Submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee

Inquiry into Aged Care Service Delivery

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Executive Summary

Dovida respectfully submits this response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's inquiry into the implications of delaying the Support at Home program until 1 November 2025. As a national provider of person-centred home care, we witness daily the urgent need for accessible, quality aged care that empowers older Australians to live independently in their own homes.

We commend the Government for its commitment to aged care reform through the Support at Home program, which represents a significant step forward in supporting older Australians to age in place with dignity and independence. The new program's increased funding levels, care partner model, and focus on early intervention demonstrate a clear understanding of what older Australians need and want.

However, the delay in implementation, coupled with the pause on release of additional Home Care Packages, creates a critical gap in support that directly impacts the wellbeing of our clients and their families. This submission outlines our observations and recommendations based on our frontline experience delivering care to 12,000 older Australians across the country, with particular focus on the time-critical nature of home care needs.

About Dovida

Dovida is a national provider of high-quality person-centred home care, empowering older people to live their life, their way by advocating for those who choose to live independently at home. We create a "Circle of Care" that places individuals at the centre of a holistic support system, uniting families, skilled caregivers, support teams, and the wider healthcare community.

Dovida is a global provider of Home Care solutions, with operations in Switzerland, France, The Netherlands, Ireland and New Zealand. In Australia alone, Dovida employs over 4,000 staff nation-wide, comprising over 3,000 caregivers.

Our comprehensive services include everyday companionship, domestic assistance, personal care, meal preparation, medication reminders, transport services, dementia care, palliative care, 24-hour care, and live-in care. We understand that the majority of Australians want to live independently in their own homes as they age, and we are committed to making this possible through quality, compassionate care.

Response to Terms of Reference

(a) Impact of the delay on older Australians waiting for support at home

The Critical Time Factor in Home Care

Based on Dovida's client data, the average person receives home care for approximately 2 years before transitioning to residential aged care or end-of-life. Current waiting times of up to 12 months for Home Care Package approval mean that individuals lose a significant proportion of their potential time receiving funded home care support—time that is irreplaceable and represents critical months of independence, dignity, and quality of life.

The postponement of the Home Care Packages places vulnerable older Australians in an untenable position. Those currently waiting for Home Care Packages face extended periods without essential support, leading to:

- **Loss of choice and control** over their daily lives and care decisions, directly undermining the fundamental principles enshrined in the new Aged Care Act
- **Accelerated functional decline** due to lack of early intervention and preventive care

- **Increased social isolation** as individuals become reluctant to leave their homes due to mobility or safety concerns
- **Deteriorating nutritional status** when meal preparation becomes overwhelming
- **Medication management risks** from confusion or inability to properly administer prescriptions
- **Declining personal hygiene standards** indicating the need for personal care support
- **Premature transition to residential care** when home-based support could have maintained independence longer. This transition places increased demand on the residential aged care sector and associated government funding requirements

Critically, these delays erode the very foundations of choice and control that the new Aged Care Act seeks to protect and promote. When older Australians cannot access timely support, they lose the ability to make meaningful decisions about their care, their daily routines, and their future. Instead of choosing how they want to live, they are forced into decline and dependency - the opposite of person-centred care.

Family Carer Burden and Wellbeing

Our experience shows that delays in formal care support place enormous strain on family carers, many of whom are older adults themselves. This leads to:

- **Compassion fatigue and burnout** among family carers
- **Increased risk of elder abuse** due to carer stress and inadequate support services
- **Health deterioration** of family carers who sacrifice their own wellbeing
- **Financial hardship** from reduced work capacity or early retirement to provide informal care

The psychological impact on families watching their loved ones struggle without adequate support cannot be understated. Many families resort to paying privately for services they cannot afford, creating financial stress that compounds their caring responsibilities.

(b) Capacity of existing government support programs

Current System Strain

Existing government aged care and carer support programs were never designed to absorb the increased demand created by the delay in Support at Home implementation. Our observations indicate:

- **Service rationing** is already occurring, with providers unable to meet the increased demand for basic support services
- **Waiting lists for government-funded services** are growing, particularly for high-demand services like domestic assistance and personal care
- **Geographical inequities** are widening, with rural and remote areas experiencing more severe service shortages
- **Service fragmentation** continues, with older adults navigating multiple providers for different aspects of their care
- **Decreased availability in complementary programs** such as Carers Gateway, which compounds the support gap for families

The focus on lower-level support services in existing programs means that individuals with more complex needs receive inadequate care, often leading to avoidable hospitalisations and premature entry into residential aged care.

Economic Benefits of Timely Home Care Investment

Importantly, increased investment in timely home care represents significant cost savings for government. Our data shows that clients who receive early intervention home care services maintain independence longer, delaying or avoiding altogether the need for residential aged care. Given that government funding of residential aged care is currently four times higher per person than home care funding, accelerating home care access delivers both better outcomes for older Australians and improved fiscal efficiency for government.

(c) Impacts on aged care service providers and workforce

Provider Sustainability Challenges

The uncertainty surrounding program implementation creates significant operational challenges:

- **Workforce planning difficulties** due to unclear service demand projections
- **Investment hesitation** in system upgrades and staff training required for the new program
- **Cash flow impacts** from delayed funding model implementation

- **Competitive disadvantage** for providers who have already invested in preparation for the new system

Workforce Implications

The aged care workforce faces particular challenges during this transition period:

- **Career uncertainty** affecting recruitment and retention in an already strained sector
- **Training delays** for new assessment and care planning processes
- **Increased workload** managing more complex client needs within existing service parameters
- **Professional frustration** from inability to provide optimal care due to system limitations

The delay exacerbates these existing workforce challenges.

(d) Impacts on hospitals and state and territory health systems

Preventable Hospital Presentations

The delay in comprehensive home support contributes to:

- **Increased emergency department presentations** from preventable incidents such as falls, medication errors, and untreated health conditions
- **Extended hospital stays** due to unsafe discharge environments without adequate home support
- **Readmission rates** increasing as individuals return home to unchanged circumstances
- **Bed blocking** in acute settings while awaiting appropriate community support

System Cost Implications

State and territory health systems bear the financial burden of these preventable health episodes, creating cost-shifting from the aged care system to acute health services.

(e) Feasibility of the 3-month waiting time target by July 2027

Timeline Concerns

We strongly support the Government's ambitious target to reduce waiting times to 3 months by July 2027, which represents a significant improvement for older Australians seeking home care support. This target aligns perfectly with the urgent needs of our clients and the time-sensitive nature of aged care. However, based on our sector experience and understanding of our clients' care journeys, achieving this target faces significant challenges:

- **Digital infrastructure readiness** appears questionable given the delay in program commencement
- **Assessment system capacity** requires substantial scaling and resourcing to meet demand
- **Provider readiness** varies significantly across the sector
- **Workforce availability** may not meet the increased demand for assessment and care services

The Urgency of Timely Implementation

Given that our average client receives home care for only 2 years, every month of delay represents a significant portion of their remaining time for independence. The target 3-month waiting time, while ambitious, is essential when we consider that older Australians have limited time to benefit from these services.

(f) Governance, assurance and accountability frameworks

System Readiness Concerns

The delay suggests potential issues with:

- **Digital transformation project management** and delivery timelines
- **Stakeholder consultation and preparation** processes
- **Risk management frameworks** for large-scale system changes
- **Quality assurance mechanisms** for new assessment and service delivery models

Recommendation for Enhanced Oversight

We recommend establishing independent oversight mechanisms to monitor implementation progress and provide regular public reporting on system readiness milestones.

(g) Single assessment system readiness

Assessment System Challenges

The readiness of the single assessment system is crucial for successful implementation. Key concerns include:

- **Assessor training and accreditation** programs may not be sufficiently advanced
- **Technology platform stability** and user experience testing
- **Integration with existing health and social care systems**
- **Capacity to handle assessment volumes** required to meet the July 2027 targets, runs the risk of producing template assessments, rather than personalised outcomes

Quality and Consistency

Ensuring consistent, high-quality assessments across diverse geographical areas and client populations requires substantial preparation and ongoing quality assurance mechanisms.

(h) Other related matters

Consumer Choice and Market Dynamics

The delay fundamentally undermines the principle of consumer-directed care that underpins Australia's aged care system and is enshrined in the new Aged Care Act. This represents one of the most significant impacts of the postponement, as it directly contradicts the government's own policy objectives.

Consumer-directed care is built on the premise that older Australians should have choice and control over their care services, including what services they receive, when they receive them, and from whom. However, when individuals face extended waiting periods of up to 12 months, these fundamental rights become meaningless. Instead of exercising choice, older Australians are forced to:

- Accept whatever limited services are available through existing programs, regardless of their preferences
- Rely on family members to provide care they may not be equipped or willing to provide
- Go without essential support services altogether
- Make premature decisions about residential care to access any form of funded support

The delay also significantly impacts market dynamics that support consumer choice:

- **Reduced provider competition** due to market uncertainty affects service quality and innovation, limiting options for consumers when they eventually receive funding
- **Consumer advocacy capacity** is strained as older adults navigate an increasingly complex interim system without adequate support
- **Cultural and linguistic diversity considerations** may be inadequately addressed during the extended transition period, particularly affecting vulnerable communities who already face barriers to accessing appropriate care

This erosion of consumer choice creates a two-tiered system where those who can afford to pay privately maintain choice and control, while those dependent on government funding are denied these fundamental rights. This outcome directly contradicts the equity principles that underpin aged care reform and risks entrenching disadvantage among Australia's most vulnerable older adults.

Regional and Remote Service Delivery

Rural and remote communities face disproportionate impacts from the delay:

- **Service provider viability** in smaller markets becomes more precarious with extended uncertainty
- **Travel and accommodation costs** for assessments and service delivery continue to create barriers
- **Digital connectivity limitations** may affect readiness for new digital assessment systems

Preparedness for Future Challenges

The delay raises questions about system resilience:

- **Pandemic preparedness** lessons from COVID-19 should inform system design
- **Demographic transition management** as baby boomers age
- **Climate change adaptation** for service delivery during extreme weather events

Recommendations

We acknowledge the Government's significant investment in aged care reform and the complexity of implementing the Support at Home program. Our recommendations focus on supporting successful implementation while addressing the immediate needs of older Australians during this transition period.

Immediate Actions

1. **Emergency funding allocation** to expand CHSP capacity during the transition period, with priority for clients approaching the 12-month waiting threshold
2. **Fast-track approval process** for Home Care Packages for individuals at highest risk, particularly those who have been waiting longest
3. **Enhanced carer support services** including emergency respite care and mental health support for families under stress
4. **Improved coordination mechanisms** between state health systems and aged care providers to prevent hospital readmissions

Longer-term Solutions

1. **Phased implementation approach** beginning with longest-waiting individuals and highest-need populations
2. **Workforce development initiatives** including recruitment campaigns and accelerated training programs
3. **Comprehensive technology testing** with provider and recipient feedback before full system launch
4. **Provider readiness support** including operational training and system preparation assistance

5. **Robust governance frameworks** with independent oversight and regular public reporting on waiting times and client outcomes

6. **Flexible service delivery models** that can adapt to changing demographics and client needs
7. **Enhanced integration with health systems** to prevent cost-shifting and improve client outcomes
8. **Investment in preventive home care** that demonstrates long-term savings through delayed residential care transitions
9. **Regular system performance reviews** measuring both efficiency and client satisfaction outcomes

Conclusion

We commend the Government's vision for the Support at Home program and its commitment to helping older Australians age in place with dignity and independence. The increased funding levels, care coordination improvements, and focus on early intervention represent exactly the kind of forward-thinking policy that will benefit older Australians and their families.

However, the delay in implementation creates more than an administrative challenge - it directly impacts the limited time our clients have to maintain their independence at home. As frontline providers, we see daily how every month matters when someone has an average of only 2 years of home care before requiring residential placement.

While we understand the importance of implementing a robust system, the human cost of delay - measured in lost choice and independence, family stress, and missed opportunities for early intervention - cannot be ignored. We urge the Committee to recommend immediate bridging measures while ensuring the new system launches successfully and delivers on its promise of 3-month waiting times.

Dovida remains committed to working with government and sector partners to ensure older Australians can continue to live their life, their way, in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes. The success of the Support at Home program is crucial not just for the aged care sector, but for Australian society's commitment to supporting our ageing population with dignity and respect.

The economic benefits of investing in timely home care - preventing expensive residential care placements and hospital admissions - align with the human imperative to support older Australians when they need it most. We believe this represents a unique opportunity for policy that is both fiscally responsible and deeply compassionate.

We appreciate the Committee's attention to these critical issues and welcome the opportunity to provide additional information or clarification as needed.

Appendix: Supporting Evidence

Dovida's Service Data and Observations

Our frontline experience across Australia provides valuable insights into the current challenges:

- **Client care journey statistics** showing average 2-year home care duration and the critical impact of waiting times on service utilisation
- **Red flags for care needs** we regularly observe include unpaid bills, reluctance to leave the house, declining personal hygiene, losing interest in food, and missed medical appointments
- **Family carer stress indicators** include requests for emergency respite, reports of feeling overwhelmed, and concerns about their own health declining
- **Service coordination challenges** where older adults must navigate multiple providers for different aspects of their care needs
- **Economic outcomes data** demonstrating how early home care intervention delays residential care transitions

These examples highlight the critical importance of well-coordinated, adequately resourced home care systems.

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