

Recreation, Sports and Aquatics Club

Opportunities for People with a Disability



Registered Charity & Deductible Gift Recipient. ABN: 59 726 089 873

Incorporating: **SPECIAL OLYMPICS ROSELANDS REGION**

18/06/08
Submission No. 69
(Inq into Obesity)

Postal Address: PO Box 120 Bankstown NSW 1885

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SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY ON OBESITY

INTRODUCTION

Recreation Sports and Aquatic Club (RSAC) provides sporting and recreation activities to around one thousand participants with disabilities across ten local government areas in southern and western Sydney. Through its affiliation with Special Olympics Australia RSAC provides coaching and sporting competition for people with intellectual disabilities in a range of sports including athletics, basketball, gymnastics, soccer and tennis.

With minimal government funding and only one paid employee, the club relies on volunteers and community grants to support its activities.

OBESITY AS AN ISSUE FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

The International Association of Scientific Study in Intellectual Disability (ISSAD)ⁱ reports that nutrition related health problems; particularly obesity and chronic constipation are more common in people with an intellectual disability than in the general population.

Low levels of physical activity among people with Intellectual Disability have been identified by the ISSAD as a major factor contributing to high rates of obesity. Lack of physical activity is also associated with other serious health conditions that are increased among adults with intellectual disability such as in coronary heart disease, hypertension, obesity, osteoporosis and mental health disorders. Health screening alone has been shown to have little impact in addressing obesity in this population, as people with intellectual disability need active support to increase levels of exercise and improve their diet.ⁱⁱ

RSAC Patrons

The Honourable Morris Iemma, Premier of NSW

The Honourable Kaye Griffin, MLC; Mayor of Bankstown, Councillor Tania Mihailuk
Mayor of Hurstville, Councillor Vince Badalati; Mayor of Canterbury, Councillor Robert Furolo

Barriers to participation in physical activity by people with intellectual disability include:

Limited income

People with intellectual disability generally have low incomes either because they are reliant on government benefits or have access only to low-paid, often part-time jobs. This means they have difficulty accessing options such as gym membership that are available to the general community.

Restricted access to transport

People with intellectual disability are likely to be reliant on public transport, or on carers for transport to activities.

Restricted access to employment

People with intellectual disability have restricted access to employment. Most people with intellectual disability want to work, but opportunities for work are often not available. People with moderate to severe disabilities often also have restricted access to day programs, which means they spend long periods of time at home. This reduces access to incidental physical activity, and increases periods of time when people with intellectual disability are reliant on passive activities such as viewing television.

Reliance on carers

Many people with intellectual disability live with family carers who may lack the time, energy or mobility to support even low impact activity such as walking. Because of the demands they face carers themselves are vulnerable to depression, and face their own health issues, which means they often have reduced motivation in relation to exercising themselves, let alone supporting their family member with an intellectual disability to exercise. In group-home settings with multiple residents it may be difficult to provide individualised support so that each resident can participate in physical activities of their choice. There is some evidence that although quality of life for people with intellectual disability has increased overall as use of institutional care has ceased, people with intellectual disability who live in the community or with family are more likely to be obese than people in larger-scale institutional care. ⁱⁱⁱ

Social exclusion

Exclusion from mainstream sporting activities such as team sports. While people with intellectual disability may be included in these activities as children, RSAC experience is that in adolescence many people with intellectual disability are unable to keep up with the expectations of team members, and are excluded from participation in team activities such as netball, soccer and cricket. This presents a double disadvantage, as young adults with intellectual disability often report limited friendship networks. They are often more reliant than their peers on organised activities as a source of social contact, and have a reduced capacity to participate in social activities outside formal groups.

ROLE OF RSAC IN INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND THEIR CARERS

RSAC is a community based organization that provides sports training and competition and recreation and social activities for people with disabilities. Using community venues across St George, Inner West, South and South West Sydney the club welcomes participants from across Sydney to attend its programs. For close to 1000 people each week the club provides their main opportunity to participate in physical activity.

The club relies on 120 volunteers to provide weekly training sessions in athletics, basketball, bocce, bowling, cricket, gymnastics, soccer, sports skills, swimming and tennis. The club also runs regular discos and drop-in sessions, sports carnivals, picnics and fun days. The club has established successful social clubs for young adults with intellectual disabilities, and carer support groups, which have incorporated fitness activities. The club has also conducted a range of personal development programs targeting young people that have incorporated messages about healthy lifestyle.

The club provides vacation care and camp programs that provide much needed respite for families caring for school aged children. These also incorporate a range of physical activities.

RSAC has recognised the challenges of an aging population of people with a disability, and has responded by providing more activities, such as bocce, that are appropriate for older people, scheduling more day time activities, and incorporating activities that are not focused on competition.

RSAC functions within a culturally diverse community, and has actively promoted the participation of people with disabilities and their carers from a range of cultural backgrounds within its programs.

The Commonwealth of Australia (2003)^{iv} encouraged that the NHMRC Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents be implemented by introducing standards for school canteens, vending machines, fundraising, sponsorships, and special events as one of the many strategies to prevent the increase in child obesity in Australia. They also recommend that outreach services to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and families be included in healthy weight strategies. In particular it was recommended that neighbourhood and community organizations improve the availability and promotion of healthy foods and physical activity for young people and families involved in their activities.

RSAC is a community organization that is closely involved with outreach to one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the community – people with intellectual disability. RSAC receives no core funding for its activities. Any government grants received are for specific projects only, generally as one-off grants. It has a volunteer board, and one full-time paid employee. It has been fortunate to obtain premises through the generous donation of a local club. However many of its sporting activities take place at community facilities for which sessional fees must be paid (eg community centres, tennis courts, bowling alleys) Casual staff are employed for some programs. Funds are sourced on a project basis from government bodies, councils, philanthropic organizations, and clubs through the Community

Development Social Expenditure (CDSE) program. Constant effort is expended to ensure continuity of as many of the club's activities as possible. RSAC is affiliated with Special Olympics Australia which provides an opportunity for members to participate in competition within NSW, nationally and internationally. This is a wonderful motivation for participants, and affirms their status as athletes within the community. However this also requires members to pay a \$70 annual individual fee if they want to access this opportunity. RSAC does not receive any funding for its activities from Special Olympics Australia.

CHALLENGES OF FUNDRAISING

Fundraising is vital to RSAC to supplement the grants available from government and philanthropic groups. Fundraising presents an ongoing challenge for organizations such as RSAC. While children with disabilities may be appealing to sponsors and the public, it is much more difficult to promote interest in the needs of young people and adults with intellectual disability.

RSAC participated as a case study in an action research project with Curtin University^v to explore the context, issues and barriers around healthy fundraising. The project highlighted the challenges in ensuring that fundraising activities did not compromise messages about healthier eating.

The project noted that corporate businesses promoting the unhealthy food options were quite willing to step in to support the RSAC with fundraising. Such support could include provision of prizes by fast food companies, or the packaging of products such as chocolates in an easy to sell format, thus reducing the time and effort involved in fundraising projects. Concerns were expressed that criticisms of food companies are using underhand marketing techniques by plying their wares to schools^{vi}, were even more relevant to RSAC's disadvantaged intellectually disabled members. People with intellectual disability are likely to be more vulnerable to marketing because they don't have the cognitive skills necessary to assess the claims of advertisers.

While RSAC aims to promote healthy lifestyle options for its members, funding is an ongoing challenge for the organization. When at times the only bodies interested in supporting its activities are corporate food marketers, it is difficult for the organization to take a stand and resist these offers when to do so is likely to reduce the range of activities that can be offered to its members.

CONCLUSION

Specialist sporting and recreational activities such as RSAC play an important role in enabling people with intellectual disability to access physical activity, and thus reduce obesity and improve physical health. Even though there is good evidence that people with intellectual disability experience significant barriers in participating in physical activity without formal support, and that increased activity in this population group should improve health and reduce the costs associated with obesity, very limited government support is available for such organizations.

Jenny Bombardieri

Executive Officer

ⁱ Santos R et al (2004) Health Guidelines for Adults with an Intellectual Disability. International Association of the Scientific Study in Intellectual Disability, Health Special Interest Group, viewed 16/10/07. Website: www.iassid.org/pdf/healthguidelines.pdf

ⁱⁱ Marshall D, McConkey, R., and Moore, G., Obesity in people with intellectual disabilities: the impact of nurse-led health screenings and health promotion activities, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 41(2), January 2003, pp.147-153

ⁱⁱⁱ Rimmer, J.H. and Yamaki, K, Obesity and Intellectual Disability., *Ment Retard Dev Disabil Res Rev.* 2006;12(1):22-7.

^{iv} Commonwealth of Australia, 2003. Healthy Weight 2008. Australia's Future. The National Action Agenda for Children and Young people and their Families.

^v Humphrey B. Healthy fundraising: a Case Study with Special Olympics, Roselands. Unpublished report. Presented as part of requirements for the degree of Masters of Health Promotion, Research Project, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia.

^{vi} Bourke K. Death to the Krispy Kreme: the Parents Jury has spoken. *Sydney Morning Herald* Monday 19th March 2007