

## **COMMITTEES**

### **Community Affairs Committee Report**

**Senator HUMPHRIES** (Australian Capital Territory) (6.07 p.m.)—I am very pleased to be able to return this afternoon to the subject of the report which the Community Affairs Committee presented earlier today on the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement. I want to record that, although this is not the only report that has been done into that agreement and Australian disability services in recent decades—nor is it the most authoritative on that subject—it is certainly a report which highlights a present and real need on the part of Australian governments to take seriously an area where, frankly, government performance at all levels has been unacceptable.

The report finds that there has been substantial dysfunctionality in Australian disability service provision. It goes on to strongly recommend that the next iteration of the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement tackle the underlying problems which leave large numbers of disabled Australians and their families either without proper services or with no services at all.

The CSTDA is essentially a funding agreement purporting to establish key national priorities for service provision for those in this country with disabilities and to coordinate that service provision so as to ensure that all areas of need are adequately addressed. Although the three previous CSTDAs made, I think, huge progress towards meeting those goals, the committee completed this inquiry more aware of the agreements' failings than their successes.

The facts are stark. There are numerous examples within our disability system of inflexible access criteria, siloed services, bureaucratic application and assessment processes, poor linkages with companion services and obscure entry points to programs. Urgent reform is required to lift consumers out of the labyrinth which the system often represents and help Australians already under pressure to find which services are available and the support at hand.

More transparency and better coordination are, however, only peripheral solutions to the central problem in disability services, and that is the fact that need in Australia outstrips capacity by an enormous margin. There are hundreds of thousands of Australians whose quality of life is greatly compromised because of their own or a family member's disability. The committee heard countless stories illustrating this very point: younger disabled people in rural and regional Australia with no access to day programs or employment services; multiple sclerosis sufferers trapped in hospital beds because no suitable accommodation in their community exists—I am not only talking about rural communities but even major cities; people receiving some state support who are unable to move interstate because they would thereby drop to the bottom of the services queue in that new jurisdiction; and ageing carers facing the reality of needing care themselves, with limited prospects of residential options for their children when they reach that stage.

The report draws attention to the most important recommendation arising from this inquiry—that is, recommendation 21—that Commonwealth, state and territory governments jointly commit as part of the fourth CSTDA to substantial additional funding to address identified unmet need for specialist disability services, particularly accommodation services and support. I think it is fair to say that, after Indigenous Australians, those affected by disability rank as the most disadvantaged Australians today. Yet the burden of disability seems to have suppressed the capacity of this group of our country men and women to bring their concerns to national attention to the extent that their numbers and the severity of these issues would suggest.

The fact remains that it is extremely distressing, as the committee discovered, to see so many Australians with a severely compromised quality of life by virtue of the fact that they either have a disability or have made the decision as Australians to shoulder the responsibility of caring for a

family member with a disability because they believe that the importance of that responsibility transcends anything else.

The committee recommends in its report a number of other changes to the operation of the CSTDA. Those are important and they are warmly commended to all of the governments concerned. Particularly, we believe that the next CSTDA should attempt to focus on services from the perspective of those who consume them. There should be, for example, a whole-of-government, whole-of-life approach to services for people with disabilities; there should be a partnership between governments at all levels, service providers and the disability community to set priorities and improve outcomes for people with disabilities; and it should be clear to the people who approach those services where they need to go to obtain a service if it is available. So much valuable and precious time and effort on the part of people under great pressure is expended in seeking services which are either not available in the form that they require or not there at all. The report makes a number of other recommendations which I commend to the Senate and particularly to the Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

Let me say just a couple of things before I sit down and allow others to speak in this debate. I draw attention to the fact that this is again a unanimous report of the Community Affairs Committee. We have certainly tried in recent years to make reports which reflect the unanimous view of its members, and we hope that that carries some weight in the eyes of the government and the community when examining these issues. I also commend the committee for having worked so very hard to produce this report after an extremely busy year as a committee. I draw attention to the fact that, according to figures published yesterday, the community affairs committee of the Senate is the committee with, at the least, the greatest number of working hours—and, I would suggest, it also has a record in terms of the production of reports which other committees in the Senate would be hard-pressed to match. I want to close by commending the committee secretariat, which has borne so much of the hard work in making this report possible after a year in which many other reports and matters were dealt with by the committee.