

**Question: What do you feel is the personal impact of your community activism?
Have your efforts been worthwhile?**

The personal impact community activism has had on us personally is best illustrated through our family.

We are a family with six children, the eldest of which is severely disabled, suffering from Angelmans Syndrome. The impact that our son has had on our family has been tremendous; it has been positive in that it has drawn our family closer together.

The impact that battling the telecommunications carrier Optus, on our family, has been harder than raising a son with special needs; it is not something we can do together as Patricia 'keeps the home fires burning' alone while I'm buried in the 'paper war' of letters, media releases, reports and presentations. Even to appear before the Senate in Canberra had a huge impact on our family ... and this is just one family.

The opportunity to express the personal and emotional toll that this battle has had is more than welcome. For so long we have been unable to voice these concerns as carriers are ready to pounce on any sign of emotion and use it against you in your dealings with them; this alone imposes its own emotional toll.

The emotional toll, while difficult to value, ***is immense ... and it is real!!***

The impact *on family life*, as outlined above, the *sleepless nights*, the *worry and anxiety* ... the battle has the ability to take over your life if you let it; at times it has. *You feel torn* between your family life, working life and dealing with the battle.

The time factor alone; the hours spent researching and preparing reports, presentations and media releases; writing, drafting and preparing letters to government bodies and the carrier ... only to be ignored.

Then there is the impact and interruption on working lives. A number of members of the Tower Action Group Inc have had to take time off work to attend meetings with the TRC, with the carrier, with the media and even with the Senate. The hours spent working at home, well into the night having spent the whole day working takes its toll physically and emotionally. In dealing with these carriers, you have to fit your battle around your working life. It is not our full time occupation although at times it does feel like it. And in doing so, this has an impact on the time you have with your family ... hence our opening comment!!

Physically it is tiring. Having to front up to work having only had three hours sleep is not easy. The emotional impact itself is also draining. And this is compounded on those that have to 'fill in the gap' of your absence from family life. We have members of our group, a retired couple, who have

health issues of their own and care for an elderly mother, have responsibilities as grandparents to help their own children. This couple have spent extensive time and effort in co-ordinating the media releases, making telephone calls and assisting in the research and proof reading of documents for our battle. Many hours have been invested, and it has taken its toll in the form of an exacerbation of their existing health conditions, not to mention the stress and anxiety referred to earlier.

There is also the frustration and feeling of absolute helplessness, of having to deal with a carrier, government agencies, and government itself. We do understand what is going on in the industry and the laws and regulations; in fact, we understand too well which is why the carriers and agencies appear to act in this way.

And when you turn to the government for assistance, you discover you are effectively on your own. To be told by local council planners that we would have to take our own council to court highlighted the helplessness we now feel. This was followed by those charged with regulating the industry, who treated our concerns as more of a nuisance than as a genuine complaint.

This situation was made even worse by having to cope with *the aggression towards us by our local MP*. We were perceived and treated as troublemakers, while the carrier got a 'free ride' at the meetings we had in his office. We even had the added burden of being bullied into finding alternative sites for the carrier; being told by our local MP that if we didn't, the matter was over and the tower would be built. Having a local MP who was prepared to 'play politics' with his own constituents left us feeling alone, left to battle with a multinational corporation with no support.

This aggression, this bullying behaviour at the hands of our elected representative, was not something we expected or deserved.

What makes all this worse is that the carriers know they are having this impact. In fact, they use it to their advantage. In negotiating with carriers, you are under constant 'surveillance' for any sign of emotional weakness. They also know that if they 'string communities along' for long enough, that they will simply give up as they lose the will to carry on the fight. This is particularly the case when one or two people are the mainstays of a group, such as in Lennox Head, and in Wyreema just south of Toowoomba.

As taxpayers, communities should not have to wrangle with the legal discrepancies, the bureaucracy and injustice on their own. The 'hidden costs' for communities need to be considered by Parliament when 'valuing' legislative change; at present, these are ignored in favour of the larger carriers pursuing greater financial gain.

Financially, the short term cost of postage, paper, printing, phone calls, for us, is quite small at this stage. However, ***the longer term impacts are worrying***. There is the real concern in the decline in property values for our homes. The local Vet, a member of our group, has concerns that her staff would rather leave than work under a tower, and that this could also make it harder to employ staff. She has even considered selling her business should the tower go next to her property. The retired couple, had plans to sell their home and downsize in their retirement. This too, has been impacted as selling their home has been complicated by the proposed tower. Why should people have to face these hidden costs simply because a telecommunications company decides *they want* a tower in a particular location?

Have our efforts been worthwhile?

On one level, the answer to this question ***depends on whether a more appropriate location is found*** for the tower in Highfields. And this depends on the willingness of the carrier to genuinely consult with the community and act in good faith in seeking alternative sites. *On this front, we simply don't know the answer.*

It also depends on the outcome of the inquiry into Senator Brown's legislation. Our efforts will have been in vain if the carriers and regulators are not called to account through legislative change; change that, it would seem, is long overdue in an industry that has become a 'free-for-all' when it comes to dealing with communities. The helplessness and injustice toll that we have experienced needs to be eliminated so that other communities in the future do not face the emotional and physical toll that we, and other community groups have suffered.

However, on the personal level, despite the worry, the tiredness, the frustration, the helplessness, and all the emotional costs, and despite the uncertainty that still surrounds our particular situation, we would say that **our efforts have been worthwhile**.

It has drawn the immediate local community together, and the extended community has also been supportive. We have become closer to our neighbours and have really found out who are the genuine political leaders in our region.

Our case, and others, has highlighted the real costs of having to engage with intransigent and arrogant carriers who believe they have the right to do and act as they please. Our battle, we believe, has provided an example to other groups that these carriers and government agencies need to be answerable to the community, and that they cannot just walk over the community the claim to serve.

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(on behalf of the Tower Action Group Inc)