

Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Inquiry into Aged Care
Submission from Darwin Community Legal Service's Aged & Disability Rights
Team

Our submission is in relation to:

(c) The appropriateness of young people with disabilities being accommodated in residential aged care facilities and the extent to which residents with special needs such as dementia, mental illness or specific conditions are met under current funding arrangements.

We provide aged care advocacy and disability advocacy to people in the Top End of the Northern Territory. As the only disability advocacy service in this area we support people with any recognized type of disability and of any age.

We are aware of a number of young people who are presently accommodated in aged care facilities in the Top End.

Most of these young people are indigenous people from remote communities. They are under Adult Guardianship Orders and have little contact with family members who cannot afford the airfares to visit them in the urban centres. Their first language is usually an Aboriginal language.

Young people are disproportionately represented in physically aggressive incidents at the facilities. In the last eight months there has been an allegation of sexual assault against a frail elderly resident and physical assaults against two others. In all three cases there have been indications that the alleged perpetrator was not at ease in the facility. In one case the young man had been asking to leave for years prior to the incident.

There is an extreme shortage of appropriate community-based accommodation. The aged care facilities have had empty 'beds' and seem to need the income derived from having it occupied. These young people do not have a supportive, articulate network of family or friends to help them find better accommodation. The alternative to the aged care facility for some has been very long stays in an acute care ward in a hospital. This has been in excess of a year in more than one case. Accommodation in an aged care facility is better than being in hospital in some respects, but the young person effectively disappears from the list of those needing appropriate accommodation.

Aged care facilities are still institutional in many respects. There are many compromises to be made when you live with 20 or 50 other people. The young

person can expect to be using plastic mugs that are suitable for elderly people whose hand strength is very limited and going to bed early each evening. The music that is playing in the communal areas will be from his or her parents' or grandparents' young days. The longevity of the young person in an aged care facility is often much greater than their fellow residents. They will be there while many of their fellow residents pass away.

Once the young person is in the aged care facility they are likely to lose what connections with the community they have. The aged care facilities normally have a bus, but it doesn't get used very often because there aren't sufficient staff to take residents on outings. And when they do go out the trips usually cater for the interests of the majority of the residents, not the minority. One-to-one time with a staff member is very limited.

The aged care facilities in the Top End of the Northern Territory are of small to medium size. The minority groups represented there are very small minorities. The chance of staff being specially trained to support younger, stronger people is very limited. It is a continual challenge for the facilities to keep a full staff compliment, let alone a highly trained staff and one that caters for young people's needs. Young people find that the activity program caters for much older, frail people.

For these reason we believe that young people should not be accommodated in aged care facilities. We hope this Senate Inquiry will be an avenue for giving the issue enough prominence to ensure it is addressed by the Federal, State and Territory Governments who have responsibility for meeting the needs of this vulnerable group in the Australian community.

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In the absence of the DCLS' Co-ordinator the Principal Solicitor Mr Ian Tranthem authorized this submission.

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