Victorian Disability Advocacy Network
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The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra 2600

Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission on behalf of the Victorian Disability Advocacy Network (VDAN) to the **Inquiry into the funding and operation of the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement**

VDAN is a coalition of approximately 35 independent, community based organizations that advocate with and for people with a disability. Members receive funding through the CSTDA from either State or Federal Governments or a combination of both. The membership spans the full range of advocacy organisations including self advocacy groups and bodies such as the Office of the Public Advocate and the Equal Opportunity Commission.
VDAN's primary aim is to promote and defend the human rights and valued status of people with disabilities by supporting and promoting advocacy groups, actions and initiatives.
Whilst the CSTDA has laid the framework for cooperation and collaboration between the States it has not provided what people with disabilities and their families want and need from their governments – that is the entitlement to services and supports to meet their needs and foster their inclusion into full community life. Without this fundamental commitment underpinning the agreement the CSTDA becomes purely an administrative tool for stretching scarce resources and the maintenance of an inadequate set of services.

VDAN would like to see the Agreement driven by a genuine commitment to foster the citizenship rights of all people with disabilities At present it is the lack of supports rather than the disability itself that often prevents people participating and accessing the same freedoms and opportunities as people without a disability. Simplification of service delivery arrangements and approaches to disability support that promote the principles of the Disability Services Act, in particular the intended outcomes of greater choice and participation in community life, are required. Moves in the Victorian state disability plan towards direct funding to individuals are a welcome move in this direction.

We believe that the Agreements to date have failed to adequately address the shortfalls in funding and services, to what some have termed a ‘competition amongst beggars’ where often those who are best informed and able to express their needs do best. There are inequities across disability groups; and the services available vary from state to state.

A very narrow, diagnostically oriented and isolationist view of disability has informed the Agreements to date. VDAN believes the Agreement requires a values base that recognises the rights of all citizens and commits to ensuring the enactment of this role regardless of the barriers.

This would recognise that the administrative barriers between aged care, mental health and disability are artificial constructs that do not reflect the lived experience of people with a disability and their families. The emphasis in the Agreement needs to be on collaboration across these artificial administrative boundaries rather than the boundary riding approach that is currently in place.

Whilst there has been some recognition of unmet need, the means for arriving at these calculations has not been based on a real assessment of quality of life and indicators of community inclusion but rather on a limited view of what constitutes need. The relatively simplistic approach to identifying unmet need has meant that some of those in greatest need such as young people in nursing homes, or those living in supported residential services have been unable to access the services and supports they require.

We believe that the Agreements to date have been too narrow in their focus and have not tackled either the ideological or the practical implications associated with the anticipated increase in disability in the community over time, associated with medical advances and the implications of an aging population. Currently people with disability do not have freedom of movement within their own country due to their reliance on complex service delivery arrangements. Funding is tied to the place of residence rather than to the individual which can severely limit their mobility and choice of residence.

We seek the next agreement to provide leadership to the general community in acknowledging the rights of people with a disability to active citizenship; rather than a drain on the public purse. A service system that would do this would be focused on an individualized approach to funding that would ensure both the adequacy and the portability of the assistance required. The capacity to control and manage the use of funds would be a key factor.

Advocacy is the only service component within the Agreement identified as a joint funding responsibility, however structures have not been established to provide a framework for program development or coordination across the different jurisdictions. The administration of the program through Attorney Generals at both State and Federal level would reinforce and support a focus on human rights and place disability advocacy within mainstream advocacy and justice administration.

The anticipated outcomes of the current review of the National Disability Advocacy Program appear to reflect a focus on administrative efficiency rather than a commitment to a services system that reflects the needs of people with disability for effective advocacy and systemic change.

Currently advocacy is identified as a joint responsibility under the CSTDA however there is a need for commitment by government to work in collaboration with people with disability through the advocacy sector to achieve broader systemic goals. There are many factors that give rise to a continued need for a specific advocacy response in the area of disability. These include:

- Recognition that many people with disability are unable to use publicly available avenues for redress or representation, without assistance. For example those with cognitive disabilities such as memory, concentration or information processing difficulties require assistance to use the systems available to them such as courts tribunals and complaints processes.
- Increase focus on risk management within the disability service systen and the community generally;
- The interests of service providers and those of people who receive services are not always the same. Economic and managerial priorities often take precedence over the interests and requirements of the individual.

The last two reviews have primarily focused on accountability and efficiency and fiscal rather than policy and service development. The first review of what was then known as the CSDA was a much more comprehensive review of the whole policy, administration and service delivery framework across all jurisdictions. The report by Professor Anna Yeatman, "*Getting Real"-1996"* addressed many of the issues that are being examined by this Senate Inquiry and many of the recommendations are worth revisiting. Furthermore, it was based on significant input from all stakeholders across the nation, the last time such a major consultation was undertaken.

The current arrangements for splitting service delivery arrangements across both the State and Federal jurisdictions creates competition, inflexibility and cost-shifting that does not benefit people with a disability. We believe this Inquiry needs to look at the roles and functions of Federal State and Local government in service delivery and move toward a simplified and collaborative national program. A unified approach to assessment and eligibility would reduce costs and enable more of the funding to be directed to the intended recipients.

We would welcome an opportunity to present these views to the Committee in its public hearings.
Yours sincerely

Paul Hume
Chairperson