

Submission No. 1202

(Inq into better support for carers)

AEC 4/8/08

Committee Secretary
Inquiry into Better Support for Carers
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family,
Community, Housing And Youth
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

I wish to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth's Inquiry into Better Support for Carers.

I am submitting to the inquiry because the cost cutting measures of all levels of government including the closure of institutions has put an enormous burden on families. My experience has been one of shiny brochures, advertisements and help lines with no substance behind them.

Within the scope of this inquiry I am a carer. But I see myself as simply as someone who loves her family and does as much as one possibly can to care for them. My husband is blind and deaf. He held a good position in the work force but had to take early retirement as life became too difficult. He recently won a well deserved award for his service to the community. This could not have happened without the care and support of those around him. When work became too stressful he had to take early retirement and so did I. As his sight and hearing declined it was simply too difficult for him live at home on his own. And when conductors were no longer on trains and buses he lost confidence accessing public transport. His world changed. If governments are serious about helping disabled people have access to employment they to fully assess the impact their decisions have on that sector of the population.

My son is schizophrenic and we have lived through a nightmare trying to get help for him. Access to mental health care can be very difficult and then it seems to consist solely of medication. Within weeks of being put on a disability pension Centrelink sent him a letter saying that he had fraudulently claimed money and owed the government more than he had received. When we contacted Centrelink we were told that it was a 'fishing letter'. These letters were sent out randomly to flush out cheats. We organized a great deal of paperwork so that in the event of any problems we would be contacted before they took any action. Centrelink cut our son's benefits off without notifying us and he disappeared for over three years.

Trying to access the care that my son is entitled to has at times been almost a full time job.

We are lucky that my husband had worked long enough to have a small pension and that we own our home. To live one's life on only government benefits would be very difficult. As I get older many of the home maintenance jobs that I did with no trouble are getting harder. When I was ill we contacted our shire to see if we could access the help that according to the shire's brochures we were definitely entitled to. It was three months before they sent someone to us and more weeks before we were given vouchers. Budget problems of the shire only added to our stress and it would have been far more helpful to have been told the truth i.e. no help for at least three months than to be strung along for so long. Glossy

brochures with false promises only make life more difficult. The same goes for help lines. Try dealing with someone having a psychotic episode and being told to get them out of the house and call the police, because there was no one who could or would come and help. Just recently in my area the only respite bed was going to be closed and a new facility scheduled to be built was to be cancelled. I believe this has been resolved but why do governments go on these cost cutting exercises without first checking out the impact they will have. Carers look after people who were once looked after in institutions at government cost. They do it 24/7 with usually no time off. Access to respite care should be automatic. When razor gangs go in to cut costs they should be reminded of the true cost of caring for the disabled in institutions a cost now shifted onto families. Sometimes people cannot be looked after at home. At present finding suitable care ranges from difficult to impossible. This puts a terrible burden on carers. How much easier it would be if one knew that respite was available and quality care would be there when needed.

The economics of living on a pension are challenging to say the least and my son is lucky that he has affordable accommodation. I am very aware of how limited that is and many people really struggle financially. Affordable housing should be available. Residential care should also be available. There is hardly anywhere for people with mental health problems to go where they can be cared for if they lack the ability to look after themselves.

It would be great if there were people, compassionate caring and well informed that one could access to find out what help was available. Some carers end up isolated and depressed maybe house calls could be made to make sure that they were getting all the help that was available when they needed it. Of course that would only work if there really was help and it was available when needed.

I have been incredibly disappointed with the services that are supposed to help our son. The church organization that promised so much has constantly let our son down. State Trustees who manage his finances have charged him \$4,000 over two years. In that time they also paid someone else's claims out of his account in excess of \$1,200. Money that has yet to be reimbursed and an error that we found not them.

We are supposed to be a rich nation and yet the level of care and protection we give to our most vulnerable is sadly lacking. To leave it to families to do the caring is short sighted. I wonder how many leave the work force because of lack of support in their role as carers?

Thank you for taking my views into consideration as part of the Committee's inquiry. I look forward to reviewing any recommendations you make to improve life for carers in Australia.

Yours sincerely

Angela

2nd July 2, 2008