

26 November 2020

Hon Rob Lucas MLC  
Treasurer  
[treasurer.dtf@sa.gov.au](mailto:treasurer.dtf@sa.gov.au)

Dear Treasurer

***RE – Pathways back to work for older female workers***

COTA SA and The Working Women's Centre Inc welcome the stimulus spending in the recent 2020-21 State Budget to support SA business and jobs. We are pleased that the scope includes regions where 26% of older South Australians live.

We write to urge you to include in the implementation of the measures, a focus on older female workers.

About a third of older workers, particularly older women, have experienced recent age discrimination resulting in both unemployment and underemployment. Older women are unemployed for much longer periods than any other age group and, prior to COVID, women aged over 60 made up the largest proportion of Newstart recipients. COVID will compound the disadvantage older women face in the search for jobs.

While unemployment and underemployment declined in October, the net jobs growth from September to October in SA was almost entirely in traditionally male jobs. Whereas female labour force numbers were static in recent months, male employment increased by over 6,000. The female unemployment rate (7.2%) continues to be higher than that for men (6.8%).

The employment aspirations of women – particularly those in low skill occupations - are disproportionately impacted by ageism.

It will be critical that there are active strategies to support older women to find pathways back to work.

Lower lifetime earnings (the cumulative effect of lower wages, lower levels of superannuation, disproportionate caregiving responsibilities) will see an increasing number of women without housing, savings or superannuation as they age. The high-vis focus of State Government stimulus and the proposed federal government JobMaker program, with its targeted support for the employment of people aged under 35, risk exacerbating the disadvantage of older women looking for work. The public sector traineeship program and previously announced apprenticeship incentives will target young workers unless deliberate work with older cohorts is also part of implementation.

We would urge the State Government to do two things.

The first is to advocate to the federal government in relation to the Job Maker program. It is an invitation to discriminate on the basis of age and carries with it grave risks that secure full time work will be traded off for casual, part time employment.

The second thing the State Government must do is ensure that there is a focus on older female workers that addresses ageism and supports pathways back to work.

We propose a 3-year project between COTA SA and the Working Women's Centre to engage employers and older workers to trial practical strategies to counter ageism and improve access to employment. Such a project would include -

- Research (including from unemployed and underemployed older women) into the barriers to work and a scan of best practice strategies
- Work with leading South Australian employers (based on the successful Chiefs for Gender Equity model) to champion change options such as flexible work practice, tackling unconscious bias, accountability through monitoring and proactive access to training and development opportunities for older workers
- Provide input to the education of current and future employers (including with universities and vocational programs) to improve their understanding of the opportunities of an age-diverse workforce
- Expand mature age employment programs to provide access to training, retraining and new skill development for mid-career and older workers and support mature age workers transition to new industries
- Co-design and trial practical strategies through the engagement of older workers, SA business and employers and other stakeholders, including in regional SA.

The SA Government has rightly supported strategies to get young South Australians back to work. We now urge a similar focus on older female workers. Your government has just released South Australia's Plan for Ageing Well 2020-2025. It is a good plan but without active support to find pathways back to work, ageing well will be a pipe dream for an increasing number of women especially in the wake of COVID.

Treasurer, we share your Government's confidence in South Australia as we manage the challenges of COVID together. This is not a matter of choosing between two generations of workers, but of making sure that the two groups who will be the most disadvantaged, get the support they need to work again. The Budget provides an outstanding framework to address entrenched disadvantage as part of a jobs recovery.

We look forward to an opportunity to discuss this further with you.

Yours sincerely



**JANE MUSSARED**  
Chief Executive  
COTA SA



**ABBAY KENDALL**  
Director  
Working Women's Centre SA Inc



*Cc Ross Womersley, SACOSS; Martin Haese, Business SA; John Spoehr, Flinders University.*