

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator McLUCAS (Queensland) (6.15 p.m.)—I too commend to the Senate the report of the community affairs committee in its inquiry into the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement. Likewise, I am very pleased that this is a unanimous report. Virtually the first sentence uttered by one of the first witnesses to our inquiry, Dr Bronwyn Morkham, was that the power of the committee's previous report, into the provision of aged care in Australia, particularly the chapter devoted to young people in nursing homes, was in its unanimity. I think that Dr Morkham's plea to us to come to a unanimous report has been heeded. Hopefully, the governments—all governments—will recognise that this is not a report that reflects the views of any political group in this country; it reflects the views of people with disabilities and their carers as expressed through our committee process.

I initially moved the reference for this inquiry at about this time last year, and unfortunately that was not agreed to—I could make some points about that, but we do not have time. However, I am pleased to say that the Senate did agree to this reference in the middle of last year, for which I thank the Senate. The purpose of moving the reference was to allow all people in the disability community—people with disabilities, their carers and the disability service sector—to participate in and inform the negotiations that are currently underway in the lead-up to the fourth Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement. The timing of this report is helpful to that, I think, along with its unanimity.

During the inquiry, we heard on many occasions that, in searching for support—and I say searching, not looking; scrabbling for support—people with disabilities and their carers were often told by a service provider that they were funded by, let's say, the Commonwealth and so therefore providing a service to that individual was not their responsibility. And that was the same with the states and territories. If these recommendations are adopted, that blame game—that 'not my responsibility' argument—will stop, and that would be a great contribution to assisting people with disabilities.

Part of the reason that service providers have to say, 'I can't help you,' is lack of funding. Our first recommendation is that all governments, Commonwealth, state and territory, increase the level of funding to disability services in Australia. The other thing that is absolutely essential is that the fourth agreement must clarify the responsibilities of each of the parties so that people with disabilities and their carers know who should be funding certain services. The other achievement, if these recommendations are adopted, will be that people will have an understanding of what their expectations should be. People with disabilities know that they are not going to have their every need fulfilled, but they simply need an indication of what could be provided to them, and they also are looking for some sort of equitable access to services.

The recommendation I would like to talk about tonight, though, is recommendation 4:

That in the life of the next CSTDA, signatories agree to develop a National Disability Strategy which would function as a high level strategic policy document, designed to address the complexity of needs of people with disability and their carers in all aspects of their lives.

If governments adopt that recommendation, I believe it is the blueprint for the way forward that will allow people with disabilities to access all types of services that will support them. Too often people with disabilities are only supported with disability funding. A person with a disability has the same right to access transport funding or housing funding or health funding. We know, from undertaking this inquiry, that people with disabilities do not access generic funding to the level

that other Australians do. That must change and, if we have a national disability strategy that encompasses all departments right across government at the Commonwealth, state and territory levels, we will have a document that is a blueprint for people with disabilities that recognises their rights as consumers of disability services but also their fundamental human rights.

Just briefly, there are a couple of other recommendations I would like to bring to the attention of the Senate. Recommendations 7 and 8 go to the question of indexation. In some respects indexation for some disability services is seen as growth funding, and that is absolutely inappropriate. Why is it seen as growth funding? There simply is not enough money to go around anyway. Indexation is designed to accommodate the increase in costs that any service will have. I encourage both the states and the Commonwealth to recognise our recommendation to set a realistic indexation level, in line with the actual cost of delivering services. Most of the costs in delivering disability services are human costs—staffing and wage costs. That will not change. It cannot change.

The other recommendation is that the Commonwealth government consider removing the efficiency dividend from the indexation formula for funds allocated through the CSTDA. There are very few efficiencies to be found when most of your costs are human costs. You cannot lift a person out of a bed faster. You cannot bathe a person faster. Those costs are going to be there. They are not going to change. You cannot computerise them. The application of the efficiency dividend to the indexation from the Commonwealth results in a direct cut to overall income.

The other issue I would like to go to is the issue of lifelong planning. It is very important for people with disabilities and the parents of people with disabilities to have an expectation of the sorts of supports that they will be able to have during their lives. Those support levels will change—that is natural—and they may change quite quickly. We have to have in place, though, a commitment from governments to support people with disabilities in their aspiration to be a part of society and to contribute to society.

We heard, as Senator Humphries has said, some horrifying stories of people being kept in their homes almost as prisoners. We heard stories many times of people living in nursing homes because the support simply could not be provided outside. But we also heard some very positive stories, and we should learn from those positive stories and make sure that the positive experiences, where people are supported and are encouraged to be participants in our society, are the model that we adopt and ensure is applicable to all people.

Finally, there is a chapter on the ageing-disability interface. In the years to come, the number of people with disabilities who are ageing will grow quite considerably. That provides a challenge to governments, and our recommendation is that people who are ageing who have disabilities need to be able to access services from whichever stream of funding is most applicable.

I thank all witnesses who came before the inquiry and all people who provided submissions, but I particularly want to thank Christine McDonald and Owen Griffiths and all the staff of the secretariat for their exemplary work and for their enormous patience in some trying times, even up to yesterday. I place on record my thanks.