



Australian Association of Social Workers

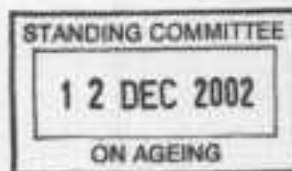
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10 December 2002

Committee Secretary
Dr Margot Kerley
Standing Committee on Ageing
House of Representatives, Parliament House
Canberra 2600
ACT



Dear Dr Kerley

I am writing on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) in response to the call for submissions for the House of Representatives Inquiry into Ageing in Australia.

Ageing concerns every member of our community and it is heartening to see the Australian Government endeavouring to work with business groups, community groups and academia to address ageing issues. Social workers are well placed to advise on ageing policy as they are employed by many agencies delivering services to the aged around the country. Social workers work at the interface between individuals and their environment, their distinctive area of practice is in working with the individual in the context of their family, social networks, community and the broader society. They are therefore well informed about issues such as health, education, housing and employment and the needs of the aged in these areas.

This submission proposes general directions and principles that the AASW members believe to be essential in strategy development to address ageing in Australia, rather than offering detailed suggestions.

In the interests of Australia's ageing community members, the AASW asks the Standing Committee to consider the accompanying submission in the development of its recommendations for a long-term strategy to address the ageing population of Australia.

Yours sincerely

Ian Rentsch
Chief Executive Officer
AASW

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO AGEING IN AUSTRALIA

**AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL
WORKERS**

**Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Ageing
10-12-02**

**Inquiry into Long Term Strategies to Address the Ageing of the
Australian Population Over the Next 40 Years**

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Submission by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

House of Representatives

Inquiry into Ageing in Australia

Terms of Reference

To inquire into and report on the long term strategies to address ageing of the Australian population over the next 40 years

Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is a national association promoting the work of professionally qualified social workers. The Association represents over 6,000 social workers in Australia; some of whom work in the current aged care support system at many levels including direct service delivery, service planning and policy work. Members have the stated objective 'to actively support social structures and policies pursuant to the promotion of social justice' (AASW 1998). In accordance with this objective the members established an Aged Services Working Party to address aged care issues. This working party includes practitioners and policy workers from all states of Australia.

This official submission from the National Office of the AASW draws on the experience and knowledge of our members and specifically the members of the Aged Services Working Party.

The AASW strongly supports the House of Representatives inquiry into aged care issues. The Association feels that the development of long-term strategies addressing the needs of the ageing Australian population is timely and will be beneficial as the aged population over sixty-five expands.

This paper will address the issues of:

- Workforce participation
- Care for the elderly
- Education
- Housing, and
- Health

It is the view of the AASW that:

- Older Australians are *not* a homogenous group
- That they *are* an age cohort that represents a diverse group of people in terms of cultural backgrounds, capabilities, access to education and other opportunities, languages spoken and life experiences
- That they are a community that deserves respect and to be treated with dignity and worth
- That they be encouraged and supported to reach their full potential, and
- That they be provided with access to a competent and comprehensive social support system that meets their needs, when this is required.

In particular the Association would like to debunk the myth that the 'Ageing of Australia' is an economic nightmare built on the false economic assumptions that care for the elderly is costly, increasing and fiscally unsustainable due to a disproportionate inverse ageing pyramid. The Association would like the Standing Committee to support evidenced based aged care practice and policy that will enhance the older Australian community and recognise that this will have positive and fiscal benefits for the Australian community as a whole.

Demographics

The increased ageing of the world population is the most dramatic demographic shift in history. In Australia, the percentage of older persons has already tripled since 1901 (3.9-11.0%) (ABS 2002). In 2051 more than 21% of Australians will be 65 or older. This demographic change has been created by a number of factors including decreased infant mortality, increased longevity and decreasing birth rates. The decreased infant mortalities is one of the great achievements of the 20th century and has been created through better health care, social support and better environmental conditions.

A peculiarity that must be taken into account in any demographic study of Australia is the impact of migration. Australia is a country of immigrants and affecting the demographic shift is the net overseas migration. Generally migrants are younger than the resident population and they therefore assist in maintaining a balanced population split. However, planning for the needs of migrants as they age must be taken into consideration.

The AASW would like to highlight that the 'ageing of Australia' has been occurring consistently for at least a century and rather than placing an additional burden on Australian society, it has enhanced and developed it. The positive benefits of a maturing society can be enhanced through the provision of appropriate supports and the development of a comprehensive evidence-based service structure.

The AASW has concerns regarding the balanced nature of the intergenerational report and therefore the reliance on its predictions. The report maintains an extreme perspective in the growth of the aged population and their care needs, while being extremely conservative with regards to changes in health care, older peoples' input into the fiscal economy and the cost of services provided. For instance, the report predicts a continuing

growth in residential aged care when in fact the demand and growth is in community based aged care, which for the Government is a cheaper option.

Workforce Participation

To examine dependence in old age a distinction between ageing and illness needs to be drawn. Even though the population is ageing, people only become reliant on the health care system in the last two years of their life. Therefore, the mere fact that people age does not extend their frailty period but delays it to a later time in their life. The sector of the aged Australian community that is experiencing the most growth is those people aged over 85. This is in a society that maintains a recognised retirement age of 65 and further currently disadvantages retrenched workers over 45. OECD statistics identify on average a 28% drop of workforce participation for men aged 55-64 in the twenty years between 1971 and 1991 (Stiehr and Schumacher 1996). This scenario as the intergenerational paper identifies would create a significant burden on younger members of the community to provide an income for an ever-increasing unemployable aged cohort.

Evidence would suggest that this scenario should not continue. It is counter productive to the health and welfare of older people, and as the fiscal economists highlight, economically unsustainable. An ageing strategy must recognise and create a system that encourages people who wish to maintain a productive working life. The AASW supports initiatives that change the perspective of older people as being redundant and unproductive in the workplace and calls for the Government to support social justice campaigns that advocate for the skills and benefits of employing older people and changes community paradigms regarding older people and work.

Further research identifies that people on average change employment type approximately every seven years. Older people should be encouraged and not disadvantaged in their efforts to maintain an interesting and productive lifestyle. Government needs to develop and support initiatives that provide opportunities for older people to retrain and gain access to new employment types.

The AASW would like to stress that the encouragement of older people to remain in the workplace and the focus on participation, should not become onerous for older people or force them into a particular lifestyle, but rather create opportunities for older people to be able to participate for longer.

Health Care for the frail elderly

The majority of people over sixty-five are relatively healthy and can stay so for a majority of their older years if provided with a supportive social atmosphere and if they maintain a healthy life style. However, due to the nature of ageing in the last two years of a person's life, their health deteriorates and older people find themselves reliant on the health care system. The health care system needs to be one that provides holistic support whilst enabling people to maintain as much independence as possible. Therefore, its components of acute care, support at home and residential care, needs to be client

centered and supportive rather than program based and prescriptive. The AASW recognises that a support and care system needs to be comprehensive and diverse. The system needs to be flexible to meet the diversity of the older Australian population.

The essential parts of an effective and efficient care system for the frail elderly are:

- That it recognises diversity
- That it provides a comprehensive and holistic service
- That it is client centred rather than program based
- That it ensures that the desires of the older person are fully respected and complied with
- That they support the person to lead the lifestyle as closely as possible to what they are used to
- That they maintain the independence, dignity and choice of the older person
- That they protect older people from harm
- Recognise cultural and individual difference, and
- Involve the older person in decision making about their own life and supports

The AASW suggests that the ageing strategy for Australia should comply with the World Health Organisations' definition of health, that: 'health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not an absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1948). The AASW would see an ageing strategy that was built on this premise as recognising that the resultant preventative and supportive health care system would be more economically viable than an illness, disease, acute/post acute/sub acute centred approach.

Education

Older Australians come from a diversity of backgrounds and have enjoyed various opportunities throughout their lives including developing a variety of interests and various education levels. Learning is a life long activity and one given the right environment does not slow down or alter with age. Older Australians, therefore, have a right to and should enjoy a support system that encourages and provides opportunities for older people to further their educational and other interests. A strategy looking at supporting older Australians should take this into account and develop a system that encourages older people to follow this interest in a suitable environment, recognising prior learning and life experience. The education system needs to be diverse enough to cater for older frail people who may no longer be able to access education centres far from their primary care centre or at a wide range of times. The benefits of maintaining interest for the older person are numerous and include staying active (both physically and mentally) and consequently maintaining the health of older people. An investment in an ongoing education system has positive results both for an individual's health and reduction of costs on the health care system.

Housing

Suitable accommodation can make a difference in a person's ability to maintain themselves safely in the community. Unfortunately, many homes are not designed for people with increasing frailty and reducing spatial perceptions. Older person's housing falls into several categories:

- Rental accommodation
- Privately owned
- Supported communal living (Independent Living Units, Special Residential Services), and
- Residential Care

Many of these housing options currently have major concerns such as the tenuous nature of rental accommodation, especially for older people reliant on the pension or those requiring modifications to the residence. Alternatively, the owned home also has issues. It is not uncommon for the marital house to go from being the matrimonial home to family house and eventually becoming an older person's prison and death trap. Many of the people in this situation are asset rich and income poor and their ability to maintain and/or modify their home is limited.

To optimise a person's capabilities as they age and to maintain a healthy lifestyle, housing must be suitable to ensure mobility internally and allow for unhindered access. Providing safe and secure accommodation in the community permits the ongoing health and safety of the individual in environments that are familiar to them. However, in many cases they are poorly designed and not maintained. A good ageing strategy would provide support to ensure individual housing in the community was redesigned to provide older frail Australians with a healthier and safer environment. This strategy would enable people to live more independently for longer and reduce the need for more costly interventions.

For instance the 'Falls Safety' program in Victoria has identified that a fall and the resultant injuries can be a major life-changing event for an older person leading to costly medical interventions and ultimately death. The cause of falls has been identified as simple issues such as poorly designed environments, use of inappropriate footwear, lack of optical care, and medication issues. All these issues have extremely low cost remedies to correct and provide support, but the resultant reduction in costs to the medical and health systems is one of the many benefits of providing a universal low cost assessment and correction service.

Rurality is also an issue within housing that sees people becoming isolated and having fewer resources available to them compared to people living in regional or metropolitan centres. The AASW maintains that a supportive strategy accepts people's independence to choose where and how they live, however provides support to them in their own situation. A supportive strategy enables people to access similar services unrelated to where they live to enable them to live with dignity in the setting of their choice.

Conclusion

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is encouraged by the House of Representatives approach to the long term planning of strategies to meet the need of the community. It is an opportunity to actively develop supportive social structures and policies that promote social justice. In particular, this ageing strategy has the potential to make a difference and improve the quality of life for older Australians and therefore enrich Australian society. The benefits from a holistic and supportive aged strategy are numerous in the social and psychological state of the ageing individuals and their families, friends etc., but will also have major positive impacts on the Australian economy. An effective and supportive ageing strategy that involves the following components:

- Recognising that the aged population is not a homogenous group
- That it is an age cohort that represents a diverse group of people in terms of cultural backgrounds, capabilities, access to education and other opportunities, languages spoken and life experiences
- That it is a community that deserves respect and to be treated with dignity and worth
- That it is a community that needs to be encouraged and supported to reach their full potential, and
- That members of the community requiring support services should be able to readily access a competent and comprehensive social support system that meets their needs,

would provide an economically sustainable system. Further apart from reducing the costs of the current health care system an effective strategy will value add to the Australian economy.

Acknowledgements

The AASW wishes to acknowledge the contributions of the Aged Services Working Party to this submission, including the Convenor Peter Moore and Social Policy Officer Sarah Hordern.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO AGEING IN AUSTRALIA

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