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Autism
QUEENSLAND Inc.

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Regional Australia
House of Representatives
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

e-mail: ra.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input for consideration by the House of Representatives Standing Committee into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia. This submission will outline some of the barriers to provision of therapy and support services for people with autism and their families living in rural and remote regions of Queensland and the challenges and benefits of 'fly-in, fly-out' models of service delivery. We also wish to acknowledge and support the excellent report put forward by S.A.R.R.A.H (Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health) to the Standing committee in October 2011.

Autism is a lifelong and complex developmental disability. A study commissioned by the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorder in 2007 reported a prevalence of one child in every 160 children between the ages of 6 to 12 years having an autism spectrum disorder. More recent research from around the world suggests that this figure may be higher. There is no known cure for autism, but early intervention, therapy, education and family support leads to improved outcomes not just for the person with autism but also for the person's family and the community.

In spite of the recognition of the value of intervention and support, many families find it difficult to access the supports they need for their child and themselves. This is magnified many times over for families living regional areas of Queensland, particularly those in more remote areas. Opportunities to access support from professionals with specialist knowledge and skills in autism is very limited or non-existent. In some regions access to more generalist therapy and support services are also extremely limited. The impact of the mining boom has exacerbated this problem with increased populations in these regions as well as increased cost of living making it difficult to attract therapists and other specialists to the region.

Issues particularly pertinent to this discussion and the impacts on provision of support and services to people with autism and their families are outlined below:

Local Service Provision vs Outreach Service ('Fly-in, fly-out' Service) Provision

Clearly most families would prefer to access the services and supports they require for their child locally and this should always be our goal wherever possible. For families there are often fewer costs associated with a local service, the service is available on a more regular basis and families often report feeling more comfortable with people who are local to their area and understand their community. However this is often not a reality for rural families. Aside from the costs of setting up new services in an area, the ability to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff to these rural areas is a major barrier. Reasons for this are many but include: shortage of therapists and other qualified professionals; unwillingness of many professionals to relocate to these regions for family and other personal reasons; cost of relocation to these regions given the significant increase in cost of rental and general cost of living; limited opportunities for professional development and professional support and supervision, etc. Even when staff can be recruited to these areas, turnover is high due to all the reasons above and positions can remain vacant for lengthy periods of time. This together with the reality that the small population of some more remote locations will never be able to support locally based, specialised services makes outreach ('fly-in, fly-out', or 'drive-in, drive-out') services a necessity.

A good compromise is regionally based hubs in regional centres allowing for more regular and consistent outreach support to the surrounding areas. While this exists for in some regions of Queensland for children with autism, it is only available for children under 6 years of age and only in a small number of locations.

High Costs Associated with Delivery of Outreach Services ('Fly-in, fly-out' Services)

There are few, if any specialised services for people with autism and their families outside Brisbane and large regional centres in Queensland. Therefore families are reliant upon outreach services for specialised, autism-specific input, many of which are unfunded or only partially funded and therefore very expensive. As a result of the mining boom in many regional areas there have been significant increases in the cost of accommodation and airfares for all FIFO services and in some instances accommodation simply cannot be found. These costs must be added to the cost of an outreach program, effectively ruling out this option for some families or at least reducing the amount of intervention they can afford. Thanks to supplementary funding from the Department of Education and Training and significant fundraising efforts, Autism Queensland is able to deliver an advisory service to students with autism in schools throughout Queensland at no cost to families. However the ever growing gap between funding and the cost of delivery of this service makes its future uncertain. The limited funds available also means most rural and remote areas of Queensland may only be visited just once every one or two years and some children miss out altogether due to the high demand for the service in each region visited.

In 2008 the federal government introduced the Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) Package which included the provision of up to \$12,000 funding per child to families to contribute to the costs of early intervention for young children with autism and an additional \$2000 payment to families living in rural and remote areas. This has facilitated access to early intervention services for many young children with autism as well as increasing the range of services available. However due to the limited local services and high cost of specialized outreach autism services in rural Queensland, choices in reality are very limited. The \$2,000 rural and remote payment goes only a little way towards covering the additional travel costs associated with the delivery of an early intervention program by qualified specialists in these areas. As a result these programs are very costly and the child's limited early intervention funds 'buy' very little early intervention in comparison to children living in Brisbane and larger regional centres. Some families ultimately make the decision to move to these larger centres to access more service for their child which means moving away from their jobs, their extended family and support network and their community. Others simply do not have this option whether for financial, business and family reasons and must accept they simply will not be able to access the early intervention their child needs.

Additionally, this federal funding is only available for children under the age of 7. Targeted support and intervention for children once they turn 7 is not funded and therefore is only available in regional and remote parts of Queensland at an extremely high cost that the families have to pay themselves. Brisbane families have options of specialist schools for children with autism (primarily funded by Department of Education and Training and therefore available at a subsidised cost to the families), a greater frequency of advisory visits (as described in the paragraph at the start of this section) and a wide range of private therapy options, as well as a greater array of respite services. None of these are available choices for families in regional and remote Queensland – the only option they have are outreach services, offering customised individual intensive programs. However, compared to families living in Brisbane, the costs for families in regional Queensland are much higher, as the costs of airfares, accommodation, car hire and meals have to be covered, as well as the cost of the actual intervention.

People with autism and their families living in rural and remote parts of Australia have as much right to the appropriate supports and services as people in cities and large towns. Government of all levels and local industry must find a way to make this support affordable for families, thereby providing families with a very real option to remain in these communities without feeling they are compromising their child or their own future. Government and local industry could help by:

- Targeted funding for programs to support people with autism and their families living in rural and remote areas
- Financial assistance to families to facilitate increased access to specialized services
- Improvement to local infrastructure such as more affordable accommodation, community facilities from which to deliver services, etc that will reduce the costs of delivering outreach services in the areas

Workforce Experience and Skill

Currently there is a shortage of professionals with relevant experience and expertise in the field of autism. Although outreach services based in larger regional centres increase opportunities to attract therapists and other professionals, the challenge of retaining experienced staff remains. The very nature of these roles means staff are travelling and away from home on a regular basis and therefore typically as many professionals become more experienced in their roles they may also be forced to leave the position due to family commitments.

Opportunities for mentoring and supervision by experienced professionals are therefore a critical component of any outreach service. Providing access to appropriate professional development which is targeted to delivery of services in rural and remote communities and professional development that is targeted to an outreach model of service delivery are also an important consideration. Unfortunately all these measures come at considerable cost.

Risks Associated with Outreach Services

There are a number of risk factors associated with delivery of Outreach Services. This can include extended hours of travel by road in rural areas where mobile coverage is poor, visits to the homes of clients in isolated areas, fatigue due to long days and long periods away from home and challenges finding suitable accommodation, particularly in mining areas where much of the accommodation is booked out months in advance.

Some of these risks can be reduced by providing staff with the opportunity to travel in teams rather than individually. Of course this is also a preferable a model of service delivery as it allows for staff from different areas of professional expertise and experience to contribute to the program. Unfortunately this is not always possible due to the cost, particularly when there are only a small number or even only an individual client in a particular area. Risk assessment and management training and clear policies and procedures are important measures to ensure the safety of staff delivering outreach services

As the peak agency for autism in Queensland, and a provider of services to people with autism and their families across Queensland, Autism Queensland is in a unique position to recognize the challenges for families living with autism across the state. Most families have a strong desire to continue to live and work in their communities. However without the appropriate services and supports many families will have to make the difficult decision about remaining in their community or leaving so as to access better services and supports for their young or adult child with autism.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback to the inquiry. Please contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Penny Beeston
Chief Executive Officer

