Blind Citizens WA Inc.

Blind Citizens WA Inc. response to:

Social Services Legislation Amendment (Transition Mobility Allowance to the National Disability Insurance Scheme) Bill 2016

About Blind Citizens WA Inc.

Blind Citizens WA Inc. is a peer led not-for-profit organisation run by and for people who are blind or vision impaired in Western Australia. Blind Citizens WA's mission is to ensure that Western Australians who are blind or vision impaired have full participation in the community.

Blind Citizens WA provides Advocacy, Peer Support and Accessible Information Dissemination to our members. Blind Citizens WA was formed in 1961 and has over 250 members and we welcome new members and we are a state branch of Blind Citizens Australia (formed in 1975). We have an Executive Committee made up of volunteers from our membership.

Blind Citizens WA believe that all people who are blind or vision impaired have the right to obtain and retain meaningful employment and live as independently as possible. Blind Citizens WA also supports every person's right to participate in and contribute to the community.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

Due to the design of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) individuals who acquire a disability such as blindness or vision impairment over the age of 65 will not be covered by the NDIS and must rely on aged care services. However, almost 75% of people who are blind or vision impaired are over the age of 65.

Vision Australia reported in 2012 indicated that 58% of people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age are unemployed or underemployed compared with 14% of the wider population. Blind Citizens WA is aware from our own membership that this percentage may even be higher at around 70% of people who are

blind or vision impaired being unemployed or underemployed. This is a startling statistic and highlights the need to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired and who are in paid employment (or a qualifying activity) are provided as much support as possible to continue in that employment.

The Mobility Allowance has always been crucial to maintaining paid and meaningful employment, volunteer work or training with the flow-on effects of independence and social interaction for people who are blind or vision impaired.

- Registration to the NDIS is too difficult.
- The NDIS is currently located in "trial and launch" sites and has not yet been rolled out Australia wide.
- NDIS Planning and assessment processes inaccessible.
- NDIS Information is not provided in an accessible format including NDIS forms.
- People who are blind or vision impaired have not used LACs (Local Area Co-Ordinators) and are not used to being "case managed"
- People who asked for blindness specific assistive technical equipment vital for their independence and participation in the workforce and while looking for employment, but the equipment has been rejected by the NDIS as not necessary.
- Mobility Allowance allow someone who is blind or vision impaired the independence to go to work, attend volunteer activities and contribute to society, attend training to improve their skills and knowledge and in turn seek meaningful employment.
- Mobility Allowance to assist them in maintaining their independence and employment.

If a NDIS participant exits the NDIS, they will not be able to access the Mobility Allowance again.

Mobility Allowance allows a person who is blind or vision impaired to be "dropped off at the front door" of a new location, such as a new job, attending a job interview and other job seeking tasks, or visiting a client as part of their employment, attending an off-site meeting, attending conferences. seminars and workshops, or completing a work placement as part of training, or volunteering

and contributing to society. Also adverse weather conditions like extreme hot weather for someone who uses a Dog Guide. Sometimes a person may have to relocate if there are changes to their regular workplace, like refurbishment or moving office.

Orientation and Mobility training from the various blindness organisations is not always available at short notice, or there can be a long wait-list to access Orientation and Mobility services from a qualified instructor.

Blind Citizens WA recommends the Senate Committee takes into account how the transfer of the Mobility Allowance will affect those people who are blind or vision impaired and reliant on the Mobility Allowance to continue their employment

Blind Citizens WA recommends the Senate Committee takes into account who are blind or vision impaired and are not receiving an NDIS package due to accessibility problems and other issues.

Continuation period – 12 weeks reduced to 4 weeks

Blind Citizens WA understands the mobility allowance is currently available to recipients for a 12-week continuation period, during which they may continue to receive a payment while not participating in a qualifying activity (while they look for another job or another activity).

DSS data indicates the following about people who are blind or vision impaired:

- 22.7 per cent of people with primarily vison related disability are employed 3 months after their participation compared to 31.1 per cent for all participants.

- 49.5 per cent are unemployed compared to 39.3 per cent for all participants.

This data shows how hard it is for people who are blind or vision impaired to not only obtain some form of employment but also how hard it is to retain that employment. To lose the Mobility Allowance after only 4 weeks of not being engaged in a qualifying activity will have an enormous impact on an individual's ability to continue to find work. Also this reduction in the continuation period from 12 weeks to 4 weeks will have a detrimental effect on volunteers in Australia. it is unrealistic to expect arrangements to be made within

4 weeks. Volunteers are often over the age of 65 years and outside the NDIS.

Blind Citizens WA recommends the Senate Committee reconsiders the reduction in the continuation period from 12 weeks to 4 weeks and reinstates it at 12 weeks. The reduction will have a detrimental effect on the employment prospects and volunteer opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired who want to contribute and have a meaningful role within Australia.

People over 65 years old

If people who are blind or vision impaired continue to work and volunteer over the age of 65, they will be unable to access the NDIS and therefore the Mobility Allowance.

In addition to paid employment, the removal of the Mobility Allowance for over 65s will restrict the volunteer capacity within the blindness community if those volunteers are unable to have supported travel over the age of 65.

With the transfer of the Mobility Allowance into the NDIS, it is not clear what equivalent support is going to be available to someone who acquires their disability over the age of 65 and who is still in employment or wants to contribute to the volunteer community and needs a Mobility Allowance in order to continue to these activities. These people would not benefit from continuity of support because they will not have received it in the past (they will not be ongoing recipients, they will be new to the allowance).

Blind Citizens WA is calling for further information about how people who acquire a disability over the age of 65 and who need the Mobility Allowance are going to access this funding. The Government needs to ensure the age requirements and limits in all its programs and schemes are aligned with the Government's expectations of an individual's working life and retirement age

Continuity of support

Minister Christian Porter said that the government is working to ensure that those not expected to transition into the NDIS (due to age or ineligibility) will continue to receive the support they need. He said the Bill "will ensure that continuity of support is provided to current recipients of Mobility Allowance who may not be eligible for the NDIS".

The Minister went on to say that "current recipients of mobility allowance who are still in receipt of the payment as at 30 June 2020,

as they have been found to be ineligible for the NDIS, will continue to receive support in the longer term pursuant to a commitment to provide continuity of support for existing Commonwealth clients".

Blind Citizens WA is seeking further clarity around continuity of support including further information on where the funding is coming from, how it is going to be administered, what the eligibility requirements are, if it is adjusted for CPI and if it is for an individual's lifetime.

Conclusion
Blind Citizens is concerned about:

• If a NDIS participant exits the Scheme, they will not be able to access the Mobility Allowance again.

• People who currently receive the Mobility Allowance but are not eligible for the NDIS will continue to access a payment for travel costs.

• People who do not currently receive the Mobility Allowance and do not meet this new criteria will not be able to access the Mobility Allowance from 1 January 2017.

Blind Citizens WA is concerned that the Bill transferring the Mobility Allowance into the NDIS will have a detrimental effect on people who are blind or vision impaired both under the age of 65 and over the age of 65. In particular, these amendments are taking away an individual's choice and control and may create disadvantage which is contradictory to the original intent of the NDIS.

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