



Outback Mobile Resource Unit Inc

A mobile children's service for outback families

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
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To Whom It May Concern.

We write to you in regard to the inquiry into the *provisions* of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2015 to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee report.

The Outback Mobile Resource Unit Inc. (or Mobile Toy Library) is a children's service providing both licensed child care and play group sessions to children and families in the remote and isolated regions of Far Western New South Wales. The area we cover is approximately 220,000 km² and is bounded by the South Australian, Queensland and Victorian borders. We travel approximately 43,000 kms each year.

We travel to various towns, communities and properties in the area, offering activities aimed at enhancing children's learning and social skills and providing support and resources to parents. The OMRU generally tries to attend each venue once every 3 or 4 weeks and because of the distances we must travel, we are often required to spend up to three or four nights a week out of town.

The Mobile spends about 42 weeks of the year on the road and operates during most school holidays.

We are funded through the Federal Government and are a Budget-Based Funded service. BBF will be non-existent from July 2017 and we will be funded under the new changes.

We have a number of concerns regarding the proposed Family Assistance Bill.

From our understanding, our service will now need to operate as a Long Day Care service and we have some issues with this scenario, which I would like to address.

Isolation

Many of our families live in isolated and remote areas. The shortest distance we have to travel is 140 kilometres and the longest is 340 kilometres. While our service can travel to a venue that is centrally located, the average distance parents still have to travel is 60-100 kilometres on uneven, dirt roads. There is little to do at some of these venues, as they are often not towns, but community halls in the middle of nowhere. What do parents do while they are in these community halls if they are not permitted to stay?

To ask a parent to travel 100 kms to drop their child/ren off, return home and return again to pick up their child a few hours later is highly impractical and quite counterproductive.

Group Sizes

We have also been informed that there will be a required minimum number of children per session, and this has been suggested as between 10-15 children. Isolation again is a factor with these numbers, as a family's closest neighbour could be 40 kilometres away and families may not always be able to commit firmly to attending a session due to a variety of reasons. The wife and children are often an integral part of station life and are often required to assist with some of the operational demands of the property. Weather can also affect roads and make it impossible for some families to get to the venue for the session.

Our service strongly believes that all children and families regardless of geographical location, deserve access to regular, high-quality early childhood educational programs, delivered by qualified, dedicated and enthusiastic staff.

We are aware that in most areas, we would not be able to meet the recommended number of children required and we feel that this would not be conducive to the

educational and social growth of the children who utilize our facilities. Families have limited contact to services such as ours already, due to the distance they must travel, and to restrict them even more will certainly be detrimental to the development of their children and to their own mental health. Surely, early childhood education is just as important, if not more, to a group of four children, living 400kms from the nearest town or service as it is for children who have ready access to regular educational and social opportunities

Mixed Age Groups.

We also understand that we will no longer be able to have mixed age groups. One of the benefits of our service is that in some particular areas, the school-aged children can gather together for School of the Air lessons, while we conduct activities with the younger children. At certain times during the session, we will provide activities for all the children at the venue, allowing the younger children to work with the older ones. It also presents the issue of what a parent does if they have 3 children of different ages. Are they to leave one child at home for 2 hours while they travel in to drop of the child who is to be placed in care?

Activity Test.

We are also concerned with how our parents will pass the activity test. Many, while not officially employed, work on their properties in a number of capacities and do not always draw a wage. Many are asset rich but cash poor and we are wondering how this will affect their Child Care Benefit.

Loss of Flexibility.

While it has been suggested these funding changes will make services more accessible and flexible and provide more opportunities for families, we strongly disagree and know that they will have the opposite effect for our service.

We have always prided ourselves on our service's ability to meet the ever changing needs of our families and communities and are all able to work together to offer sessions at the most appropriate and convenient times for each particular area.

We often liaise with other important services in the district such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and School Of The Air.

It has been suggested that under a long day-care scenario, our sessions will need to be fixed days and hours, and if this occurs that will be an extra day that our families will have to travel if our permanent days do not coincide with other services.

OMRU is also strongly committed to the many communities we service and on certain occasions, provide care sessions and activities for children during community events such as NAIDOC Days, Gymkhanas, AgFair and Field Days, LandCare Meetings and Health Days. It is considered an essential component of our service delivery by the families who find the support we offer invaluable, but with the loss of flexibility, we would no longer be able to assist at these events.

Our greatest concern is that our unique service will not be able to meet the requirements of the new funding guidelines and therefore will no longer be able to deliver the same high quality standard of service we have provided for the last 30 years.

It is our children and families, already disadvantaged by their isolation and remoteness that will be further negatively impacted by the loss of our service in their area.

We ask that you consider these points before you make a final determination.

Thank you.

Regards

Vicki Olds
Director of Service

Vicki Dowling
President Management Committee