

Ruah Community Services Submission to Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Re: Petition No 172 – First and Second Click Computer Funding

Ruah Community Services works with people in the community who experience significant social disadvantage through major mental health issues, substance use and homelessness. From 2002-03 to 2011-12, Ruah has been a recipient of Department of Education and Training WA First/Second Click funding.

This funding allowed Ruah to bring the computing skills courses to participants in the following locations: Northbridge, Gosnells, Armadale, Maddington, Langford, Fremantle, Rockingham, Mandurah, West Leederville, Perth, and West Perth.

Over 460 participants of Ruah services have taken part in the Ruah First/Second Click courses. These are people who, because of their marginalisation, face many barriers to participation in mainstream learning, including issues of stigma in the general population; inability to complete courses due to relapse; anxiety and confidence issues; effects of extended absence from learning; effects of medication; lack of support to maintain mainstream learning; tutors not necessarily skilled in dealing with learning issues they face; low income; transport issues.

Through the First/Second Click funding, Ruah has been able to provide participants with a positive learning experience in an inclusive and supportive learning environment. As a non-government agency, Ruah is constantly taking on people with complex needs into its case management services. Addressing barriers and facilitating pathways to participation in education, training and work is an embedded strategy in Ruah's psychosocial support services. Ruah is assertive in building a capacity and commitment in its workforce towards addressing social exclusion, including in the area of the digital divide.

Ruah cannot emphasise enough the importance of continued funding for the First and Second Click program, providing as it does, an opportunity for people with whom we work to take the first steps in becoming computer literate and in being personally proactive in breaking down the digital divide that otherwise excludes them.

In today's environment, access to and knowledge of computing is essential as many everyday tasks, such as banking, Centrelink, bill paying etc, are

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increasingly done online. Without programs like First/Second Click, many people from disadvantaged groups will continue to be excluded from keeping up with changes in information technology.

The benefits for participants in the Ruah First/Second Click program have been multiple, including:

- Building confidence
- Addressing anxiety issues
- Addressing issues of access and inclusion
- Creating opportunities to reconnect with family and friends via email – so vital for Ruah participants as many have lost contact because of their disadvantage and circumstances
- Reducing personal isolation and providing an opportunity for peer support
- Providing a pathway to further education, training and work opportunities through building the skills and confidence to continue learning, with some individuals enrolling in follow-on mainstream courses; returning to work; joining an employment service; or exploring further training
- Creating the desire to access free/low-cost recycled computers to consolidate their learning
- Allowing individuals to feel a part of, and understand, information technology, which is so prevalent in all aspects of today's society
- Providing individuals with the skills to mentor peers, thus encouraging others to negotiate the digital divide
- Providing a catalyst for transforming and improving life
- Providing possibilities for individuals to reconnect with their community in a positive, inclusive way.

Ruah urges the Government to consider reinstating funding for this vital program. As Ruah has witnessed many times, the outcomes achieved through attendance at these courses are often a life-giving impetus for significant changes in people's lives.

For further information, please contact Sheryl Carmody (RCS Executive Manager) or Maria Rabbone (Computing Skills Trainer) on 9485 3939.

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