

Submission to the Productivity Commission Enquiry

Physical Disability Council of South Australia Inc (PDCSA)

PDCSA is hard at work lobbying for people with disabilities and the community to open a path through the barriers to community life. Challenges arise every single day; problems like, how do you open a door, get transport, reach a lift-button or help a person not be anxious about being vulnerable. We address social assumptions about a person's aspirations, likely disinterest or incapacity to participate.

PDCSA believes there are many important issues to address regarding the long term support needs of people living with disabilities.

It is PDCSA's fundamental view that the aspirations of our society ought to be about supporting all the members of our community to have access to quality of life. PDCSA recognises that disability provides a series of challenges and barriers to having access to what may be called 'everyday life'.

In that context our society has a responsibility to ensure good support for people with disabilities so they have access to the good things in life in much the same way that most other people do.

PDCSA argues that urgent work is required in the community and the service systems in order to sustain a level of support for an individual aspiring to a reasonable quality of everyday life that enables them to be fully integrated into this society.

Despite some advances in awareness of disability issues, our society continues to be a place where in many instances people with disabilities are marginalized and not made welcome. This experience begins early in people's lives with the struggle for access to the standard childhood developmental experiences of ordinary childcare or the local school.

Streaming people at an early age because they have a disability, positions them differently from everybody else. The child who is only interacting with other children with disabilities, learns that they are a disabled child. They learn a lot about what it is to be somebody who lives with a disability, and miss out on many of those typical experiences that are about the ordinary things in life that are usually taken for granted.

A typical example of this happens when a young students with disabilities in the "special unit" at the local school, is observed by the other kids from across the boundary line, often in a fenced off area. One can only imagine what that does to the psyche of all the children in terms of legitimizing that great divide for yet another generation.

It is our hope that society in general will recognize that the issue of segregation within the education system is unfair, and also realises that people with disabilities need to be seen as full participants in society.

Sound evidence exists which show that schools have the capacity to include children with a disability within mainstream classrooms. If society can begin that process from preschool and carry it through tertiary education, then in fact we will begin to change attitudes of society towards people with disabilities. A new generation of children can grow up seeing people with disabilities as no different to themselves and as an ordinary part of their society.

This same process needs to happen beyond the schools into our local communities. Many community members assume the best options are situations where people with disabilities are segregated apart from others and/or congregated in a group. This should only be a personal “choice” option with the emphasis being on “choice”.

Local councils should be made to support all local activities that are available for most kids. Clubs and recreation groups need support in order to embrace inclusivity and ensure accessibility to all people in the community. A separate exclusive club just for people with disabilities is not good enough.

Accommodation needs are critical and represent a severe failure of the community to provide people with disabilities with a basic right and opportunity to living independently in the community.

When people with disability try to exercise a basic right of renting a house or unit, they often find themselves confronted by angry landlords unwilling to make any provisions or to make rental properties disability friendly including cooking facilities and utility connections. These very provisions are no more unique than all the others ordinarily provided in the rental housing market. People with a disability should expect to be able to choose a place in proximity to schools, shops, theatres etc., like most other people.

Society must recognise and understand the needs of people with a disability and their personal care support services if Australia is to lay claim as an equitable and just society. These services are critical if people with disabilities are to undertake the basic elements of daily life. Effective personal care services, educating the community and increasing understanding are important in ensuring people with disabilities are included on all level of the community. Appropriate training and development of the personal care workforce and the attitudes and work ethic of these workers plays a key role in the quality of life of people with disabilities.

Self managed funding can also play a key role in obtaining a quality of life. By being able to manage one's own affairs, exercising as much authority over the service that they receive as they possibly can, an individual's personal care system will reflect the needs and interests of that individual.

The emphasis has to be that the person using the system makes decisions regarding assistance with bathing, meals, education, transport, employment, housing modifications, equipment (walking sticks to wheelchairs, lifters). This validates the person's autonomy, dignity and self worth as a valued member of society.

PDCSA is encouraged by the individualised self managed funding packages being trialled by various state governments and view them in a positive light but emphasise that it should be by choice of the individual. There would be many who would rather choose (as well as those incapable of choosing) to be managed by a separate approved agency and have any funding allocated for them.

Individual people with disabilities wish to have a reasonable level of choice about their recreational, work and lifestyle preferences. To achieve this there needs to be an intentional and deliberate building of the capacity of communities to include and encourage people with disabilities as willing participants in an inclusive society.

There is a civic responsibility to voice the belief that people with disabilities belong at the heart of things, not on the edges. We can all make demands of our local communities and challenge the historical way of doing things. We can spark a thought process, a catalyst of change for all people. People in general need support to think their way through some of these issues. Community groups and local councils are good examples of where these challenges can be met.

For example, a community group could be helped to ask, "What can we do to make sure that a person has a positive experience while participating with us". The centres could be assisted in integrating into their strategic planning an increased awareness that disability issues cover a broad spectrum. More often than not a person with disability may be dealing with several issues such as physical, intellectual and social challenges on a daily basis, requiring acknowledgement if there is to be a positive outcome for all.

Peer mentoring is an effective strategy to empower people with disabilities and to support social inclusion. This requires funding and here, education is the key.

The responsibility of government is to implement such changes, to provide leadership in raising these issues in society and provide assistance so people can think through the issues. This can only happen by including people with disabilities in consultation, using all necessary means of support. But just as important are the co-operation and the assistance of society by being open and welcoming to all.

The time has come for the Government of Australia to take on the challenge of introducing the proposed NDIS which would ultimately benefit all Australians with a disability regardless of how their disability was acquired.

PDCSA joins with the commission in blazing the trail for an inclusive, just society. It is imperative we do this, because all people belong at the heart of things, not on the edges.