

**Submission
No 74**

INQUIRY INTO POST SCHOOL DISABILITY PROGRAMS

Organisation: Mid North Coast Area Disability Committee

Name: Mr John Rooth

Position: Chairperson

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Date Received: 04/03/2005

Subject:

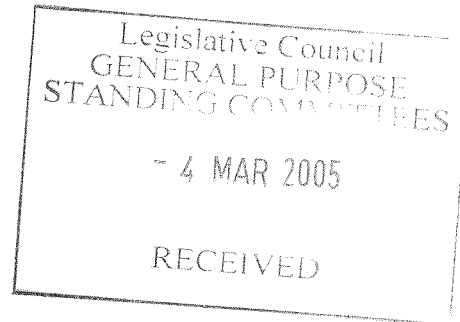
Summary



MID NORTH COAST AREA DISABILITY COMMITTEE

P.O. Box 496, Macksville NSW 2447

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1 March 2005

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 2
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir

Enclosed please find a submission on "Inquiry into Changes to Post School Programs for Young Adults With a Disability". The submission has been compiled on behalf of the Mid North Coast Area Disability Committee.

Yours faithfully

John Rooth
Chairperson

LEM:ajk
Encl

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 2
INQUIRY INTO CHANGES TO POST SCHOOL PROGRAMS
FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH A DISABILITY
SUBMISSION - FROM MID NORTH COAST AREA DISABILITY
COMMITTEE (ADC)

Council
GENERAL PURPOSE
STANDING COMMITTEES

- 4 MAR 2005

RECEIVED

INTRODUCTION

The Post School Programs for young adults introduced in the 1990's represent the greatest innovation in disability services since the International Year of Disability (1981). After a short period of experimentation and experience it is appropriate that Government should wish to review the programs.

The resultant program changes announced in mid 2004 were characterised by a lack of information and consultation. They indicated a lack of flexibility and understanding both of the needs of young people with a disability and the services being developed to meet their needs.

ADC received a copy of a Discussion Paper dated February 2002 relating to a review of Post-School programs. It received little or no further information until a Media Release in July 2004. The Release announced major changes with some procedures to be completed before the end of the month.

Changes proposed were unrealistic and ill-advised with a reduction in funding levels which would have had critical repercussions for all involved in the programs. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the Government made amendments within six months of their initial announcement of program changes.

The announcement by the Minister that no changes would be made to the Post School Options (PSO) program was welcomed. At the same time there is a clear need for a comprehensive review of the program in the long term interests of young persons with a disability, their carers, parents and service providers.

The effects of other proposed changes, especially to the Transition to Work program, are becoming apparent. Services some of which have been established for 20 years have begun to anticipate the adjustments

necessary given funding reductions. These include significant variations in programming, consideration of redundancies and pay cuts for staff and the need to spend more time begging their local committees to help them sustain services.

ADC was established by Government in 1994. It has a broad membership of those interested in disability in the Mid North Coast, including consumers, carers and service providers. A copy of a paper is enclosed on the Role and Functions of the ADC.

ADC is particularly concerned that cuts in services will have a critical effect in the Mid North Coast which is an area of rapid growth and suffers historically from a lack of services for people with a disability. The situation in this area has not changed markedly since December 1997 when an Ageing and Disability Population Group Planning Paper concluded.

“The only locality which is relatively disadvantaged in respect of every population group is the Mid North Coast which should receive the highest priority where circumstances permit”

The Mid North Coast is an area where there is a growing number of elderly people and persons with a high level of disability. Many people with a disability lack family support and HACC services are under-funded to provide appropriate assistance. We believe it is important to maximise the degree of independence of people with a disability in the community and that this will require a review of all forms of support they need.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE, POLICY FRAMEWORK AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Funding in the form of block grants to service providers raises a number of issues.

These include :-

- Clients, parents and carers will have little say in what is provided.
- If grants are not owned by individuals they will not have portability.
- Service managers may have a sectarian interest. Activities are likely to show

a major change in focus and become more centre based rather than be individual activities held in the community. The latter are more demanding on the resources of services, particularly staff.

Transition to Work and Community Participation (CP) are somewhat more appropriate titles for the two programs. Goals are clear and allowance is made for existing and new providers to be involved. There is however an already existing Federal Government program named Transition to Work, which may lead to confusion.

What is the philosophy of the Community Participation program ? funding, block grants and other changes all necessitate a reduced withdrawal from community involvement. It will also reduce the prospect of training and therapy programs which are now generally regarded as essential for those with high support needs.

In the case of the Transition to Work program the forecast outcomes are far too ambitious. In rural areas especially unemployment is at very high levels and people with a disability are more disadvantaged when it comes to seeking work.

Clients in Commonwealth Employment Centres must of course be paid even if they are non-productive. The number of places available within these programs is static and would need to be increased to accommodate Transition to Work participants.

Some aspects of timing announced in connection with program changes were quite unrealistic. The original timetable proposed for Expressions of Interest for example (to be submitted by 19th July 2004) was quite inadequate.

Considerable scepticism surrounds the Eligibility Process. This scepticism focusses largely on the adequacy and consistency of the process and the training and expertise of people conducting interviews.

FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

There appears to be no sound basis for funding levels announced in mid 2004 which imply reductions in the order of 30 – 50%. It is reasonable to assume that any cuts of this magnitude in the funding of educational programs that have been built up gradually over a decade or less are likely to have drastic effects.

On the 13th August 2004 Government announced that individuals who had been receiving PSO funding would continue to receive the same assistance given to them before June 2004. There is evidence to show that some service providers engaged in post school programs are reducing the hours of their PSO clients because of the massive impact of funding reductions for other clients.

The revised level of funding for Community Participation clients was set at \$13,500 with an additional allowance made for those with “very high support needs”. Services estimate that \$13,500 provides support for around 10 hours per week per individual for 48 weeks per year. This is a level of service provision well below what they provided previously.

To date our experience is that only some 4 – 5% of CP service users are assessed as having high support needs. Further the total pool of funds set aside for young people with high support needs is limited to around \$1.4 million. This warrants a need to clarify criteria for application of such people.

The reduced level of funding will force clients into more group activities in fewer hours and less individualised support. It is this very support that is necessary for the development of social and other skills and the increased independence of individuals.

In addition to reductions in program hours services fear that they will lose experienced and trained staff. Increased stress is also likely to affect parents and carers and services providing accommodation and other support.

Some well established and effective services anticipate the likelihood of increased undesirable competition between services and the involvement of services not equipped to offer quality programs.

Funding cuts in the Community Participation Program could lead to a return to the worst features of the sheltered workshop era and the withdrawal of individual clients from community involvement. Transport is already expensive and difficult to access for many country clients and these cuts would restrict access even further. The inclusion of people with disabilities in the general community is also greatly affected.

The funding level for those people entering the Transition to Work program is now set at \$15,699. People joining the TTW program will undertake an assessment after one (1) year, if they are assessed as “work

ready” they will exit the program. If not, they will be given funding for a further year. After this period if the individual is not work ready they may be eligible to go to the CP program.

What support is available for those exiting the program ? Many exiting vocational courses will require on-going support and maintenance to achieve sustained outcomes.

Service managers report that a cut of \$2 – 3000 per client would allow them to provide only 5 hours of individual sessions each week. An increase in the grouping of clients with competing individual needs inevitably reduces the quality of work.

THE FUNCTION OF ADVOCACY

Since 1997 ADC has sought to establish advocacy services in the Mid North Coast. Yet in the area, which has a population in excess of 300,000, the only professional advocacy service available is provided by services outside the Area or by telephone with peak bodies in Sydney.

I am enclosing a copy of an Advocacy Summit Report, dated 21st May 2004. Your attention is drawn to the Summit Conclusions recorded on page 29 of the report.

There was general agreement, even among Government departments represented at the Summit, on the need for a neutral advocacy service to be established in the Mid North Coast.

Our experience indicates that such a service, supportive of participants and others interested in the two Post School programs could be critical to their success. However, it is doubtful if an advocacy service provided from outside the Area is likely to be at all effective in this context.

THE IMPACT OF THE EXCLUSION OF STUDENTS

The policy of block funding, cuts in funding levels and inadequate eligibility procedures is likely to create an increasing pool of individuals who are excluded from the program.

Students and potential students, their parents and carers will have no bargaining power and no right to be consulted. Clients assessed as

ineligible by inconsistent eligibility procedures will be especially disadvantaged.

Services with inadequate funding levels are unlikely to seek out individuals and especially those with potential high support needs.

A growing pool of excluded students who are very vulnerable individuals must turn for support to their local communities in the absence of other help. The policy to exclude students who hope to attend university is one of discrimination and must be reconsidered.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Available evidence indicates that the assessment tool being used (HACC screening tool) is inappropriate for school leavers. There also appears to be some inconsistency within DADHC about what constitutes “high support”.

Clearly assessment cannot be solely by a tool which may be imperfect. It may take several years to perfect a procedure and even then a supplementary process may need an investigation to cope with “mistakes”.

ADC believes that the assessment process should be reviewed with allowance made for those who request reassessments. The disability sector should be fully informed about the process which needs to be monitored to ensure state-wide consistency.

ADEQUACY OF COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS MECHANISM

Under existing legislation service providers are obliged to institute a complaint and appeals system. This “internal” arrangement appears to have no effective parallel at Government level. Services report that emails on this subject remain unanswered. Only one service noted that it received a response to an appeal. This response was negative and was not subject to discussion.

APPROPRIATE AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Experience indicates that very few youths with a disability are ever likely to achieve long-term, full-time employment. What is success in the employment situation ?

Many believe that individual involvement in a normal work situation, even with the support of others, constitutes success where the person with a disability feels a reward.

Reports made to ADC show that employment outcomes can be seemingly affected by apparently minor changes in the individual's circumstances. A change in family background, bus timetable changes or a breakdown in transport may impact on an individual's work involvement. Employers with this experience are unlikely to accept a long-term commitment to workers who have a disability.

The "success" of further education is also largely commensurate with the nature of support given to students. Some communities have a long history of support for people with a disability.

Many coastal settlements like Coffs Harbour are subject to massive growth and lack the support for people with a disability provided by families established organisations and a well developed community infrastructure.

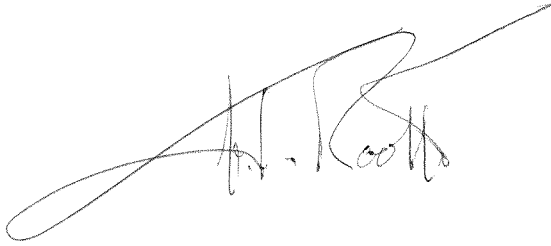
There is no Advocacy service in the Mid North Coast and accommodation and respite services are inadequate. Such schemes as PADP and IPTAAS are administered from Lismore presenting service and communication problems for people in the Area. For youth who cannot use mainstream transport the alternatives are few and expensive.

CONCLUSION

Coping with disability is difficult enough for people with disabilities, parents, carers and service providers. Each day present new problems and pitfalls.

A basic requirement for the development and training of young people with a disability is a stable and supportive environment. In its announcement of regressive changes in disability services the Government has created a mood of uncertainty in the disability sector.

ADC believes there is no justification for wreaking such hardship on the most vulnerable sector in our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S.J. Rooth', with a large, sweeping flourish extending from the end of the signature.

S.J. ROOTH O.A.M.
Chairman
Mid North Coast Area Disability Committee