

Submission
No 60

**INQUIRY INTO SERVICES PROVIDED OR FUNDED BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF AGEING, DISABILITY AND
HOME CARE**

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The Director
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Services provided or funded by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (Inquiry)

Submission to: Standing Committee on Social Issues
Response Submitted by: Sue Crane, Advocacy & Research Officer

ABOUT VISION AUSTRALIA

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to comment on quality, effectiveness and delivery of services provided or funded by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC), and in particular the issues raised in the Terms of Reference of this inquiry.

1. Introduction

Vision Australia is Australia's largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, or are deafblind. It has been formed through the merger of several of Australia's oldest, respected and most experienced blindness and low vision agencies. Our Vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every facet of life in the community.

To help realise this goal, we are committed to providing high-quality services to the community of people who are blind or have low vision, and their families, in areas that include services to children, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia is therefore well qualified to advocate on behalf of our clients who are blind or have low vision in regards to services funded or delivered by ADHC.

2. Inquiry Terms of Reference

That the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on the quality, effectiveness and delivery of services provided or funded by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC), and in particular:

(a) the historical and current level of funding and extent of unmet need,

Vision Australia is a not for profit organisation which operates with limited government support. Our organisation provides a range of services free of charge. Each year, nationally, we spend \$80m on these services, with \$29m received from government sources. The majority of our funding is through our own resources, donors and considerable fund-raising efforts.

In NSW each year, Vision Australia spends \$27m delivering services including \$3m in annual NSW State Government funding. This compares with more than \$17m a year from the Victorian State Government. The majority of this funding, \$2.77m, is through Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care - \$2.77m. This funding is appreciated but is nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of our clients, now and certainly not into the future.

It is difficult to calculate the extent of unmet need currently in the community. Current estimates are that there are 300,000 people in Australia (approximately 1.35% of the whole population¹) who are blind or have low vision, and that with a growing and ageing population this number is expected to double to 600,000 by 2020².

According to ABS figures from December 2009, the population in Australia is 22,155,400, with approximately 32% of people living in NSW³. If we translate this to people with low vision and blindness then in NSW currently the estimate is 97,085 people of which approximately 87,685 have unmet needs⁴.

Vision Australia needs additional funding to both better meet the current (unmet) need and also face the challenge of increasing need into the future.

This funding is not only to allow us to better service our clients who are blind or have low vision. Increased funding is also urgently needed to enable Vision Australia to provide more services to individuals who are deafblind. Deafblindness is

unquestionably one of the most isolating of disabilities, however funding for deafblind services is minimal.

Vision Australia also needs to comment about the change in funding for our library service in NSW.

Less than 5 percent of the information available to sighted people can be accessed by Australians living with a print disability. For this group, lack of access to information is the single biggest barrier to employment and effective participation in the community.

Recurrent support for the NSW Library and Information Service is crucial so we can keep providing essential information resources to the people of NSW. As of May 2010, funding to Vision Australia was discontinued from the NSW Government's Public Libraries Grants and Subsidies Program. In comparison, Vision Australia received \$1.33 million of funding for library services from the Victorian Government. This is despite the population in NSW being significantly greater than in Victoria.

(b) variations in service delivery, waiting lists and program quality between:

(i) services provided, or funded, by ADHC,

(ii) ADHC Regional Areas,

ADHC does not provide enough funding for all our services therefore Vision Australia seeks public donations to ensure our core services can be offered to all clients. This insufficient funding is an even greater issue in regional areas, where distance adds to the problem.

In regional areas, Vision Australia's services in adaptive technology consulting and training service, paediatric counselling, physiotherapy for children and early childhood services are in short supply. We endeavour to cover this shortfall through offering outreach services for urgent cases. We also provide low vision outreach clinics to meet clients' needs in areas where we do not have a staff presence.

(c) flexibility in client funding arrangements and client focused service delivery,

Vision Australia has significant involvement with clients in determining how we provide services.

Vision Australia feels very strongly that all disability organisations, whether funded or not, should be required to establish client consultative bodies and these bodies must be included in evaluating whether or not the service has met the standards.

Our formal client consultative framework consists of a Client Representative Council that meets regularly with the Executive, CEO and Board. We also have Regional Client Groups and Local Client Groups who provide feedback about our services.

We work with our clients on an individual basis. We agree the activities and strategy to be used to help each client achieve their goals – through an individual service plan. We have also established inter/multi disciplinary teams to ensure that all facets of a client's needs can be met in their local area whenever possible.

In terms of client funding arrangements, most of our services are free. We have arrangements for clients accessing DVA services and employment services through DEEWR where Vision Australia receives payment based on the service provided to those clients.

A key issue for Vision Australia is that our clients may receive a one off service or come back for additional services at key points in their life. As part of a one off grant from ADHC, over the next 2 – 3 years, we will be commencing a pilot for individualised funding in our children's services. This grant will enable us to test the viability of individualised funding for our young clients (up to 18 years of age).

(d) compliance with Disability Service Standards

Vision Australia is familiar with the current NSW Disability Service Standards as well as the National Disability Service Standards. These Standards inform the operational requirements for service providers funded under the Disability Services Act. The Standards also inform service users of the minimum standard of service they can expect from a service provider.

These Standards protect individuals with disability and provide consistency across service providers for service users. The Standards provide measures to provide accountability.

In Vision Australia's case, the Standards have contributed to the design of our services, systems and process to ensure we continue to deliver quality services to our clients.

Government Departments use Disability Services Standards to monitor compliance and adherence to funding and service agreements. Vision Australia regularly undertakes audits with ADHC and DEEWR to confirm we meet the Disability Service Standards in our service delivery to clients.

Vision Australia is strongly of the view that disability organisations, whether funded or not, should have to comply with standards. Consistency and quality of service should not have to depend on whether a service is funded or not.

Governments and Service Providers should undertake regular monitoring and compliance audits to track performance against the Standards. Service Users should be fully informed of the Standards and have an opportunity to provide feedback to service providers and/or Government where they feel that standards are not being met.

Feedback for service audits should be collated and analysed to identify opportunities to improve access to services and the quality of these services.

Vision Australia believes that it would be advantageous to look to replace all state specific Disability Standards with the National Disability Service Standard. A National Standard should mean the one compliance assessment system, which must be easy and manageable. Where a compliance assessment has been completed within the reporting or assessment period these results should be accepted or considered in subsequent audits by other service performance audits.

The practice of having different service standards in different states in Australia requires National service providers to undergo multiple assessments. Preparation for these multiple audits is time consuming and costly and most importantly takes staff away from service delivery to clients.

(e) adequacy of complaint handling, grievance mechanisms and ADHC funded advocacy services,

ADHC's complaint handling mechanism may be adequate, but it is not easily accessible for a person who is blind or has low vision. Initially it is difficult to find the complaint section of the ADHC website. Then having located it, the Feedback and Complaint Handling Principles and Guidelines are only available in pdf which is not the most accessible format for a person who is blind and uses synthetic speech screen readers to access documentation. The ADHC complaint form is also not easy to navigate with a screen reader.

Therefore Vision Australia cannot comment on the adequacy of the mechanisms except to comment that they are not easily accessible to our clients.

Vision Australia has a formal complaint process which encourages clients and members of the community to make comments on any aspect of our services. We also offer advocacy services to assist our clients to combat barriers (including any which may relate to ADHC services).

Vision Australia's individual advocacy service is not funded. We recently ran a trial program which involved the Department of Education and Training speaking to parents to help parents advocate for their child within the school system.

(f) internal and external program evaluation including program auditing and achievement of program performance indicators review, and

Vision Australia runs regular client surveys to assess our services, we also had an external group interview clients, donors, staff and volunteers to assess our performance in the way the organisation relates to each of these groups, through service delivery, timely provision of receipts for donations, communication with each of the groups and so on.

In regard to individual services funded by ADHC we have a quality assurance committee within the Independent Living Services department to review our services and seek client feedback on specific services or changes to services.

In our current strategic plan there are clear goals and targets for the next 3 years.

(g) any other matters.

The key issue for Vision Australia is that, predominately due to lack of funding, we are not able to provide services to the number of people in NSW who are blind, have low vision or are deafblind.

The other issue we face is the difficulty in recruiting staff in regional areas. As a Not-For-Profit organisation which relies on a mixture of Government funding and public donations to enable us to provide services, Vision Australia cannot compete with the salaries offered in the Health System or by ADHC to professionals such as Occupational Therapists.

Vision Australia feels that ADHC has not demonstrated a real commitment to work with disability organisations to ensure that they plan and are resourced appropriately to meet the needs of their client groups. Therefore we believe that this should be a requirement and is a joint responsibility between ADHC and disability organisations.

¹ ABS Statistics December 2009 states current Australian population as 22,155,400 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0/>). There are approximately 300,000 people who are blind or have low vision (World Health Organisation statistics) which equates to approximately 1.35% of the population.

² The World Health Organisation (WHO) suggests that with an ageing global population, this incidence is likely to double by 2020 (World Health Organisation 2004 Magnitude and causes of visual impairment, Fact Sheet 282.)

³ ABS Statistics from December 2009 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0/>)

⁴ ABS Statistics December 2009 current NSW population is 7,191,500 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0/>). To calculate approximate figures, that number has been multiplied by 1.35% (percentage of population who are blind or have low vision). The figure for NSW is then 97,085, less VA clients (9400), therefore in December 2009 there were currently 87,685 clients with unmet needs in NSW.