



Australian Government

Department of Social Services

Submission to the inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers

Social Services Portfolio

August 2023



Contents

Introduction.....	3
Agency responsibilities.....	3
Department of Social Services.....	3
Services Australia	4
National Disability Insurance Agency	4
National Indigenous Australians Agency	4
<i>Carer Recognition Act 2010 (Cth)</i>	4
Obligations under the Act	5
Unpaid carers	5
First Nations carers	6
Value of unpaid care	6
Carer Wellbeing Survey.....	6
Barriers faced by carers	7
Employment and payment supports	7
Developments in the policy landscape	8
Carer Gateway	8
Young Carer Bursary Program.....	9
Carer Inclusive Workplace Initiative	9
Tristate Carer Vocational Outcomes Program Pilot (Your Caring Way)	9
National Carer Strategy	10
National Disability Insurance Scheme.....	10
Other relevant policy initiatives	10
Australia’s Disability Strategy	11
Senate Select Committee on Work and Care	11
National Strategy for Care and Support Economy	11
Productivity Commission Carer Leave inquiry	11
Closing statement	11
References	12

Introduction

The Social Services Portfolio (the Portfolio) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers (the Inquiry).

This submission provides the Committee with information about services and supports administered by the Portfolio related to the scope of the Inquiry and the purpose of the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* (the Act).

The Portfolio recognises the immense contribution of Australia's unpaid carers to society and the economy. Portfolio agencies are committed to providing services and supports to improve carer wellbeing, increase their capacity and support their economic and social participation.

Many carers use a variety of programs and services across sectors such as social services, health, education and employment. A whole-of-government approach, coordinated across government agencies, is important to support carers.

Agency responsibilities

The Social Services Portfolio is made up of:

- the Department of Social Services
- Services Australia
- Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission
- National Disability Insurance Agency
- the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission
- Hearing Australia, and
- the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The Department of Social Services, Services Australia and the National Disability Insurance Agency are the agencies responsible for providing policy, program and payment services to unpaid carers.

Department of Social Services

The Department of Social Services (the Department) is responsible for carer payments policy and legislation, Commonwealth carer policy and carer programs. The Department delivers a range of services to help carers in their caring role, including the Carer Gateway program, and has policy responsibility for financial support to carers who are unable to work or study due to the nature of care they provide.

Services Australia

Services Australia administers payments and some services to carers on behalf of the Department. This includes the social security payments such as Carer Payment, Carer Allowance, Carer Supplement, Child Disability Assistance Payment and Carer Adjustment Payment. Services Australia also provides referrals to employment services carers may be eligible for.

National Disability Insurance Agency

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) administers the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which provides funding to eligible people with disability to gain more time with family and friends, greater independence, access to new skills, jobs or volunteering in their community, and an improved quality of life.

The NDIA recognises that carers provide practical and emotional support to NDIS participants throughout their NDIS journey. They may also have a vital role in helping participants to use their NDIS plan effectively. Carers often provide support that would otherwise be provided by other mainstream or community supports or paid support workers.

National Indigenous Australians Agency

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) leads and coordinates Commonwealth policy development, program design and implementation for First Nations people. The NIAA leads and influences change across government to ensure First Nations people have a say in decisions that affect them.

The NIAA is not part of the Social Services Portfolio, but provided input to this submission. The NIAA recognises that First Nations carers often face cultural challenges in self-identifying as a carer and seeking support in their caring role.

Carer Recognition Act 2010 (Cth)

The object of the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* is to increase recognition and awareness of carers, and to acknowledge the valuable contribution they make to society. For the purpose of the Act a carer is defined as an individual who provides personal care, support and assistance to another individual who needs it because that other individual:

- has a disability; or
- has a medical condition (including a terminal or chronic illness); or
- has a mental illness; or
- is frail and aged.

The Act includes the Statement for Australia's Carers which sets out ten key principles for how carers should be treated and considered in policy, program and service delivery settings. The Portfolio's approach to policy and programs reflect these principles.

The Act does not intend to exclude similar state or territory laws that established recognition of carers. All states and territories have enacted legislation recognising the value and contribution of carers.

Obligations under the Act

There are a range of obligations for public service agencies and public service care agencies that are defined in the Act. These include ensuring all practicable measures are taken to ensure employees and agents have an awareness and understanding of the Statement for Australia's Carers.

Examples of adherence to the obligations by portfolio agencies are including in annual reports. These include:

- human resources policies that support staff to access flexible working arrangements and access to Employee Assistance Programs
- information to promote awareness and understanding of the Act within public service agencies: for example, Services Australia provides a dedicated intranet page dedicated to recognising and supporting carers in the workplace, and
- activities to increase awareness are promoted externally by agencies: for example, by the Department through platforms such as Carer Gateway.

The rights and duties for carers specified in the Act are not legally enforceable in judicial or other proceedings.

Unpaid carers

There are 2.65 million unpaid carers in Australia who provide some care for someone with disability, a medical condition, mental illness or someone who is frail due to age. Of these, around 861,000 Australians are considered primary carers; that is, they provide the most assistance to a person with the core activities of mobility, self-care and communication (ABS, 2018).

Carers can be any age, with children and young adults under 25 years classified as 'young carers', and carers 65 years and over classified as 'older carers'. As at 2018, of the 2.65 million carers in Australia, there were more than 235,000 young carers and over 647,000 older carers in Australia (ABS, 2018).

Data collected by service providers gives a picture of carers accessing services. Carer Gateway is the Australian Government's national carer support service system (further detail provided on page 8). There were 134,715 total carers registered with Carer Gateway local service providers as at 31 December 2022. Of these:

- 100,474 carers (or 75 per cent) were female
- 7,345 carers (or 5 per cent) were under 25 years old
- 5,459 carers (or 4 per cent) identified as First Nations
- 7,792 carers (or 6 per cent) identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD).

First Nations carers

The ABS Census of Population and Housing 2021 found 15 per cent of First Nations people aged 15 and over provided unpaid assistance to a person with disability, long-term health conditions or problems related to ageing. The proportion of First Nations people providing unpaid care was 1.3 times the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW, 2023). Evidence also suggests First Nations carers are more likely than other carers to support multiple people in need of care. In particular, older First Nations people often have multigenerational caring roles (Carers NSW, 2023).

First Nations care is influenced by a range of historical, cultural and socioeconomic factors. First Nations carers are more likely to be unpaid carers, which is reflective of traditional and cultural care responsibilities, with many women regarding the strength of caring to be fundamental to identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. This is also reflected in the term 'disability' not being used in many First Nations communities, resulting in the term 'carer' often being associated with other types of relationships, such as foster care and kinship care. This may reduce the likelihood that carers will seek formal assistance (AHRC, 2020).

Value of unpaid care

Australian carers provide 2.2 billion hours of unpaid care each year. This care would have a value of \$77.9 billion per year, if these hours were provided as paid formal care (Deloitte, 2020).

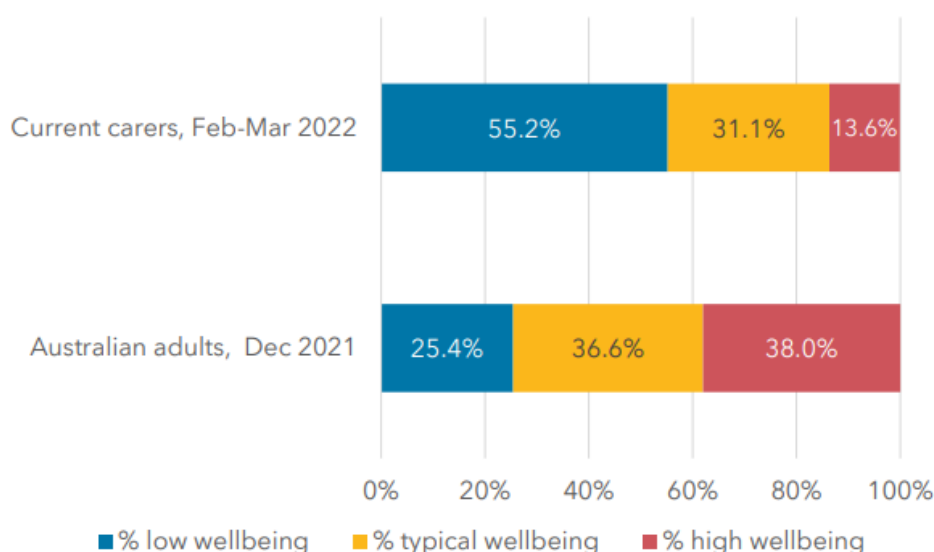
In line with the demographic changes projected for coming decades, the demand for unpaid care is expected to grow. Demand for unpaid care is projected to increase by 23 per cent between 2020 and 2030. This projection is based on the number of people with a severe or profound disability living in the community (Deloitte, 2020).

Carer Wellbeing Survey

Carers Australia commissions the University of Canberra to conduct a national annual Carer Wellbeing Survey. The intent of the annual survey is to understanding the experiences and wellbeing of unpaid carers and their use of support services, such as Carer Gateway.

The 2022 Carer Wellbeing Survey reported on both positive experiences of caring and also challenges (Schirmer et al. 2022). Fifty-four per cent of carer respondents reported that being a carer is satisfying, 56 per cent said that it contributed to meaning and purpose in their life and 52 per cent said that being a carer is a positive experience. Sixty-three per cent of carers found that being a carer had strengthened their relationship with the person they care for, and 68 per cent had learned new skills through their caring role. The survey also found that carers were significantly more likely than other Australians to have low levels of wellbeing.

Figure 1: Carer wellbeing compared to Australian adults – Carer Wellbeing Survey, 2022



Source: Schirmer et al. 2022

Barriers faced by carers

Carers face a range of barriers in carrying out their caring responsibilities and ensuring their own needs are met. This includes challenges in getting and maintaining employment, navigating service systems (including finding the best service to meet their needs) and support with the emotional toll caring can take.

Employment and payment supports

The demands of unpaid caring can act as a barrier to carers seeking and maintaining paid employment, whether that be casual, part-time or full-time work. Unpaid carers of working age are less likely to be employed (69 per cent) compared to non-carers (75 per cent). Twenty-seven per cent of carers report they are not in the labour force at all, compared to 21 per cent of non-carers (ABS, 2021).

To support unpaid carers, the Department and Services Australia facilitate the Carer Payment and the Carer Allowance as income support payments to assist carers who are unable to support themselves through paid employment, due to the constant care they provide.

Carer Payment is an income support payment to assist carers who are unable to support themselves through paid employment, due to the care they provide, and Carer Allowance is a supplementary payment for carers who provide a level of daily care and attention for people who need significant additional care.

As at December 2022, 628,805 carers were receiving Carer Allowance and 303,520 receiving Carer Payment. Of these, 277,195 were receiving both payments.

Table 1: Payment recipients – selected demographic details

	Carer Allowance		Carer Payment	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
Female	467,430	74%	215,250	71%
Under 25	7,870	1%	7,085	2%
First Nations	28,920	5%	20,025	7%
CALD*	165,365	26%	90,450	30%

*CALD defined as where country of birth is not Australia, United Kingdom or New Zealand.

The social and economic benefits associated with workforce participation are widely recognised and for this reason, carers are able to cease providing care for up to 25 hours a week to participate in employment – while remaining qualified for Carer Payment. This not only helps the carer's immediate economic situation, but also supports them to build long-term future savings through superannuation contributions. The limit is set at 25 hours per week, as it is considered a reasonable balance between supporting carers who are able to combine care with work or study and upholding the purpose of Carer Payment.

Carer Payment carers have 63 'respite' days each calendar year where they may take a break from caring without impacting their payment.

Developments in the policy landscape

There has been significant reform to the policy landscape since 2010, with the introduction of a range of programs to support all types of carers.

Carer Gateway

Carer Gateway was launched in April 2020 and is a free national carer support service system, providing access to supports and services for all unpaid carers. Carer Gateway provides a single point of contact through a website and 1800 phone number for carers. The services focus on providing carers with access to early intervention, and preventative and skill building supports to improve well-being and long term outcomes.

Carer Gateway delivers evidence based supports and services that are tailored to the individual needs and circumstances of a carer. Services are provided in-person, online and over the phone so carers can access the support they need, when they need it. Carers can access a range of targeted support services, including in-person and online peer support groups, tailored support packages (with a focus on employment, education and respite), counselling, coaching, online skills courses, and access to emergency respite.

As at 31 December 2022 reporting shows that almost 5 per cent of Australian carers were registered with Carer Gateway service providers. This is an increase from the 2 per cent reported at 30 June 2021.

The Carer Gateway national advertising campaign commenced in October 2022 and aims to increase awareness of services and supports and assist carers to self-identify. Since the campaign's launch the number of visitors to the Carer Gateway website has increased considerably, from an average of 70,000 visitors each month (over the 12 months prior), to an average of 310,000 visitors per month between October 2022 and June 2023.

The Department works closely with stakeholders and service providers to ensure the Carer Gateway continues to be useful for carers. An impact evaluation of Carer Gateway and other Departmental carer support programs, led by University of New South Wales, commenced in April 2022. The evaluation is focussed on the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the Carer Gateway, with findings informing decisions about the future program model. The final evaluation report is due in late 2023.

Young Carer Bursary Program

Since 2014, Carers Australia has been funded to deliver the Young Carer Bursary Program. The Program aims to relieve the financial pressure on young carers, in particular by reducing the need to undertake part-time work whilst studying and managing caring responsibilities.

The Young Carer Bursary Program has supported over 9,000 young carers to date. In April 2023, the Program increased the number of bursaries available to around 1,600 each year and raised the annual bursary amount from \$3,000 to \$3,768.

Carer Inclusive Workplace Initiative

The Department is currently implementing the Carer Inclusive Workplace Initiative that will help employers develop and adopt practices that encourage and support employees with caring responsibilities. The initiative will enable businesses, in particular small businesses, to self-identify as an organisation committed to carer inclusivity without the time commitment and cost associated with a full accreditation process.

Once employers complete the relevant self-assessments they will be recognised as committed to carer inclusivity, and be provided with a government endorsed carer inclusive workplace logo to display at their place of business and marketing materials. The initiative is being developed by Carers Australia and is expected to be available to employers in the second half of 2023.

Tristate Carer Vocational Outcomes Program Pilot (Your Caring Way)

The Your Caring Way pilot is delivered by Carers Queensland and provides supported vocational training to carers to enhance their employment outcomes in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. The program delivers face-to-face and online training, to help carers who are looking for work to gain vocational education qualifications. Your Caring Way provides end-to-end vocational coaching and support, designed to support the carer throughout the duration of the program, during placement and the transition into employment.

Your Caring Way assists carers of working age in accessing accredited education and training, and assistance seeking and establishing employment. Figures as at June 2023 show that 1,654 carers have completed the Vocational Needs Assessment, the first step of the program, with 333 carers having retained employment or long term volunteering for 12 months or more.

National Carer Strategy

The former National Carer Strategy was launched in 2011, and sat alongside the previous National Disability Strategy. The Strategy complemented the Act and formed part of the Australian Government's National Carer Recognition Framework. This Strategy was superseded in 2015 by the Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services. The Department is currently progressing preliminary work to inform a new national carer strategy.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

The NDIA recognises that carers often need support. They may need to take a break from time-to-time to sustain their own wellbeing, their relationships with others and their capacity to continue caring. As such, the NDIS can fund Short Term Accommodation, including respite, when a NDIS participant needs to live out of home for a short period. This can give carers a short break from their caring role.

Before the NDIA can include supports in a NDIS participant's plan, it needs to be satisfied the support meets the reasonable and necessary criteria. This is explained in Our Guideline – Reasonable and Necessary Supports which is available on the NDIA website.

The *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* was amended in 2022 to include stronger recognition of the role of carers and the relationship they have with the people with disability for whom they care.

Additionally, as the disability sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in Australia, the Government has commenced a major review of the design, operations and sustainability of the NDIS. The NDIS Review will guide the government on priority areas for improving the Scheme. A key part of the NDIS Review is to examine ways to build a more responsive, supportive and sustainable NDIS market and workforce. A final Review report is due by October 2023.

In addition to the NDIS Review, the Government has also committed to develop a comprehensive NDIS Workforce Strategy to ensure NDIS participants can access the supports they need. The workforce strategy will address attraction and retention, training, skills development and career pathways, and ensure workers are paid fairly.

Other relevant policy initiatives

Unpaid care intersects across a range of Commonwealth portfolios, including but not limited to education, employment, health and aged care. Wider work is underway in a variety of sectors to improve the support for unpaid carers, either directly or indirectly.

Australia's Disability Strategy

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 (the ADS) sets out a plan to change the lives of people with disability over ten years. This includes recognition of the role of unpaid care, and its intersection with disability policy.

The diverse and specific needs of unpaid carers is an ongoing focus over the life of the ADS. The finalisation of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability in September 2023 and the subsequent ADS Review, will present further opportunities to consider how the ADS can respond to the needs of unpaid carers.

Senate Select Committee on Work and Care

The Senate Select Committee on Work and Care was appointed by resolution of the Senate on 3 August 2022 to inquire into the impact that combining work and care responsibilities has on the wellbeing of workers, carers, and those they care for. The Committee considered evidence on the extent and nature of work and care arrangements, the adequacy of current support systems, and effective work and care policies and practices in place in Australia and overseas.

In its final report, the Senate Select Committee made 33 recommendations for consideration across government. The Department is working with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations on the Government response to the final report, due to be tabled later in 2023.

National Strategy for Care and Support Economy

In May 2023, the draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy was released for public consultations. The draft strategy focuses on paid care and support services in aged care, disability care and support, veteran's care and early childhood education and care. The strategy's vision is for a sustainable and productive care and support economy that delivers quality care and support with decent jobs.

Productivity Commission Carer Leave inquiry

In February 2022, the Productivity Commission announced it would examine the merits of unpaid leave allocated for all workers who need to care for an older relative or friend. This included a study of employment models across the aged care sector. The final report was handed to the Government in May 2023 and is pending release.

Closing statement

The Portfolio appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers. The Portfolio welcomes feedback and insights the Committee's inquiry will bring, to ensure support for carers is accessible and meaningful.

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