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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Canberra ACT 2600

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Re: The impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services.

Advocacy for Inclusion is a small Canberra based independent disability advocacy organisation. We are funded under the National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP) which is an ongoing program funded through the Department of Social Services. NDAP funds 59 organisations to provide a range of 6 different types of disability advocacy throughout Australia.

Advocacy for Inclusion provides 3 of those types of advocacy: individual advocacy, a self-advocacy program, and systemic advocacy.

There is a desperate shortage of disability advocacy in Australia. This is a longstanding issue which has more recently been exacerbated by the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). In 2010 ACT disability advocacy organisations modelled unmet demand and discovered that at least a doubling of advocacy was required to meet demand at that time. Since then the NDIS has placed advocacy organisations under further pressure, with many people with disabilities having nowhere else to turn for information, preparation support, and troubleshooting as the NDIS launch proceeds.

Our experiences, and our research, show that less than half of people with high support needs – such as those living in group homes – have natural support networks. For them independent advocacy organisations are the only option outside their paid support workers, and yet we struggle consistently to support even half of the people who request it. At the beginning of 2014 Advocacy for Inclusion was turning away 2 people for every 1 person that we were able to support.

Despite this we have not received appropriate indexation from the Federal Government for many years. The ACT government has a standard formula, announced in the Budget each year, which applies indexation uniformly to all ongoing community sector funding agreements. The Federal Government has no such formula and applies indexation if and when it sees fit.

Over 5 years to 2014 Advocacy for Inclusion received 15.7% indexation from the ACT Government. For the same period we received 4.4% indexation from the Federal Government, which is our largest funding body. This represents a gap in real terms of 11.3% in our funding over 5 years. The current government has also

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frozen indexation for another 3 years from 2014. This is a significant shortfall when we already have huge demand for our services which cannot be met.

Additionally, complete uncertainty has been added to the equation with no commitment to continue to fund the NDAP beyond June 2015. In other words, from 30 June this year we do not know if or how we will be funded.

This is happening at the same time that we are facing significantly increased demand for our services as a result of the launch of the NDIS in the ACT.

COAG disability ministers have met several times to discuss advocacy funding, but have been unable to reach agreement. This is now causing severe uncertainty for the sector. The most recent ministers' meeting committed to yet another review of advocacy funding. This will not resolve the uncertainty, rather it is likely to add to it and make it last longer.

We do not know if or how we will be funded, what the shape of disability advocacy will be, and how the government will approach the sector to undertake it. Will we be forced to tender for our own work? Will we be "encouraged" to merge with other organisations? Will we be competing with private operators or large service providers? This work is highly specialised and it takes many years to build both expertise and a rapport with very vulnerable consumers. It is also critical that it is undertaken by organisations which have no conflict of interest through service provision or profit making arrangements.

We have been fortunate to receive funding to deliver some of the projects currently available through NDIS development funds. However, without the certainty for our core NDAP funding we have no idea whether our ongoing staff will be retrenched at the end of June. This means we must attempt to retain core staff in an environment of uncertainty, and recruit now for project staff that may end up being here longer than core staff but without the infrastructure to back them up. It has become a management nightmare to juggle recruitment and to entice people to work in a very challenging job, in a poorly paid sector, when the period of employment is uncertain.

The ACT government has done its best to overcome uncertainty and recently notified us that it would roll over funding for another 12 months while general funding matters were addressed for disability related organisations. They were trying to do this several months ago but have been hamstrung by the broader COAG process relating to disability advocacy funding. Clearly they felt that certainty could wait no longer.

While the ACT government has also not resolved how the sector will be funded and what shape the work will take, at least they are not expecting us to wait until the funding is imminently ceasing to tell us. We now have another year to work through the bureaucratic morass to resolve it. This new certainty from the ACT government only covers one third of our operation.

Upon contacting my funding manager at DSS this week I was told that we would be notified about funding following the May 2015 federal budget. If we are expected to wait until our funding agreements imminently expire then it is likely that many of our core ongoing staff will find other opportunities to ensure their own financial security. This is totally unacceptable and has not been the method used in the past. It is not clear why such a sluggish approach to certainty has become necessary now, other than difficulties in the decision making process between DSS and the relevant ministers.

Disability advocacy work is highly specialised and it takes lengthy periods to train staff to the level required. Occupational health and safety is a high level risk in our sector. The work is challenging and requires repeated exposure to situations that the broader community would rather remain ignorant of. This is the purpose of another inquiry that your committee is now undertaking into abuse and violence in residential care.

Our consumers are some of the most isolated and vulnerable people with disabilities in the community. They need certainty and trust before resolving serious issues becomes possible. We cannot expect them to face a revolving door of advocates. This will cause advocacy to fail and abuse will continue.

We are unable to find a workforce on tap. Our workforce is specialised. Our organisation requires stability and certainty to be able to support our consumers to the level expected by them, by the community, and by the quality standards which are applied to us.

Yet the funding uncertainty we currently face is directly countering this stability and poses a significant threat to us continuing to provide quality work in a very challenging environment.

The Department of Social Services has changed our external quality systems 3 times in the past 5 years, yet it cannot provide certainty about our funding. We have an extremely onerous compliance system of external audits, yet there is no capacity building or development for the work of our organisations beyond that compliance. We are forced to spend thousands of dollars each year from our unindexed funding on external auditors, but there is no funding support to keep up with the increasing demand for disability advocacy from our community at this time of great change and reform.

The current lack of certainty poses a direct threat to the success of the NDIS and risks forcing people with disabilities into continuing arrangements that are not of their choosing. Advocates are at the frontline of ensuring that people are prepared for the NDIS – have heard of it, understand it, are pre-planning for it. Without advocates many people will continue to be abused and their wishes ignored.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to your inquiry. We are happy to expand on matters raised should that be convenient for the committee.

Yours sincerely

General Manager
Advocacy for Inclusion

Immediate past Chair, Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA)

5 March 2015