

# **Submission to the Productivity Commission on Disability and Support On behalf of Wattle Range Council**

## **Key Questions**

### **Who should be the key focus of a new scheme and how they may be practically and reliably identified?**

People who have severe or profound disabilities should be the key focus of any new disability scheme. Already Centrelink has assessment tools to establish the level of disability for both children and adults, however these are not only based on diagnosis but functional abilities. This approach means that a whole new system of assessment would not need to be established. This would be a streamlined service that gives people with a disability the ability to have their entitlement to services established at the same time that their entitlement to income is assessed. Centrelink also has clearly defined systems of appeal and review.

### **Which groups are most in need of additional support and help?**

There a number of additional factors that impact on the capacity of individuals with disability to lead connected and fulfilling lives. Coming from communities already marginalised ie Aboriginal Communities, people who have less service opportunities in rural and remote locations; people from non-English speaking backgrounds, recently arrived migrants. People with disability who have no a carer or where family relationships have been strained. Some disabilities are more likely to put strain on family relationships, chronic mental illness or Huntington's Disease with its strongly genetic component means there is a lot of fear, guilt and stigma associated with the condition. Families often have a high number of suffers to be cared for and high levels of relationship breakdown.

### **Means Testing?**

Within our community a degree of fear is associated with the means testing of supported accommodation and personal support services. In particular families are concerned about whose incomes and assets might be means tested, ie will families be financially responsible for their adult children – are siblings responsible? In our community we have seen people who acquire severe disability in their 50's admitted to nursing homes at great financial and emotional cost to their spouses because of the income and asset test of the federal government. Wattle Range Council believes that the establishment of any means test is likely to cause undue hardship to people with disability and their carers.

### **Case Study**

Man in his 50's who had to leave work early because of his progressively debilitating illness and had used all his superannuation in paying off house. His wife is on a carers pension with some part time work. The wife is caring for him (until he has to go into residential care) and their son who has the same debilitating condition.

On the husband's admittance to Aged Care his income and assets are assessed. While the house is exempt from the asset test her part time work is not. As a consequence they must pay an additional daily fee for his care, they both lose 20 cents for each dollars she earns and she pays tax on her earnings as well.

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As a cleaner she finds it very difficult to make ends meet, paying all of his pension and a bit more for his care and she now has to pay all of the electricity, insurances, running a vehicle and council rates from her own meager income. The health and aged care means test for accommodation is designed for people at the end stage of their lives who have accumulated wealth over their lifetime and who do have the capacity in the most part to contribute to their care and still have sufficient for their needs. This is very different to younger people who have had their working lives truncated and whose partners have their own lives to lead over an extend period.

Many families of people with a disability may want and have the means to contribute to their loved ones comfort and care. The Special Disability Trusts have been a good way to encourage people with means to set up support mechanisms for their loved ones ongoing support and care without impacting on their pension income and most definitely should not impede them receiving essential services.

### **How a new scheme could encourage the full participation by people with disability and their carers in the community and work?**

A whole of community approach is required to ensure people with disabilities and their carers are fully included in our community. Underlining the importance to all people of participation, a study undertaken on carers, found that their mental and physically health to be amongst the poorest in the nation yet carers who engaged in paid employment had much better mental health than those who didn't work.

While the Disability Discrimination Act has gone some way in assisting people with disabilities to be included in our society, there are still limitation – too many buildings are still built without proper disability access, transport services fall short of accessibility, changes made recently to ensure carers are not discriminated against in employment if they need to take time off for their caring role is certainly welcome.

The National Companion Card is helpful to allow people who require support to participate to have the carer admitted free, extending this to airlines, bus and train travel would also be useful. Even further an expectation that with some preplanning that business and organizations might provide direct support for people with a disability to access services without that person having to bring their own carer.

The focus of a new scheme should be about assessing what is possible for an individual with disability across their lifespan. Encouraging participation in the mainstream as much as possible, working with their strengths rather than rewarding and reinforcing their inabilities.

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#### **What to do in rural and remote areas where it is hard to get services!**

The first barrier to providing services to rural and remote areas is a commitment to do so. Often barriers to services delivery are created by inflexible and “accountable” city centric models of service delivery. In an attempt to ration services or to target the most needy recipients, funding bodies risk not providing any services to people with disabilities in country areas. Often in country locations there is not a large enough core group of people with one particular diagnosis to attract funding but there is often a range of people with disabilities who have similar needs who could benefit from a service being established.

For services to work particularly in a rural setting, linkages need to be made with existing services and consultation undertaken around how to get the most out of the limited resources available. For example Millicent Day Activity Centre, run by the health service as an activity program predominantly for frail aged, has made available staff time one day a fortnight for a Men’s Group. This group was developed around the needs of a small group of men who had acquired disabilities, who no longer work and as result had lost connection with their peers and had become socially isolated. The program was developed to be as inclusive as possible of men who are socially isolated. There are regularly between 15 – 25 men who attend this group on a fortnightly basis aged between 18 and 75. The majority of men who attend are under 50 and includes men involved in day options. While this model works because of community goodwill of the agency involved, disability funding bodies would be uncomfortable about funding this group because it is inclusive of people who are not or would not be part of their target group.

In country areas there are a small number of agencies that provide disability services, so it is more difficult for country communities to benefit from competitive tendering processes or grant applications. Often there is a lack of organisations able to apply and extend services. Likewise there are less specialist services. Statewide Specialist Services provide very limited and often inadequate services to Country people usually only providing a telephone service or limited visiting service.

Equitable access to disability services in country areas is complicated by distances involved and the lack of public transport, affordable transport options and limited accessible transport.