

Disability Care and Support Submission

I am a 43 year old with Cerebral Palsy. Prior to 1982 I attended The Spastic Centre and Northcott School for Crippled Children. In 1982, at age 15, I was one of the earliest students to integrate into the mainstream education system. I graduated from university with an economics degree and post graduate qualifications in taxation.

I have held a full time position in the Australian Public Service since January 1990, progressing from a Graduate Officer to my current position of an EL 1 Senior Case Officer. I regard being in employment my most significant and rewarding attainment. I also recognise that none of the above would be possible without the total dedication of my family, in both emotional and financial terms.

There are many on-going additional expenses that must be incurred to maintain my health and well-being as a person with a disability. I would not be able to maintain my job without an extensive exercise program and other medical support.

I incur the following on-going expenses:

- Transport \$160 out of pocket each week (\$120 when the Mobility Allowance is considered). See below for further details
- Physiotherapy \$70 weekly
- Tai Chi class \$7 weekly
- Podiatrist \$55 bi monthly
- House cleaning \$60 a fortnight

I have also found it necessary to purchase the following equipment to assist me in daily living

- Electronic bed \$6,000
- Shoes \$1,000 a pair, incurred every two years approximately
- Wheelchair \$450
- Walking frame \$200
- Wii console \$440 used exclusively as part of my exercise program

I share a house with my mother who provides extensive support, shopping, cooking washing, ironing, making my bed and driving me to many places. My living expenses would be significantly higher without my mother's constant care.

Although not currently the case, I will need to access community support services or private providers to a far greater extent to stay at home in the years ahead, as my mother ages. I may be forced to work part time if I do not have this constant support. It would be extremely difficult to combine the physical demands of day-to-day living and full time employment without a multi sourced, permanent support system that is guaranteed.

The social interaction from which I benefit by working is a large contributing factor to my overall health and well-being. Being able to stay in employment is a real motivator when exercising. Exercise, employment and independence are mutually dependent.

Transport Costs

By far my most significant on-going expense is the cost of transport to and from work. I am totally reliant on using taxis as I cannot access other forms of public transport. This costs me an average of \$120 each week in taxi fares. This figure is after the 50% discount I receive on the metered fare from the NSW Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme and \$40 a week I receive from the Commonwealth Mobility allowance.

There is little doubt that this financial support is critical in allowing me to maintain my job. No tax deduction is available to help defray the cost of travelling to and from work as they are considered to be of a private and domestic nature. Although this position is the same for other salary and wage earners, the transport costs of people with disabilities who are restricted to using taxis would generally exceed the weekly cost of able-bodied employees, even after considering government schemes and benefits.

The high cost of transport is an active disincentive in obtaining and maintaining employment, especially at the lower end of the wage scale. Having a job opens up many valuable opportunities for social inclusion for people with disabilities and the able-bodied alike. Employment also promotes financial security, independence and social inclusion.

I travel a distance of 11.2 km each work each way. Many people with disabilities would need to travel much further to access suitable employment.

Each State and Territory has a scheme to subsidise taxi fares for people with disabilities. However, there is a wide disparity between the levels of subsidy available under each scheme. The current inequality and duplication of services is demonstrated below through a comparison of the taxi subsidy available in NSW and Victoria.

NSW Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme

- To be eligible a person must have ambulatory problems, vision impairment, epilepsy, intellectual disabilities or other functional disabilities
- A subsidy up to \$30 on each trip, regardless of the total cost;
- Travel can be for any reason;
- There is no cost to be part of the scheme;
- Drivers of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis are able to claim \$8.47 for each wheelchair passenger they carry;

- To qualify for the subsidy, an applicant's disability must be permanent. The subsidy is not available to people receiving treatment or undergoing rehabilitation with the exception that in due course, the extent of their disability will then be such as to qualify into the Scheme;
- The Ministry may require a TTSS participant to undergo an eligibility review from time to time. This is used to determine whether the participant's disability continues to fall within the Scheme's eligibility criteria;
- Vouchers are available to be used interstate. However, the subsidy must not exceed \$30.

Victorian Multi Purpose Taxi Program

- To be a member you must
 - have a severe and permanent disability, and
 - have a disability that means you can't use public transport by yourself.
 - use a wheelchair all the time, or
 - hold a Department of Veterans' Affairs Pensioner Concession Card or gold Repatriation Health Card, or
 - hold certain Pensioner Concession or Health Care Cards from Centrelink, or
 - be able to show you have financial hardship by providing financial information.
- The subsidy is up to \$60 per trip, regardless of the total cost;
- Travel can be for any reason;
- Trips that are covered by insurance or other funding are not covered by the Scheme;
- There is also a separate a subsidy of 75% on fares for wheelchair passengers.
- It costs \$16.50 for the membership card, which lasts for 6 years.
- There is also an annual subsidy cap of \$2,180.
- Members who can demonstrate they require a higher limit can apply. Higher limits are granted for those in employment.

The taxi subsidy has been available in NSW since 1981. The subsidy has only increased once in this time from \$25 to \$30. The passenger must pay full fare on the portion of the fare that exceeds \$60. That is, you pay \$50 if the fare was \$80.

By comparison, since 1990 when I began work, taxi fares have increased by an average of 2.5% per year. In 1990 the trip cost \$12 each way, which is \$6 after the subsidy. Now

the same metered fare is \$30 to \$32 each way or \$15 to \$16 after the subsidy is considered.

In the same time, the phone booking fee has increased from \$0.50 to \$2.20. The hiring fees has gone up from \$1.00 to \$3.30. When these fare increases are combined with the many tolls that apply in the Sydney metropolitan area the distance that can be travelled with a \$30 fare subsidy is continually shrinking.

Mobility Allowance

There are two rates of Mobility Allowance. The Mobility Allowance is paid fortnightly to people with disabilities who cannot use public transport without substantial assistance.

To be eligible for the standard rate of Mobility Allowance of \$80.50, you must also:

- be undertaking vocational training, voluntary work, paid work, independent living/life skills or any combination of these for at least 32 hours every 4 weeks on a continuing basis
- have an agreement to look for work through an employment services provider (for example, Job Services Australia or Disability Employment Services)
- be participating in a Disability Employment Services-Disability Management Service program, or
- be receiving Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy and be required to meet the Activity Test.

You may be eligible for the higher rate of Mobility Allowance of \$112.70 if you are:

- receiving Disability Support Pension, Parenting Payment, Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance (job seeker) and,
- be working for at least 15 hours a week on wages that are at or above the relevant minimum wage, or
- be undertaking job search activities for work of at least 15 hours a week on wages that are at or above the relevant minimum wage under an Employment Pathway Plan or agreement with an Employment Services Provider (e.g. Job Services Australia or Disability Employment Services), or be working for at least 15 hours a week on productivity based wages under the Supported Wage System.

Although there are costs associated with finding work that warrant the higher rate, as shown in the analysis above, these costs do not reduce once in employment.

In many cases a person with disability needs to book a taxi each time they wish to travel. After the fare increase of July 2010 in NSW, the combined cost of booking a taxi by phone and the hiring fee is \$5.50 each journey or \$11 a day. The standard Mobility Allowance of \$80.50 does not meet the fortnightly cost of \$110 to book and pay the

hiring fee of a taxi for a person in full time employment . The current higher Mobility Allowance of \$112.70 leaves \$2.70 to go towards other components of the taxi fare.

Recommendations

1. There needs to be a consistent approach to funding across all levels of government in the provision of services. This can be achieved most effectively by adopting individualised funding. It is essential that transport funding is considered as part of any disability care and support reforms.
2. The standard Mobility Allowance should be replaced by a single Mobility Allowance set at the higher rate.
3. The state based taxi subsidy schemes be replaced with a single scheme administered by the Commonwealth as part of the current reform process.
 - The Commonwealth scheme could introduce cards similar to the existing Gold Cards issued to eligible war veterans.
 - The taxi subsidy should be unlimited if the travel is for medical reasons or employment, with an annual cap set for other personal travel.

It is important that personal travel not be totally excluded as work/life balance should be maintained.

These measures will promote equity and independence. They will also provide people with disabilities greater opportunities to access employment.

I am available to attend a public hearing to discuss my submission in more detail.

Margaret Ann Burke