



New Leadership.



Disability and carers

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Overview

Labor believes that all people should be able to participate as valued members of a civil society. Disability should not stand in the way of people being active members of their communities, workplaces, families and society.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that approximately 20 per cent of Australians have some kind of disability. Most disabilities are relatively minor and can be addressed by simple aids or equipment. Over 50 per cent of people with disabilities are older Australians who receive support through the aged care system.¹

In 2003, the ABS estimated that approximately 700,000 Australians under the age of 65 across Australia were living with severe and profound disabilities. This included almost 250,000 children.

Labor convened the recent Senate Inquiry into the funding and operation of the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA).

During that Inquiry people with disabilities and their families and carers made a compelling case for disability reform. People spoke of the blame game between governments. People gave examples of having to fight to get the services they need from a system that is constantly in crisis. People wanted simple, practical measures that give them greater control over their own lives.

The Inquiry made it painfully clear that disability policy currently has no national direction, is under-funded and does not work for people with disabilities or their carers.

As a result of the Howard Government's failure to negotiate a new CSTDA, funding for disability services is not guaranteed beyond 31 December 2007. If an agreement is not finalised, the States and Territories will be forced to cut funding to existing services. No agreement has been reached on how governments will work together to improve the services offered to people with a disability over the next five years. No agreement has been reached on growth funds.

Federal Labor knows that effective disability policy includes many elements. To support people with disabilities and their carers we need to:

- Increase access to mainstream services like health, housing and transport.
- Provide disability services that meet the support needs of people with disabilities.
- Recognise the support the families and carers of people with disabilities provide.
- Offer practical assistance so that people with disabilities can participate fully in the community, including in the open labour market.

Most of all governments need to make a sustained commitment and provide policy leadership to fix a broken system. A Rudd Labor Government will:

- Guarantee the ongoing funding of disability services by fast tracking the renegotiation of a new CSTDA.
- Bring \$962 million in funding for disability services, which is currently outside the CSTDA, back into the Agreement and provide it to the States and Territories on a dollar for dollar matching basis. This will increase funding by \$1.9 billion in excess of indexation.
- Make disability services reform the priority of the next CSTDA. Reform priorities will include:
 - Better measurement of current and future need for disability services.
 - Moving toward national population benchmarks for key disability service types.
 - Making older carers a priority for all disability services under the CSTDA.
 - Quality improvement systems based on the National Disability Services Standards for all CSTDA services.
 - Improved service planning and strategies to simplify access to services.
 - Focusing on early intervention, life long planning and increasing the independence and social participation of people with disabilities.
- Build six long day care centres to provide early intervention for children with autism in addition to the \$190 million Helping Children with Autism package.
- Establish a National Companion Card Scheme and achieve national consistency on disability parking.
- Give people with disabilities who are ageing access to community aged care programs.
- Negotiate a National Disability Strategy with the States and Territories to tackle the complex needs of people with disabilities and their carers.
- Create a two year transition period for people working in business services who want to move to open employment.
- Review the need for legislative reform to recognise the role and rights of carers through the Office of Work and Family.

Disability services in Australia

Specialist disability services are funded through the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA). The Commonwealth Government has sole responsibility for disability employment. The States administer most other services such as accommodation support, community access, community support and respite services. The Commonwealth meets about 20 per cent of the cost of State administered services.

In 2006, there were approximately 220,000 users of CSTDA-funded services. The most common disability type was intellectual/learning disability followed by physical/diverse disability and psychiatric disabilities.²

There is strong evidence that many people with disabilities and their carers are not getting the services they need. The AIHW estimates that over 23,000 people are waiting for accommodation and respite services nationally and almost 4,000 need community access services.³ Many services have long waiting lists and the Senate Inquiry revealed that some people have stopped asking for support they know cannot be provided.

The disability blame game

Disability services are one of the worst examples of the blame game between the Commonwealth and the States. Roles and responsibilities are confused and too often both levels of government use shared funding arrangements as an excuse to avoid their obligations to people with disabilities and their carers.

Labor initiated the first CSTDA in 1991. A clear agreement of roles and responsibilities was needed to create a system that was easier to use for people with disabilities. During the first agreement, the Commonwealth and the States agreed on important reforms such as nationally consistent disability services legislation and National Disability Services Standards.

Fifteen years later the CSTDA has descended into a blame game between governments. The Commonwealth no longer exercises policy leadership and provides a declining proportion of disability services funding.

As one witness to the Senate Inquiry put it:

*The States say they are doing their bit, but the Commonwealth is falling short. The Commonwealth says just the opposite. Frankly, I don't care about playing the 'blame game', I just want the system to work.*⁴

Nearly all witnesses told the Inquiry that disability must be the responsibility of all levels of government working together. The job cannot be done by one government alone, nor by each government working in isolation.

The CSTDA has been under renegotiation for over a year but has shown no sign of being finalised. The Howard Government has refused to provide growth funds to the States.

The last agreement expired on 30 June 2007. The Howard Government extended the agreement to 31 December 2007 and has provided part year funding to the States.

Under a re-elected Howard Government, there is no guarantee that Commonwealth funding for State and Territory run services will continue after this date. If the CSTDA is not agreed,

State and Territory Governments will be forced to close critical services due to the withdrawal of Commonwealth funding.

The Howard Government has further undermined the chances of achieving funding certainty for disability services by tendering for accommodation and respite services outside the current system. These services will not be provided in all areas and will be targeted at specific groups of people with a disability with strict age criteria. The Howard Government's approach will make disability services more difficult to use and impossible to plan.

A Rudd Labor Government will fast track the renegotiation of the CSTDA, providing certainty for disability services across the country.

Labor will bring \$962 million in funds identified for supported accommodation, respite and in-home support in the Howard Government's Disability Assistance Package back into the CSTDA. This funding will be provided to the States and Territories on a dollar for dollar matching basis, generating \$1.9 billion in new funding for disability services from 2007-08.

The Senate Inquiry recommended significant new investment in disability services to address unmet need. Labor's approach will make a down payment on the funding required to support people with disabilities.

To avoid uncertainty, Labor will honour the outcomes of the recent funding round for respite services.

A Rudd Labor Government will implement all other elements of the Disability Assistance Package, including annual payments to parents of children with a disability and measures relating to children's services and employment services.

Labor does not support the current competitive tendering processes for the National Disability Advocacy Program based on the Coalition's narrow criteria. Labor wants to create a system of advocacy that provides effective services for people with disabilities and their families. A Rudd Labor Government will address the gaps in service delivery that currently exist through collaboration with advocacy providers and all other stakeholders. Labor does not consider that an adversarial process of competitive tendering will deliver the best outcomes for people with disabilities needing advocacy services.

An agenda for reform

A Rudd Labor Government will make reform the priority of the next CSTDA. Change will be informed by the evidence given to the Senate Inquiry into the CSTDA.

Labor will work the States and Territories over the next five years on essential reforms. The CSTDA will include agreements on goals and timelines so that the hard work of fixing this system can begin.

Labor will improve the data that is used to plan and fund disability services. We will implement better measures of current and future need for disability services. We need to bring together population projections and data on the care needs of people to design a system that will meet the needs of tomorrow. Better measurement of need will support the development of national population benchmarks for key disability service types.

Service quality will be progressed over the life of the agreement. Labor will require States and Territories to put in place systems that measure the continuous improvement of disability

services against the National Disability Services Standards. We will look for systems that focus on outcomes for people with disabilities and address issues such as the risk of abuse and neglect.

A Rudd Labor Government will focus the disability services system on the needs of carers, particularly carers who have been looking after family members for many years. Older carers want to make plans so that their children will have access to appropriate support when they are no longer able to provide care. For some the pressure of caring is so great that they are unable to continue in the role.

The Howard Government's approach has been to provide specialised services in some areas once a carer has reached the age of 65. Labor will seek commitments from the States and Territories that older carers, not only those over the age of 65, are a priority for the entire system.

People with disabilities and their carers want services that are easy to use and well planned. A Rudd Labor Government will work with the States and Territories to make it easier for people to get to services with the least number of assessments.

The disability service system currently operates in crisis much of the time. There is not enough planning and preparation for predictable events such as young people moving from school to work or leaving home. Too often people miss out on opportunities for early intervention because funds are spent responding to crises. In some cases parents are spending over \$30,000 on early intervention services that will prevent problems later in life.

A Rudd Labor Government will reform the system to focus on lifelong planning, independence and early intervention. Assessment and individual planning must include helping people with disabilities to develop new skills and preparing them for predictable life events.

Labor will start the early intervention agenda by building six specialist early intervention long day care centres for children with autism. The cost of operating these centres will be met through funding from the Inclusion Support Program, individual assistance funds for children with autism, parent contributions, the Child Care Benefit and Labor's new 50 per cent Child Care Tax Rebate. Labor will aim to ensure that parent contributions to send children to specialist centres are no greater than other long day care fees.

Labor is also committed to implementing the \$190 million Helping Children with Autism Package. This package will create new items in the Medicare Benefits Schedule, fund training for teachers, and support playgroups, early intervention and individual assistance packages for children with autism and their families.

A National Disability Strategy

One of the major recommendations of the Senate Inquiry was that all governments agree to a National Disability Strategy.

A Rudd Labor Government will implement this recommendation by negotiating a National Disability Strategy with the States and Territories to tackle the complex needs of people with disabilities and their carers. The National Disability Strategy will be overseen by the relevant Ministerial Council and have a clear place for the involvement of consumers, carers and providers of disability support services.

Disability policy must be about more than individual services. All portfolios have a role to play and some of the most important issues can only be addressed across government.

A National Disability Strategy would be a document that canvasses the full range of issues that impact on disability policy including:

- How to fund, finance and deliver disability services in the future.
- Prevention and early intervention.
- Increasing social and workforce participation.
- The specific needs of various disability groups, particularly those that are increasing in number.
- Improving the research agenda.
- New models of care.

Over the last 11 years, the Howard Government have stepped away from a national leadership role in disability policy. The National Disability Strategy will replace the Howard Government's failed Commonwealth Disability Strategy. It will move from a singular focus on information provision and Australian Public Service employees to the actual outcomes that Departments and programs ought to be delivering for people with disabilities.

A Rudd Labor Government will provide the national leadership that is needed to make real gains and build the cooperation required from all levels of government to see that the National Disability Strategy is implemented.

Practical measures for inclusion and participation

Labor's approach to disability is focused on the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. There are many practical measures that can support the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in the community that provide immediate and tangible benefits.

Labor supported the signing of the International Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons. Labor has long supported strong action to remove discrimination against Australians with disabilities. It was the Keating Government that introduced legislation outlawing this discrimination in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. A Rudd Labor Government will continue this strong support, and will investigate how best to implement the Convention at a federal level.

Labor will make changes to the aged care and disability systems to allow people living in disability group homes to access community aged care under a blended payment system. Funds equivalent to the value of a community aged care package will be available to top up disability supports for people who are clearly demonstrating increased needs due to ageing. A small number of community aged care packages will be allocated from future years' growth rounds to establish this model. People with disabilities will no longer be forced to move to a residential aged care facility in order to obtain a service to meet their ageing needs.

Labor will create a two year transition period for people with disabilities working in business services who want to move to open employment. As a consequence of the Howard

Government's welfare to work changes, business service employees are forced to resign before they even begin looking for work on the open market. Labor will give people with disabilities who wish to try open employment the capacity to return to a business service at any time within the first two years without penalty.

A Rudd Labor Government will work with States and Territories to create a national Companion Card scheme that allows people with disabilities dependent on full time care to take a carer to sporting and entertainment events for the price of a single ticket. Companion Card schemes currently operate in some States.

Evidence from Victoria indicates that people with disabilities in that State are able to go out twice as often once they have received a Companion Card.

Labor will work with States and Territories to harmonise rules for disability parking. Currently there are very different rules in each location and difficulties for people who travel across borders. A national approach to this issue will make it easier for people with disabilities to travel interstate and keep in contact with family and friends.

Labor will work with all stakeholders in the blind and vision impaired community to modernise print disability services. Current arrangements provide funding for material to be translated and posted but do not support new technologies that provide more immediate access to material.

Labor has already announced that it will develop a Disability and Arts Strategy in conjunction with the Australia Council focused on the participation of people with disabilities in the arts.

Support for carers

The daily care provided to people with disabilities by family members and friends is of immense importance. Without carers, the quality of life of people with disabilities would be significantly reduced and the demand for formal services would rise markedly.

Labor understands that one of the most important family responsibilities is caring for a partner, adult child or other family member.

Labor has already announced that it will establish an Office of Work and Family within the Prime Minister's Department that will focus on the needs of people who are carers and in paid employment.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has recommended that amendments be made to federal protection against discrimination on the grounds of family responsibilities to ensure that this covers the needs of carers. Some States and Territories have passed Carers Recognition Acts to set a legislative standard for the treatment of carers by government services. The Office of Work and Family will consider what legislation may be needed at the federal level.

Labor is committed to streamlining respite services to create a more sensible system for carers. Responsibility for respite services is currently split between several departments and programs without any attempt at coordination.

Labor has already announced that it will provide additional support to the 120,000 Australians who receive the Carer Payment. Carer Payment recipients will receive a quarterly utilities allowance of \$125, providing an annual amount of \$500. People receiving

telephone allowance who also connect to the internet will also be eligible for an increased allowance – up from \$88 to \$132 a year.

Conclusion

People with disabilities and their carers deserve better than to be treated as political targets during election campaigns and subjected to endless excuses and buck passing in between.

With funding certainty and new leadership at the federal level, Australia can have a disability service system that enables people to plan for the future and achieve their full potential.

A Rudd Labor Government will work with the States and Territories to end the crisis approach to disability services and to build a more inclusive society that truly values the contributions of people with disabilities and their carers.

Endnotes

1. ABS, Survey of Disability and Carers
2. AIHW, Current and future demand for specialist disability services, 2007
3. AIHW, Current and future demand for specialist disability services, 2007
4. Standing Committee on Community Affairs (2007) *Funding and operation of the Commonwealth State / Territory Disability Agreement*