council for another in another state they lose their accrued entitlements. This is despite the fact they are remaining within the sector and often relocating to meet employment needs, which in the WA case of mining towns, are to support activities of national significance.
- 6.2. The current public service continuity of service legislation allows for public servants to move between the Federal and State public services to gain exposure and take advantage of career opportunities in other public service's without losing their accrued entitlements. In some cases it also allows local government workers to move between Councils and the public service within State boundaries. Entitlements travel with the worker as long as they remain employed within the sector. These entitlements as they apply to local government do not extend beyond state borders.
- 6.3. A scheme that allowed local government workers to move to Councils in other states without loss of entitlements would remove one of the disincentives to relocating, and might encourage workers to move to regional Council's for career opportunities and to gain new skills.
- 6.4. *Recommendation:*  
A national portable continuity of service scheme for the local government sector should be established that would enable local government workers to move between local government bodies and keep their accrued entitlements in their new employment. The model for such a scheme should be the public service continuity of service scheme, which is established via co-dependent legislation in each state and territory. One example that includes local government workers already (however only within the state) is the Victorian legislation, the *Public Administration Act 2004 (Vic)*.

## **7. Strong and supportive communities that have access to services**

- 7.1. One of big reasons people don't move to rural and regional towns or move away is a lack of access to services. This is especially the case in WA mining towns. If the Federal Government is serious about attracting people to these towns to live and work for any sustained period of time then resources need to be invested in the local government to develop the local infrastructure and services.
- 7.2. Local government services in rural and regional areas over the last two decades have suffered from contracting out and cost shifting from other tiers of government. Contracting out has resulted in a deterioration of quality as value is assessed against the bottom line. Cost shifting has meant that those services that Council's have retained are underfunded. In addition to this amalgamation and the implementation of share services models have meant that services are not always accessible to small communities.

*7.3. Recommendation:*

Direct funding from the federal government to local Council's is urgently in these areas of national significance needed to reverse these corrosive trends and rebuild local infrastructure and services.