

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (6.32 p.m.)—I too was a member of this committee and I too am extremely pleased that we had a unanimous report. It seems a bit strange to say that it was a pleasure to work on this committee but it was in terms of working with both committee members and committee staff who were so dedicated to what we were doing. It was also a pleasure to meet and interact with both people with disabilities and with their carers who came to the committee and who told us in many cases very disturbing and tragic stories.

We also heard some positive stories. As Senator McLucas said, there are many very positive stories. But unfortunately those are outweighed by the stories of people struggling, people with disabilities and their carers living in what can be described, I think, as most distressing circumstances. Not only, as Senator Humphries articulated, are some of the most disadvantaged people in our community living with disabilities, so too are their carers, and the carers of those living with disabilities have amongst the lowest rating on the wellbeing index. So I think that we also need to bear that in mind.

The overwhelming sentiment from nearly all people, except two, making submissions to our inquiry was that there should be another agreement, and I also strongly believe that. But as my colleagues have articulated, the overwhelming No. 1 recommendation—even though it is No. 21—is that there needs to be more funding to meet unmet need. The tragedy here is that we do not have a firm understanding of what that unmet need is. In my home state of Western Australia they have a bit of an idea of how many people want accommodation but that is only known from those that are on the waiting list. It works differently in each state but in my home state of Western Australia you just keep applying, and if you do not get accommodation you just keep applying. People get sick of it so they self-select and so we do not have a firm idea of how many people do require accommodation.

As well as endorsing the issues that my colleagues have pointed out, I want to point out that there are issues around portability of services. If you are living with a disability in Western Australia and you want to move to the eastern states, you are not guaranteed access to similar services. In fact, some people told us stories of moving interstate and having to move back to their original state in order to get some sort of support. As we pointed out in the report, although the states and the Commonwealth identified this as an issue before the year 2000 it is still a major issue. There has to be some change in the way we do business to enable people to be able to move between states and have the same level of support services and have their needs met.

Another area that has come up is dual and multiple disabilities. We heard a number of stories where people who have dual disabilities or dual diagnoses were batted between services. It was a matter of: 'No, you do not fit neatly into this service and you should go to the other service,' or 'No, you definitely do not fit into this service so you should go to the other service.' They are falling between gaps because they are a round peg in a square hole. This should not be occurring to the most vulnerable members of our community.

I also strongly endorse the call for whole-of-life planning. Again we heard stories of people having to go back repeatedly for assessments. When people have disabilities, the medical profession and those people living with these disabilities know what is going to happen to them as they age, so they should not need to go back for repeated assessments. We also need a much more comprehensive assessment of people's disabilities so that we can match services to their needs.

Another area that came out was equipment. Equipment is absolutely essential for those living with disabilities. Again it varies between states; it can be extremely difficult. Different states have different caps on what you can buy. It is also very difficult to transfer your equipment between some states. When you are moving out of a nursing home—we are encouraging young people with disabilities to move out of nursing homes—you cannot take your equipment with you. You cannot take your equipment into nursing homes when you go into one. These things should not be happening to people living with disabilities; we should be looking after them and making their life that much easier.

Ageing in place is also very important and looking after carers as they age. We need to ensure that we are meeting the needs of carers of people with disabilities. We heard stories of people in their late 80s and early 90s still looking after their child who has a disability and not going to hospital and not seeking medical attention because they were worried about their child.

This is an extremely important report, and my plea to the Commonwealth and to the states and territories is to please take on board these recommendations. There are a lot of them; there are 29. They are for things that need to be fixed. Please take it on board. I also make a plea to Minister Scullion, the new minister responsible for families here, to please read this report as soon as he can and start talking to his colleagues and to the states and territories ministers so that we can get this fixed.