

INQUIRY INTO POST SCHOOL DISABILITY PROGRAMS

Organisation: Coffs Harbour Support Services Inc
Name: Ms Kathleen O'Meley
Position: Secretary
Telephone: 02 6651 7646
Date Received: 13/04/2005

Subject:

Summary

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28th February 2005

Mr. S Reynolds
Director of GPSC2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Re: GPSC No. 2 Inquiry Into Changes to Post School Programs for young Adults with a Disability

Dear Mr. Reynolds

I am writing on behalf of Coffs Harbour Support Services Inc to provide input for the above enquiry.

Our submission was originally sent on 2nd March 2005, however, it was unfortunately sent to the wrong address (Hon Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans, Legislative Council, Parliament House) and I understand that Glenda Baker from your office is following up to try to locate the original document.

We would be most appreciative if our submission could still be considered for the above inquiry despite our error.

This submission has been authorised by the Board of Management of Coffs Harbour Support Services Inc. The signature of our Board of Management Secretary is on the last page of the submission document.

I have provided a brief summary and contents list over the page.

Yours Sincerely



Maureen Rahman
CHOICES Program Manager
Coffs Harbour Support Services Inc

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Terms of Reference:

1. The program structure and policy framework, including eligibility criteria, for the New transition to Work and Community Participation Programs.

The new programs have been established without clear Policy Framework. To date, only "Interim Policy" guidelines have been available. These are incomplete and fail to address fundamental Program elements including "Vacancy Management" and allocation of additional resources for "High Support Needs" Service Users. Funding levels do not match program objectives suggesting The Reforms have been "driven" by a funding framework rather than a Policy Framework. As a result, it is clear that support to program participants will need to be based on Group Activity with significantly reduced opportunities for individualised and 1:1 support in line with participant aspirations.

As the final policy and operations manual is not yet available, information must come from The Interim 'Adult Training, Learning and Support (ATLAS) and Post School Options (PSO) Policy And Operations Manual'. The document entitled "Policy Framework" dated July 2004 asserts that Services for people with disabilities in NSW operate under the Disability Services Act 1993. There is an inherent "conflict " between the legislative and funding framework which can only serve to compromise the effective implementation of the Disability Service Standards and the quality of services to people with disabilities. Most notably, these include:

Standard 2: Individual Needs

Each person with a disability receives a service which is designed to meet, in the least restrictive way, his/her individual needs.

This is not possible when people are supported in groups of 4-6 people with only one staff person. Individual Needs and Individual Service Plans often involve Service Users developing or enhancing personal skills such as; confidence, social skills, communication, personal safety awareness. Other skills such as travel training to and from home, literacy, numeracy, time telling

and money skills are difficult to teach to groups because of the individual variations of the skills of each Service User. Many people require 1:1 support or even 2:1 support for personal care, swimming and other types of therapies essential for their well being, comfort and limb flexibility. People with these types of needs will have significantly reduced support time because of the costs involved and in some instances may be excluded from services in the interests of maintaining viability.

Standard 3: Decision Making and Choice

Each person with a disability has the opportunity to participate as fully as possible in making decisions about the events and activities of his/her daily life in relation to the services he/she receives.

Again, this is not possible in groups of 4-6 people. The only choice is to join the group, or not. Any decision to do an activity or learn a skill requiring 1:1 support is unlikely to be honoured by services with the lower funding and a DADHC benchmark of 12 hours of support per week. Choices may be made whether to have a couple of 1:1 hours and a few group hours per week, however, the families of many Service users who currently receive more Atlas funding, and therefore more support hours, depends on this level of support so they can work, do other things or spend quality time with other family members. These families may only have a choice of giving up, or reducing, their work, family or other time or sending their son or daughter to group support which may be, because of the needs for larger groups, support which is of a lower quality to that currently received.

Standard 5: Participation and Integration

Each person with a disability is supported and encouraged to participate and be involved in the life of the community.

Real participation and integration in the community comes from individual people doing things with, and in, the community. Where large groups of people with disabilities are supported to access the community, compromise to the image of all people within that group is usually the result. This prohibits meaningful participation and integration as "valued members" of the community. Participation and integration does not come through large groups of people with disabilities walking to the local café to have lunch together. In any case, walking to the local café would only be possible if the group of people could safely be supported, by one person, to do so. For groups of people containing even one person with 'challenging behaviour', this would not be possible. Similarly, Service Users who habitually abscond, some people who have Autistic Spectrum Disorder and others who have poor road skills/traffic awareness, often cannot be supported in groups in the community with a single support person. They either will not stay with the group or need close supervision near roads, which means that one staff person would need to devote their attention to one Service User leaving others unsupervised. Service Users with visual impairment and those with balance difficulties need to hold the arm of support staff so they do not fall, again difficult in a group with one support staff if there are any other Service Users, including people with epilepsy, requiring the support person's undivided attention for any length of time. It may be possible to group some people with high support needs with people with low support needs, however this then denies the Service Users choice of who to spend time with and/or what activity they do. In many cases, in order to ensure Service Users safety, activities will need to be centre based when community access is not viable with the particular group.

Standard 6: Valued Status

Each person with a disability has the opportunity to develop and maintain skills to participate in activities that enable him/her to achieve valued roles in

the community.

People forced to participate in centre-based group support will not develop or maintain their skills, but are likely to lose many of the skills they have developed over time, due to having too few opportunities to practice them. People who we support and who currently have a valued status in the community, will lose that status once the reforms begin as we will not be able to maintain support to them individually. Service Users who require 1:1 support to do volunteer work in the community will no longer be able to do this.

Standard 9: Family Relationships

Each person with a disability receives a service which recognizes the importance of preserving family relationships, informal social networks and is sensitive to their cultural and linguistic environments.

Many family relationships are maintained only because of the support the Service User receives outside the family home. Whilst the Service User is receiving support, the family has some respite from the responsibility of caring for the person. Families of people with high support needs, challenging behaviour or dual diagnosis (intellectual disability and mental illness) will suffer through a loss of support hours or a loss in quality of support which may, in fact, be support which is teaching the Service User to do some things independently and therefore reducing the strain of the family.

2. The adequacy and appropriateness of funding arrangements for the new programs.

There continues to be an absence of clarity in relation to the new funding arrangements – specifically as to whether the funding is to be treated as a “block grant” and how the (yet to be developed) “Vacancy Management System” will impact on these block grants. While nothing has been provided in writing as yet, verbal advice seems to suggest that grants are not truly “Block Grants” as funding levels will vary according to the number of program participants. This will raise issues for rural and regional providers in relation to industrial matters, continuity of employment and the attraction and retention of suitably skilled and qualified staff. It is also likely to raise viability issues for smaller rural and regional services.

Funding arrangements for Community Participation Programs.

People receiving Community Participation support vary widely in terms of support needs, abilities and aspirations. Some people are totally dependent on support staff or others for their every need, others may have minimal support needs in regard to everyday skills needed to look after themselves, but have a particular idiosyncrasy or aspect of their disability which excludes them from a Transition to Work Program, others fall somewhere in between. Whilst DADHC has mentioned a high need pool of money (\$1.4 million) for people with high support needs, how this money will be divided and among whom has not yet been communicated to services. It has been suggested that people with ‘challenging behaviour’ will be prioritised over people with high support needs in terms of their physical, health and well being needs, that is, those people who require support for moving from bed to wheelchair, personal care, eating and drinking, health maintenance and participation in any activity. If the latter group does not have access to the high need pool of money, disability services may be forced to regress several decades and have people sitting in their wheelchairs in front of a television for hours on end or joining groups of people in a

room where a couple staff have insufficient time to tend to their needs as well as support the others in the group with whatever they're doing. It is the Service Users who are the loudest or most disruptive who get the attention of staff and not the people who are quiet or non verbal. In fact, people who do not have their needs met usually are the ones who develop 'challenging behaviour'. This then translates into higher workers compensation premiums for services, additional strain on resources for services and ultimately a higher cost for DADHC (more funding for 1:1 support, drain on respite resources, Service User may then need to move from family home into supported accommodation due to family being unable to cope with the 'challenging behaviours'), as well as the personal cost to the Service User and their family, of loss of skills being maintained at present, fewer opportunities to enhance and develop skills, loss of confidence, self esteem and sense of themselves as part of the community. Of course families can and do buy more support for their children, however the cost is prohibitive for most families. The new funding for current Atlas Service Users of this service means a loss of between \$2092 and \$6082 per year per person. At the very least, their funding amounts should be maintained and the high need pool be distributed to those who need it. For people with high support needs, it should be acknowledged that people who have high support needs often require two support staff for transfers, personal care, swimming and other therapeutic activities, if Occupational Health and Safety requirements are to be adhered to. It should be noted that the Community Participation funding of \$13,500 per year is equivalent to the amount of Post School Options funding provided for people with low to moderate support needs in 1996. In the same year, people with high support needs were funded at \$16,500 per year. These amounts were based on the analysis of costs for service providers and reflected program requirements and expectations (i.e. amounts were established after policy framework developed). In "real" terms this equates to around \$16,133 and \$19,719 today (applying a CPI

rate of 2% pa). Attempts to elicit how the new funding levels were arrived at have met with no response.

Transition to Work

The nature of the support required by Service Users in TTW Programs is dependent on many factors, including the person's current skills, (especially those in literacy, numeracy and communication); their aspirations and goals; whether they are attending a vocational course and if there is support provided within the course; whether there is a cost involved in the course; whether transport to and from the service and courses is required; many other variables. The TTW funding amount of \$15,699 for a maximum of 2 years may well be adequate for some people and grossly inadequate for others, especially those requiring intensive 1:1 support. A time frame of 2 years would be inadequate for some people to develop literacy, numeracy and communication skills (if these are poor at the commencement of TTW programs) to the standards required by most employers. In addition to this, Coffs Harbour is an area of high unemployment for those without disabilities, therefore the possibilities of people with disabilities finding paid employment are reduced by that fact alone.

3. *The role of advocates both individual and peak groups in the consultation process.*

We have no knowledge that there was a consultation process at all. If there was a consultation process we received no information on who was involved or when the process occurred. There were 'Atlas Reform Information' sessions facilitated by DADHC, however the information provided was incomplete.

4. *The impact of the exclusion of students enrolling or proposing to enroll in post secondary and higher education from eligibility for assistance under the new programs.*

Information from the ATLAS Information hotline is that Service Users who are enrolled or intend to enroll in University courses are not eligible for Community Participation or Transition to Work programs, however people going to TAFE are still eligible. Current Service Users of this service are not affected.

5. *The appropriateness of the assessment methodology used to identify school leaver support needs and to stream school leavers into the new programs.*

This tool was inappropriate, inadequate and did not take into consideration the goals or aspirations of Service Users. In addition, any barriers to employment identified at the time of the assessment are likely to have changed over time and in response to the personal circumstances and experiences each person has had. In our service several people were assessed as having skills and abilities far above those that they actually have. The tool did not reflect the true needs of Service Users of this service.

6. *The adequacy of complaints and appeals mechanisms established in relation to the implementation of the new programs and particularly with respect to assessment decisions.*

Information from the ATLAS Information line is that people can appeal their support codes (CP or TTW) by contacting their local DADHC Support Service Development Officer. An appeals process for the distribution of the High Needs Pool funding will be established once this funding is available to services. Email requests to DADHC central office for more information about the complaints and appeals mechanism have not been answered. There seems to be no complaint mechanism in the ATLAS material, however the Appeals Process outlined in the ATLAS and PSO Policy and Operations Manual advises that only school leavers who have been assessed as ineligible for ATLAS services may appeal the result of the assessments.

7. *Whether appropriate and sustainable further education and vocational training and employment outcomes for people with a disability are likely to be achieved as a result of these changes.*

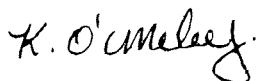
To date, there has been a considerable amount of funding spent (by DADHC, TAFE and specialist employment services for people with disabilities) on attempting to support people to develop the skills needed to gain and maintain employment for people with disabilities. Our experience in this service has been that, whilst some people have gained employment, very few have maintained it. This has been due to employer benefits running out and the person being put off, insufficient ongoing support and/or supervision of the person at work, transport difficulties and loss of motivation. In addition, even though ATLAS funding was always meant to be short term, families often did not support their son or daughter with a disability having paid employment because they were fearful that the person would lose their job after funding was withdrawn, and then not be able to regain support/funding. The ideal of a benevolent employer having altruistic motives for employing a person with a disability and then providing informal support in their workplace is very rarely seen in this area. In our experience, supported employment has been most successful for people with disabilities in the medium to long term; however, often this work is monotonous, unmotivating and demoralizing. At Coffs Harbour TAFE, the courses specifically for people with disabilities mainly consist of subjects such as literacy, work readiness, getting your L's self advocacy and horticulture. Such courses typically last for six months with no follow up courses offered. In 2005 I believe the only courses offered specifically for people with disabilities are work readiness and getting your L's. Whilst people with disabilities are able to access mainstream courses, if eligible, with some additional support from TAFE, many people are not skilled enough to do the work required or interact with others their class.

This often causes people to lose self esteem and confidence and feel more excluded than

included. Courses tailored to the specific needs of a group of Service Users have been offered, however, there is a minimum number of students required before the class can proceed and there is a per person cost of \$585 per person for a 3 hour per week course which runs for 18 weeks.

In closing, the manner in which these reforms have been undertaken has been offensive, created undue distress and has been characterized by a lack of detailed information. Genuine and stable reform needs to be undertaken in a climate of collaboration and partnership with stakeholders in alignment on the outcomes sought.

Yours Sincerely



Kathleen O'Meley

Secretary

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