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support services to the
community



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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Date: 17th March 2015

Transmitted via email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Senate Inquiry into the Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services.

I am writing to share with you, the impact of the Department of Social Services (DSS) tendering processes, on Communicare Inc, on our board and staff and on the people in need who we support.

We are also experiencing similar problems as a result of the uncertainty caused by the lack of information, consultation and coordination concerning the recent announcement of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy Grant round.

Communicare was established in 1977 by a small group of individuals, offering marriage counselling, financial assistance and school holiday programs. In the early days, the emphasis was on providing quality children's services, such as family day care and after school care programs.

The 1990's saw Communicare grow from a small, local community based charity organisation into a multi-faceted service provider, maintaining the focus on providing excellent services to those who needed it most.

We have significant expertise in providing vital community services to more than a quarter of a million Australians in Western Australia and inner Western Sydney every year, supported by 300+ staff and partnerships with government, business and non-government organisations. Our service platform spans all life stages from the 'cradle to the grave' with key areas of work encompassing children's services, family services, disability services, humanitarian services, education and training, supported accommodation, psychological services and employment services.

Our philosophy is one of local people helping local people. Communicare's mission is to work alongside people and communities who are marginalised; to help them develop options and pathways away from existing disadvantage.

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As an example, we have been providing Emergency Relief throughout the South East Corridor of Perth for just over 20 years. In 2014, in Cannington and Armadale alone Communicare supported 2500 individuals. This was an increase of 20 % from the previous year. The discontinuation of this funding has created incredible distress to our staff and service users and the stakeholders that have come to rely on us to provide this vital service to extremely vulnerable individuals and families in our community. The inability to have a transition out plan that names the successful provider and how services users and stakeholders can access this services has been very challenging. The front line staff have had to manage a growing number of disgruntled services users and at times volatile behaviour with minimal information to assist them with this transition.

Given our service excellence and reputation we have substantial, robust and long term relationships within our local community, have received great support from many small businesses and have in turn been supported by committed volunteers. There continues to be increasing demand on the services we offer, with many of the most marginalised people coming to us for support in their time of need. We have also worked incredibly hard over a long period of time to build strong relationships with other not for profit organisations, local, state and federal governments and corporates and have a great network of collaborative support. This enables us to provide more holistic services as a community and strengthens and extends what we can do with the limited resources available.

The manner in which the recent DSS tender was conducted in addition to the loss of service funding has a number of implications for our service, and creates much uncertainty for the broader community.

Problems with the tender process included the lack of notice, the lack of consultation with service providers about program and service design, the timeframe for tender responses, the lack of opportunity for collaboration with other local services to align and coordinate services to achieve collective impact, the delays in tender announcement, lack of information about local service changes and restrictive confidentiality provisions within tender contracts.

The impacts on our services and service users include:

- The loss of 5 staff who were so concerned about their personal situation, that they felt compelled to try and find alternative work. This in turn has made it very challenging for us to continue to deliver services at the levels we normally would.
- Disappointment, some disengagement and significant anxiety by staff generally, who have worked tirelessly for many years and are incredibly committed and do an outstanding job
- The difficulties for our board in being able to govern the organisation with confidence and certainty as to the future sustainability of our services. They have held off making any decisions about future investment or employment until there is greater certainty on the way forward

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- Uncertainty with our client base as to what will happen to them – who will support them and what it will mean in terms of the relationships they have built with many of our people. Change is very hard for most people, but particularly so for the vulnerable and marginalised.
- A lack of information about which other local providers were losing or gaining services made it effectively impossible for us to transition existing clients or give them any certainty about whether they would have any ongoing support. Taken together with together with restrictive confidentiality provisions it also made it impossible for us to negotiate sub-contracting arrangements where we have been asked to deliver services in areas we had not tendered for.
- A lack of communication as to why we were unsuccessful after delivering for many years what we have constantly been advised by the department, were high quality services
- The likely implications for other local businesses as our organisation has a policy of purchasing our Emergency Relief supplies and services locally
- An unreasonable level of stress for all stakeholders with the announcements having been made 2 days before Christmas

We remain extremely disappointed at the poor communication from the Department about the process and lack of clarity about the next steps. There was no collaboration or consultation with us about the difference we make in our local community. The lack of information about the goals, intentions and intended outcomes of the tender and lack of engagement with local services was a missed opportunity that directly led to a massive over-subscription of tenders and a lack of coordination between them.

Our sense is that many of these decisions were made in Canberra, with limited or no knowledge about the regions and organisations involved, the needs of those communities or the successes of existing community services.

For example, Communicare has been delivering the Multi-Cultural Drop In Play Group for over 10 years. The loss of this program will have a detrimental effect for the local community. Both Bentley and Cannington show high levels of vulnerability for young children in the Australian Early Development Census. Many families from CaLD backgrounds lack opportunities to enhance their children's early development through play activities, and develop social interactions with other families. In part, this is due to social and economic challenges faced by some families in the area, social isolation, and lack of extended family and limited knowledge of the value of play as a vehicle for learning.

There are no other supported Playgroups in Bentley and Cannington for these families to access. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that families from CaLD backgrounds are highly vulnerable regarding health and wellbeing issues due to social isolation. These families will not have the opportunity to become connected to the local community or receive support to enhance their children's school readiness after 28 February 2015.

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Over the past 10 years Communicare has consistently applied quality improvement strategies to meet the changing needs of families in the local community, our success in delivering this program is outlined in the statistics below:

- **359 children (birth to five years of age) and their families supported over past six months**
- **Over 85% of families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds**
- **Approximately 4% from Aboriginal backgrounds**
- **Over 95% satisfaction rate.**

Should there be the opportunity to meet with the committee to discuss our experiences and concerns, we would be pleased to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Yours sincerely

Melissa Perry
Chief Executive Officer
Communicare