

Submission to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing on long term strategies to address the ageing of the Australian population over the next 40 years.

POPULATION

Lake Macquarie has the fifth largest population (184,346 in 2000) of NSW Local Government Areas and is a popular retirement location that continues to experience steady growth (1% from 1999-2000). The 2001 Census identified 22,204 people aged over 55 years. It is estimated in the next 16 years, the population aged 65 years and over in the City of Lake Macquarie will increase 57%, and the population aged 45-64 years will increase 29%.

This growth will place even greater demands on the area's already overburdened health, welfare, housing and aged care services. There is a pressing need for an increase to the provision of community support services and facilities for the community's significant ageing population.

A common false assumption on ageing, is that there is a reliable sequence of changes in mind, body, abilities and limitations, when in reality individuals experience significant differences in maturation and the rate and formation of age related changes. Therefore a holistic approach is necessary in relation to planning for our ageing residents and their individual needs.

Government recognition, and assistance where required, is important so that our older residents are supported in their lifestyle choices through the provision of a range of adequate accessible services, independent living options and recreational activities.

SUPPORT SERVICES

The absence of an adequate level of support service provision has a profound effect on the emotional and physical wellbeing of a community's older residents. In this area, support service providers are currently struggling under the enormous demands placed upon them to provide adequate service delivery. These services include respite care, community transport, home maintenance, housekeeping, personal care and residential aged care. Time frames for waiting lists are currently unacceptable, given the immediacy of this group's health, welfare and housing needs. Therefore, older residents and their carers are placed at risk through the delay, limiting or exclusion of their access to necessary support services.

Locally, an example of the delay in accessing support services is the regional aged care assessment team, where the current waiting period for assessment is between 6 - 8 weeks. As many carers of frail older people tend to leave requesting assistance until they feel they are unable to continue providing care, this puts both the carer and the older person at risk. Additional resources should be provided to support services, to significantly reduce waiting times and should continue to increase in accordance with the estimated growth in demand for service.

The location of aged care residential facility beds is an issue locally. In the Hunter Region, the bulk of high care beds are located in the Cessnock LGA. This creates many difficulties for the families of older people who are placed there, as no public transport links exist between the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie LGAs which are the areas of greatest population in the region. A review of the placement of high and low care residential beds should take place. This review should relocate the bulk of resources into areas with high population density.

AGED HOUSING AND INDEPENDENT LIVING OPTIONS

There is an urgent need in the City of Lake Macquarie for public and low cost housing for older residents, and residents with a disability which affects their ability to carry out basic living tasks.

A study of the area's mobile home/caravan parks was undertaken in 1997. It found that significant numbers of park residents were aged over 55 years. Some mobile home/caravan parks even specifically target people over 55 years as residents. Residents gave the reasons

for their choice of housing as the low cost, plenty of opportunities for social interaction and an inability to carry out home maintenance.

As mobile home/caravan parks are not required to provide specific facilities for older people and people with a disability, many people do not have appropriate access to a range of services and facilities. Consequently, park managers with little or no knowledge of aged care are recurrently encountering crisis situations with these residents.

Housing models such as the Abbeyfield model would provide older people on low incomes with an affordable dignified way of life. This model is community based and is styled as a large family home for between 8 – 10 residents with assistance as required. It assists older people to maintain their independence, provides companionship and safety and enables them to be active contributing members of society and decision makers in their own household.

The following types of housing should be encouraged for older people:

- low cost housing options which also focus on social interaction and support;
- adaptable housing design which allows easy modification for people with a disability.

There should also be:

- increased access to home maintenance and modification services that are affordable and accessible to all older residents and residents with a disability to assist them to remain independent in their own homes;
- financial programs which allow older people to access the equity in their home to assist in maintenance.

RECREATION

Healthy ageing is enhanced through an active and participatory lifestyle, therefore recreational activities and social integration for older people is important for the maintenance of physical and emotional wellbeing. Preventative health programs need to start now and encourage middle aged and younger people to adopt healthy lifestyles.

The following programs should be encouraged:

- community education – aimed at promoting social integration of older residents, not segregation, and recognising the contribution of older people to the community;
- healthy ageing – including preventative health measures and encouraging recreational activities
- construction of recreational facilities eg walkways /footpaths to improve mobility, leisure centres
- adult education – programs which promote life long learning and integrate the older and younger members of the community.

INCOME SECURITY

There is a need for government recognition of the maintenance of an income security safety net. This safety net needs to adequately meet basic living needs eg housing, food, health and some recreational activities. The 1996 Census indicated that 62.84% of people aged 65 years and over living in the City of Lake Macquarie, had an income of \$199 per week or less. At that time, the basic rate for a single pension was \$173.90 per week. 2001 Census figures for this characteristic are not yet available but it is unlikely that income levels have changed greatly during the five year period.

EMPLOYMENT

Lake Macquarie has an unemployment rate of 8.5% compared with 5.5% for NSW. Anecdotal evidence indicates that older people are often discriminated against in regard to maintaining and seeking employment.

The following should be encouraged:

- ❑ community education programs – aimed at the attitudes of employers, employees and education providers to encourage mature aged participation in education and the workforce;
- ❑ flexible work options – aimed at the provision of flexible hours, job share arrangements and multi skilling;
- ❑ training/technology – ongoing training and education of mature aged employees and older people eg computer training courses for mature aged people, a system of public access to make computer usage more visible and accessible.

TRANSPORT

An inadequate level of public transport is a major concern for residents of older residents and people with a disability in the City of Lake Macquarie. This has created difficulties for people trying to access a range of services and activities. The absence of an adequate accessible transport service can also increase social isolation and reduce participation rates in community activities.

Inequity exists in the way fees are charged for transport systems. Pensioners are entitled to concessional fares if they use public transport however, these fares are not available when private providers are the supplier of the transport services. Also, people who are frail and have a disability, who use community transport services such as those funded under the Home and Community Care Program, pay fees well in excess of people who are able to use public transport.

The following should be encouraged:

- ❑ increased availability of public and community transport including the provision of a variety of vehicle sizes and flexible route options;
- ❑ programs which promote equity in transport fees;
- ❑ increased availability of public transport systems which are accessible for people with a disability;
- ❑ community education programs which encourage greater use of public transport.

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