

## SUBMISSION ADDRESSING THE QUESTION:

### What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?

The most important challenges over the next 10 years for the public sector result from the ageing workforce.

Currently more than 40% of the workforce is over 45 years of age. In ten years time, about 60% of the workforce will be over 45 year of age.

### What challenges will that workforce face?

#### **The Challenge**

We are aware from experience that an older workforce leads to:-

- > Increased health problems and personal sick leave;
- > Decreased flexibility and speed in cognitive processing, making change a challenging process.

Personal Sick Leave - Statistics in the current '*PS news*' show that Public Servants took 11 days off on average during 2008/2009 in Northern Ireland. The report found that anxiety, stress, depression and other psychiatric illnesses were the main reasons for absence - accounting for 26.7 per cent of days lost.

Workforce efficiency – It is reasonable to assume that stressed, distressed, and depressed staff will not be very effective when they do attend work.

These account for up to half of the loss in effectiveness of the Public Service.

Whilst the general health of employees is not the responsibility of an employer, research from the US (Kaiser Permanente) demonstrates conclusively that addressing health prevention is cost effective.

Addressing the health problems and the changes in cognitive processing is essential to maintaining the morale and efficiency of the workforce

## How should we respond to this challenge?

We may theorise, or we can simply look a population with the same demographic. The Department of Veterans Affairs is an excellent model for this scenario, as DVA currently has a similar age profile as the Public Service will have in ten years.

The approach in DVA has been to support projects that focus on “Wellness” through lifestyle and nutritional advice. This is not new, and similar projects are run on an ‘ad hoc’ basis throughout the Public Service. However projects, like these, need to be scientifically evaluated, the effectiveness of different approaches compared, and the most successful ones piloted and then instigated across the Public Service.

Without evaluation the effective programs cannot be identified and promulgated.

*This is an example of a project currently being undertaken in DVA. We know Vitamin D deficiency is evident in half the population and correcting this deficiency is essential for healthy bones, and to reduce the risk of cancers and heart disease but it also improves mood, cognitive function and the ability to deal with stress. These improvements decrease personal sickness leave and improve the effectiveness of the workforce. The project aim is not to just to correct a vitamin deficiency but to evaluate scientifically the effectiveness of the project in achieving the program goals of decreasing sick leave and increasing effectiveness.*

This ‘demonstration project’ is a collaboration between the Department and the University of South Australia.

This is a model for sustainable and effective health promotion to ensure the health and wellbeing of the Public Service, whilst increasing morale and workforce efficiency.

The University Research Centre can make a substantial contribution to the success of the program by providing the necessary academic input into the planning and evaluation of projects.

This program is an essential element in a co-ordinated response to the challenges faced by an aging workforce. Therefore we would commend this approach to the Advisory Group on the Reform of Australian Government Administration for their consideration.

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