

**Submission
No 71**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NSW**

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Community Services Committee
NSW Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People Rural and Regional NSW

Background to Settlement Services International

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a leading not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services in the areas of humanitarian settlement, asylum seeker assistance, community capacity building with people with disabilities and multicultural foster care in NSW. SSI's strategic vision is to assist vulnerable individuals and families to reach their full potential and build on their social and economic participation. SSI works to create opportunities for clients and communities to meet their own needs, wants and aspirations.

SSI is also the peak, state-wide representative body for 11 Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and delivers several programs at the local level through a decentralised service delivery model using SSI staff co-located at MRCs throughout NSW. SSI operates from four main office sites and 12 other locations in NSW and currently employs 450 staff and has 300 volunteers.

SSI's principal client groups are:

- Refugees & humanitarian entrants (including unaccompanied humanitarian minors);
- Asylum seekers living in the community
- People with disability
- Children in out-of-home care.

In 2014 SSI, in partnership with Uniting Care and St Vincent de Paul Society, was granted contracts to deliver Ability Links NSW across various parts of NSW, including metro centres and regional areas. From this work SSI has supported well over 6000 participants in reaching their identified goals in accessing local community. We have over 60 staff, known as Linkers, SSI Ability Links team is rich in diversity and experience, including bilingual and bicultural Linkers. Linkers are located in 21 offices across 44 Local Government Areas working with individuals, families, organisations, businesses and groups to build more inclusive and welcoming communities.

About the SSI NSW Ability Links Program

Ability Links NSW (ALNSW) continues to support the ongoing reforms of the disability system in NSW. ALNSW supports people with disability, their families and carers to connect with their local community to achieve their goals and aspirations, and live enriched and fulfilled lives.

Linkers work with people with disability by building on their strengths and overcoming barriers to make connections within their local community.

Linkers also work alongside community, community organisations, clubs and groups, businesses and mainstream services to develop a better understanding of how they can become more welcoming and inclusive.

Introduction

SSI Ability Links welcomes the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee Inquiry into 'Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional NSW'. This is an appropriate time to be asking the question of regional and rural transport options due to our current ageing population as well as on-going changes to employment and livelihood options in regional and rural Australia. It has also been estimated that there will be 2.3 million people in NSW aged 65 and over in 2050¹, meaning that older people will make up 24% of the NSW population. This leads to a likelihood that the numbers of older people with disability will also increase in NSW over this time period.

The Federal Government has published its National Disability Strategy 2010-2020, of which the NSW Government has ratified. The NSW Government has in turn implemented a Planning Guide for all Local Councils to have Disability Inclusion Action Plans in place by 1 July 2017². Within this plan is a specific policy direction of public, private and community transport systems that are accessible for the whole community. Currently as the system stands, transport is not accessible for the whole community, particularly the communities located outside of major metro centres facing the additional barriers of age and disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW;

Recommendation: NSW Government together with local councils implement new policy guidelines for use of Community Transport, specifically being available to local residents in isolated aged care facilities.

Throughout the Blue Mountains and Lithgow LGAs there is approximately 18.8% and 22.5% of the population living with disability respectively. In both these LGAs the population over the age of 65 years is close to 20%³. With this significant number of people requiring additional supports to access community, it is crucial that something is done to address the lack of transport available to get

¹ Family and Community Services. (2014) *Preventing and responding to abuse of older people: NSW interagency policy*. NSW Government. p 5. Available at: http://www.ageing.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/300465/FACS_NSW-Interagency-Policy.pdf

² NSW Family and Community Services & Local Government NSW (2015) *NSW Disability Inclusion Action Planning Guidelines* p.4 Available at: <http://www.lgnsw.org.au/files/imce-uploads/127/nsw-local-government-disability-inclusion-action-planning-guidelines-5.11.15-2.pdf>

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) *Data by Region* Available at: <http://stat.abs.gov.au/itt/r.jsp?databyregion#/>

people to local centres for personal wellbeing, outside of conventional medical appointments and elderly or disability specific outings.

It has been identified by an Ability Links participant, a 62 year old woman living in an Aged Care Facility in the Blue Mountains that she is unable to access her community. The participant is ineligible for community transport due to her current residence and the Aged Care facility no longer operates its own bus service.

In the Southern Regions of NSW, including Cooma- Monaro, Eurobodalla, Bega Valley, Goulburn Mulwaree and the Shoalhaven, people are reporting issues with access to community due to limited and ineffectual transport options. In Nowra and the surrounding coastal towns people are unable to get to social and community events due to limited community transport options, limited or lack of public transport or unaffordable private transport.

Ability Links ran a participant 'community conversation' event to gather feedback on the program and ways of improving services and opportunities in the area. This conversation, designed to create a space to talk about some of these issues, was rescheduled twice due to a failure of the transport systems in the area. Community transport could not be used due to the request being outside of a medical appointment. The participants lived outside of a regular bus route and were unable to use this system. Private transport such as taxis were unaffordable for the participants, family and friends were also unavailable to assist at the scheduled times. For Nowra it has also been reported that the bus stops in town are also limiting; there are not enough stops for people with mobility issues to go anywhere outside of the local shopping centre without having to walk many blocks to get there.

(b) Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW;

Recommendation: NSW Government work with local councils to increase the number of accessible train stations and buses, working towards having all routes and stations accessible.

Of the 22 Stations on the Blue Mountains Train Line (starting from Emu Plains), only 5 are wheelchair accessible⁴. All of the stations on this line have been upgraded to include services such as hearing loops, however only the 5 stations listed as accessible have been upgraded to include tactile tiles on the platforms, further limiting the safe use of such stations for the community. There are a variety of bus routes, of which have only scheduled accessible services, however these do not cover all areas of the mountains.

A participant in the Blue Mountains is also more than 2kms from her nearest train station, of which is not an accessible station. The closest accessible train station is more than 10kms away. The nearest bus stop is also more than 1km away which has no consistent footpath from her residence to the stop for ease of access. The participant has explained that no one in the facility uses public transport as it is too difficult to manage independently. The participant states that:

"Almost all of my time is spent inside the centre. It feels like I'm in jail, I feel like I can't escape ... I'm provided with taxi vouchers to get to medical appointments which are helpful but I have no support to help me meet my other needs. These might sound like flaky words but my social and spiritual needs are very important to me. I have no way of meaningfully meeting them without the opportunity to be out and mixing with other people. I can't do that without transport. I've

⁴ http://www.sydneytrains.info/stations/pdf/intercity_map.pdf

developed depression which was never part of my life before being so isolated. I'm a very social person and know my feelings of depression are caused by my lack of interaction with other people."

Another resident of the Blue Mountains reports they are frequently unable to attend important rehabilitation appointments in Penrith and Rooty Hill locations due to a lack of transport options to get there. The other common issue with Community Transport is although it is mostly available, those using it on any given day are prioritised on need, meaning rehab appointments are often the last to be dropped off and picked up;

"The reliance on the Blue Mountains community transport by a variety of users with diverse issues means it has to be prioritised. This has meant users with greater needs (kidney dialysis) require priority and you have to fit in. This could mean being picked up at 6am for an 8am drop off at rehab and then not being picked up until 3pm, and return home at least an hour or more later. A rehab session could last 2 hours which means a considerable waiting time prior to being picked up."

In Nowra, Ulladulla and other parts of Southern NSW, there are very limited bus services, accessible or otherwise, linking the bigger centres to the smaller coastal towns. A participant, living in Fisherman's Paradise north of Ulladulla faces a 15 minute walk to his nearest bus stop, of which they are no longer able to do. The participant is also unable to afford the community transport fee, even with a subsidised fare. The participant reported that there was a bus that a local club in Conjola operated that was very convenient, but this is no longer in operation. This participant is no longer attending social activities due to a lack of transport options that are affordable and convenient, leaving the participant isolated within their own community.

- (c) Potential strategies to improve access, including better alignment between different modes of transport, available routes and timetabling generally;

Recommendation: Local Councils with local transport providers consider additional stops and alternative routes in consultation with the transport users in the community.

For transport users in Nowra, there are only 3 major stops within the town; Bomaderry Train Station, Stockland Plaza and the Depot. This limitation on where the bus stops inhibits people from using different parts of the community due to their own limited mobility. Together with this are the limited stops outside of Nowra. In some suburbs there is only one stop for people to get to which can be quite a distance from their home. Without support, people are unable to get to and from the stop. This issue is also faced by those in the Blue Mountains.

- (d) Support that can be provided to seniors and disadvantaged people to assist with the costs of private transport where public transport is either unavailable or unable to meet the needs of these groups; and

We don't have any further recommendations for this particular section of the submission except to continue providing subsidised taxi charges for those eligible, and if necessary, open the eligibility for such subsidised fares to a wider group of people.

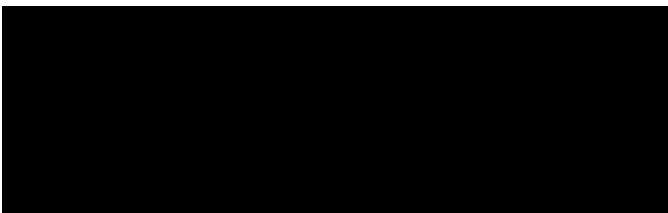
- (e) Any other related matters.

Recommendation: Inclusion of social wellbeing as a part of a person's overall health and the importance access to local transport has on this.

"I think there is a lot which can be improved for people in my situation. I would like to be able to access Community and Social Transport and would ask for consideration on how residents in Aged Care facilities could be included. As well as access to Community Transport a regular accessible bus service a few days a week to take residents directly from the facility to the railway or local shopping centre would also be welcomed. And finally I think recognition of the importance of social wellbeing as a legitimate part of overall health. The funny thing is they say we are free to come and go as we please here, that we have choice and control over our lives. That might be true in theory but, without transport, it certainly isn't true in practice."

The ability to remain socially connected to one's local community is intrinsically linked to a person's overall wellbeing. Both participants from the Blue Mountains have indicated that they face further barriers to their health due to a lack of social connection outside of their immediate families or fellow residents. The participants reporting barriers in Southern NSW are facing the same situation. Without being able to attend regular social activities or maintain connections, people are at a much higher risk of poorer health outcomes⁵.

Settlement Services International thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission and would welcome further engagement on any of the issues raised.



Steve Gholab, Operations Manager, SSI Ability Links

⁵ Berkman & Glass 2000 cited in Victoria Health (2005) *Social Inclusion as a Determinants of Mental Health and Wellbeing* <http://www.copmi.net.au/images/pdf/Research/social-inclusion-fact-sheet.pdf>