

Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

**Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs**

Submission to the Community Affairs References Committee

2009

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs submission to the Community Affairs References Committee – Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Community Affairs References Committee (the Committee) Inquiry into Hearing Health in Australia.

Structure of the submission

The following submission addresses items raised by the Committee that are relevant to FaHCSIA's portfolio responsibilities. The response also provides an outline of the relationship between key disability reform policies including an overview of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the National Disability Strategy and the National Disability Agreement.

Outline of relationships between key disability reform policies

Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention) on 17 July 2008.

The National Disability Strategy (NDS) will be an important mechanism to ensure that the principles underpinning the Convention are incorporated into policies and programs affecting people with disability, their families and carers. The NDS is currently being developed and is expected to be released in 2010.

The National Disability Agreement (NDA) was agreed by the Council of Australian Governments and came into effect on 1 January 2009. Under the NDA the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments will improve and increase services for people with disability, their families and carers. The NDA reflects a strong commitment from these two levels of government to provide more opportunities for people with disability to participate in and enjoy Australia's economic and social life.

National Disability Strategy

A National Disability Strategy (NDS) was one of the key recommendations of the 2007 Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth, State and Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA).

The NDS will provide direction and focus at a national level for the development of disability legislation, policy and standards which deliver a whole-of-government, whole-of-life approach to disability planning.

The development of the NDS included a formal public consultation process and the establishment of the 28 member National People with Disabilities and Carer Council. The Council provides expert advice to Government on the development and implementation of the Strategy.

Further, the Strategy is being developed jointly with the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments. A monitoring and reporting process will be developed and will be a means to track the progress of the Strategy and contribute to the reporting against the articles of the Convention.

The NDS consultation report, *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*, was launched by the Council and presented to the Commonwealth Government on 5 August 2009. The report will inform the NDS and help governments to identify the barriers and issues facing people with disability, their families and carers, and guide solutions.

National Disability Agreement

Under the National Disability Agreement (NDA) the Commonwealth Government and State and Territory Governments will improve and increase services for people with disability, their families and carers. A copy of the agreement can be found at:

http://www.coag.gov.au/intergov_agreements/federal_financial_relations/docs/IGA_FFR_ScheduleF_National_Disability_Agreement.rtf.

The NDA is designed specifically with the aim of ensuring that people with disability have an enhanced quality of life and participate as valued members of the community. Through the agreement, all Australian Governments have agreed to support services that provide skills and supports to enable people with disability to live as independently as possible and help them establish stable and sustainable living arrangements. It has a focus on the achievement of economic participation and social inclusion, choice, wellbeing and independence for people with disability. At the same time, the agreement focuses on supporting families and carers in their caring roles.

Under the NDA the Commonwealth has responsibility for the provision of employment services for people with disability and income support.

The State and Territory Governments have responsibility for delivering other specialist disability services including accommodation, respite, community support and community access services, in a manner which most effectively meets the needs of people with disability, their families and carers, consistent with local needs and priorities.

People with hearing impairment may be eligible for access to services and assistance which are under the scope of the NDA.

FaHCSIA Programs and services for people with a hearing impairment

FaHCSIA administers two programs that provide services to people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment: the National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS); and the Captioning Services Program.

NABS provides accredited Auslan Interpreters on a fee-free basis to deaf Auslan users who attend private medical consultations that attract a Medicare rebate. The budget for this program for 2009-10 is \$5 million.

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the sign language of the Australian deaf community. The Australian deaf community refers to people who are either born (severely or profoundly) deaf to deaf families who use Auslan or people born with hearing loss into families where the parents hear, but who learn sign language. It is important to note that not all people who are deaf use Auslan to communicate.

Since January 2005, FaHCSIA has provided funding to meet the cost of supplying accredited Auslan interpreter services to deaf Auslan users attending private medical consultations including GP's, specialists and a range of other private health care professionals that attract a Medicare rebate. NABS currently has over 500 Auslan interpreters available and has provided interpreters for over 60,000 private medical and health care appointments since the service commenced.

FaHCSIA also provided additional funding for NABS to establish a dedicated interpreter presence in the Northern Territory (NT). This funding aims to improve the uptake of interpreter services in the NT, to develop and train local Auslan interpreters and to scope the unique needs of deaf Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders working in partnership with the Institute for Aboriginal Development in the NT to develop strategies to provide culturally appropriate interpreting services.

NABS prioritises increasing the Auslan interpreter base nationally by providing regular training programs for new and existing interpreters through face-to-face or DVD format training and a Diploma of Interpreting.

FaHCSIA notes that Deaf Societies in each State and Territory (with the exception of the NT) also provide Auslan interpreting services to the deaf community.

The **Captioning Services Program** will provide funding of \$134,952 in 2009-10 to one service provider for the provision of captioning and distribution of community and education DVD's for people who are deaf or hearing impaired.

In addition, the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments all have policies in place requiring their government departments and agencies to caption all television commercials and public information videos.

FaHCSIA also funds two peak deafness and hearing loss organisations, Deafness Forum Australia and Deaf Australia (\$194,892 in 2009-10 for each organisation) through the **National Secretariat Program**. The National Secretariat Program provides financial support for peak bodies to allow them to contribute to government policy and service delivery, and communicate government information to their memberships.

Issues affecting Indigenous communities

FaHCSIA notes that hearing impairment amongst people in Indigenous communities is a significant issue.

In late 2007, all state governments committed to a national Indigenous reform agenda through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which includes actions across the areas of health, early childhood development, schooling and housing. COAG has agreed to a number of targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including:

- to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation; and
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.

In November 2008, COAG agreed to spend \$4.6 billion on initiatives for Indigenous Australians in the areas of: early childhood development; health; housing; economic development; and remote service delivery.

FaHCSIA notes the Prime Minister's announcement on 26 February 2009 about the Government's \$58.3 million investment in eye and ear health in Indigenous communities.

FaHCSIA expects that initiatives relating to health will especially have a positive impact on hearing health in Indigenous communities and that all the COAG initiatives will play a role.