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Financial Crisis Threatens Future of South Australia's Largest Disability Employer

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The future of Bedford Group, South Australia's largest disability employer, is under threat despite the state government providing emergency financial assistance. The organization, which supports over 1,400 South Australians with disabilities through employment, announced on Thursday that it may enter voluntary administration. The announcement has raised concerns among workers and their families about job security.

For decades, Bedford has provided training and supported employment to individuals living with disabilities. The organization attributes its recent financial difficulties partly to changes

made in response to the 2023 Disability Royal Commission, which reviewed national disability services and recommended a shift toward more open and inclusive employment models.

As part of this shift, Bedford launched several new ventures aimed at expanding job opportunities. These included GreenInc, a landscaping business; Dovetail, a timber manufacturing arm; and Cultivate, a food production company. Two of these initiatives were linked to a proposed \$50 million innovation and employment hub in Salisbury, intended to support a transition to mainstream employment for workers with disabilities.

However, the new ventures have not generated the expected results. “There is the strategy that we’ve embarked upon to transition those employees to open employment, and those businesses are not getting the traction within the time that we expected they would,” said Janet Miller, Chair of Bedford’s Board.

The state government has responded by offering funding to help stabilize operations, but concerns remain about the long-term sustainability of the organization. Questions have also been raised about oversight and whether rapid shifts in employment practices have been realistic for organizations like Bedford to implement effectively.

Employees returned to work on Friday, but uncertainty remains. Families and workers are waiting for clearer communication on what steps will be taken to secure the organization’s future. A collapse of Bedford would significantly affect both its workforce and South Australia’s broader disability support services.

The situation has highlighted ongoing challenges in the disability employment sector. As Bedford navigates its financial difficulties, attention has turned to whether structural reforms can be introduced without jeopardizing essential services for vulnerable communities.