



We build strong **PEOPLE**
strong **FAMILIES** strong **COMMUNITIES**

YMCA Australia response to

Developing a National Disability Strategy for Australia

December 2008

1. Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our feedback to the Federal Government in relation to the development of a National Disability Strategy for Australia.

We believe that a greater emphasis on social inclusion, equality and non-discrimination for all people with a disability, their families and carers will play a significant part in shaping future social and public policy affecting the daily lives of all Australians.

YMCA Australia would also like to acknowledge the positive step taken by the Australian Government in ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ratification of the Convention will ensure Australia continues to play a leading role in the development of robust legislation, supportive policies and targeted resources to guarantee that people with a disability have the opportunity to participate fully in their chosen pathways in the Australian community.

2. The work of the YMCA in supporting people with a disability, their families and carers

YMCA Australia is a national community-based not-for-profit organisation that delivers programs and services to help build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Australia.

We operate in over 500 locations across Australia and during 2007 an estimated 2.2 million Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service.

Our staff and volunteers deliver professionally designed programs to thousands of Australians every day in health and fitness, recreation, accommodation, child care, camping, youth and family services. This also includes people with a disability.

During 2007, YMCA provided generalist and specialist services and programs to over 83,000 persons with disabilities and/or special needs. Over 120 Australian YMCA sites deliver a range of programs and services accessed by people with a disability.

2.1 YMCA Programs

Each YMCA is different, developing and delivering a broad range of specialist and general programs focused on meeting the needs of people with a disability, their families and carers. These include, but not limited to:

- health and recreation programs for adults and children with both intellectual and physical disabilities (including sporting and aquatic programs);
- life skills programs for adults with mental illness;
- workplace fitness programs for adults with disability;
- respite programs such as camps that include families and carers;
- skill development programs for children with disability;
- sport programs for children with specialist needs (such as those with Aspergers Syndrome);
- programs that provide an opportunity for socialisation, personal development and fun; and
- our Open Doors initiative – this initiative raises and provides funds to ensure that individuals who experience social or economic disadvantage are not denied access to a YMCA program or service due to an inability to pay.

As a key provider of health and wellness programs and community development initiatives, the YMCA is concerned about social isolation for people with a disability and the challenges faced in relation to access to transport and the availability of preventative health programs that focus on the needs of people with a disability.

Many YMCA programs that work in support of people with a disability are funded in partnership with State and Federal grant programs and where possible, the YMCA seeks to develop collaborative partnerships with other local community organisations and support groups. YMCA Australia also has a policy that no one will be denied access to a YMCA service or program due to their inability to pay and our Open Doors initiative ensures that our services reach those who are most in need.

3. Key Issues and Summary of Recommendations

YMCA Australia believes that the development and successful implementation of a National Disability Strategy must be underpinned by a genuine capacity on the part of government and the broader community to address critical issues of discrimination, exclusion and barriers faced by people with a disability, their families and carers.

Many of these issues are focused on community attitudes, infrastructure issues, models of funding and levels of cooperation between Commonwealth, State and local government agencies and the disconnect between mainstream and specialist service delivery.

In developing and implementing a National Disability Strategy, YMCA Australia recommends that:

- there be a genuine attempt to implement the Strategy within a **whole of Government framework** that extends beyond the purview of the Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Department of Health and Ageing to engage a number of other key portfolio areas such as planning , infrastructure, immigration and regional and rural development;
- there continue to be enhanced cooperation regarding service planning, quality standards, funding models and service delivery between State and Commonwealth agencies and through the **COAG and the National Reform Agenda**;
- the **connection between mainstream and specialist** disability services be enhanced to address concerns regarding referral mechanisms, waiting lists and in broader terms, the capacity of mainstream services to meet the needs of persons living with disability, their families and carers;
- long-standing issues of critical importance such as access to **appropriate and adequate transportation** will need to be addressed in order for the National Disability Strategy to be successful;
- there be a range of strategies to **elevate status of the disability support sector** within Government and the broader community;
- there be a range of strategies implemented to **enhance workforce participation** and retention including the development of professional career pathways including a particular focus on the needs of rural and regional areas;
- there is provision of incentives and structured funding models to encourage greater collaboration and partnership between service providers enhancing their capacity to deliver **outreach services to rural and regional areas**;

With reference to YMCA Australia's submission on the Ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability* we would like to reiterate our recommendations that there be:

- the development of enhanced monitoring and compliance measures set out in existing Australian law, particularly that which relates to the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)*;
- a comprehensive national program of community, public and private sector education and awareness-raising regarding the rights and obligations of the Convention and the process of ratification and the National Disability Strategy by the Australian Government;
- the provision of enhanced resource and funding arrangements in relation to the National Disability Advocacy Program and, in particular, Disability Discrimination Legal Services; and
- a review of the Australian Human Rights Commission's powers in relation to the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* and take immediate steps to ensure these powers match the requirements of the Convention and reflect intent and functioning of the National Disability Strategy.

4. What should be part of a National Disability Strategy?

In providing our input to the development of a National Disability Strategy, YMCA Australia has chosen to comment on the eight key areas that will be the focus of the National Disability Reform Agenda. As a large national not-for-profit organisation, we believe this level of feedback will be of greatest use in relation to this submission.

4.1 Service benchmarks

The establishment and setting of service benchmarks should be underpinned by more extensive national research that provides a clear and tangible understanding of the experiences of clients and service providers to ensure that benchmarking is practical and grounded in realistic expectations.

With reference to the development of the National Disability Strategy and service benchmarking, the YMCA urges that the Government consider:

- the manner in which benchmarks will be measured and time-framed;
- the value of service benchmarks for different age groups;
- a consistent approach in terms of benchmarks for service providers that directly relate to their budget allocations for transport;

- benchmarking the duration of time between client referral and commencement of service provision; and
- incorporating tangible service outcomes and/or client achievement in service benchmarking.

4.2 Disability services' quality standards

YMCA Australia recognises that while the disability support sector varies greatly in terms of programs and services and that clients, their families and carers experience a broad range of differing needs that will change over time, the nationalisation of quality standards across the sector is of critical importance. The development of a National Disability Strategy provides an opportunity to address a number of structural issues that have implications for quality standards that include, but are not limited to:

- a lack of clarity regarding the dual role of Government (particularly at the State level) in being a service provider and a provider of funding to services;
- the current role of Government (at the State level) in being the lead provider of accommodation services and issues in terms of quality, suitability and flexibility of choice;
- a lack of direct opportunity for clients, their families, carers or advocates to provide input into critical decisions about accommodation; and
- the centralisation of waiting lists for services with government agencies leading to time delays in access to available places in services and programs and a lack of responsiveness.

To address some of these issues, it will be essential for the National Disability Strategy to build a greater level of collaboration between Federal and State Governments and service providers to enable services to be responsive, provide greater quality of service and re-acquire localised control. Achieving this balance will be a crucial element in enhancing disability service standards.

4.3 Service planning

YMCA Australia is concerned that many programs for people with disabilities are not funded in an appropriate and adequate manner to ensure quality service planning. Some projects for 'high need' groups are often funded on an annual basis, however, in reality there is a critical need for recurrent three to four year funding to build the capacity, success and sustainability of some of these specialised, high intensity programs that also require the recruitment and retention of staff with specialised training. In this respect, it will be essential for the Federal Government to implement the development of funding models that go beyond annual funding and move towards recurrent funding in order for community organisations to build capacity and plan strategically for the implementation of intermediate and long-term programs. A greater degree of transparency in relation to

funding allocation decisions at both the Federal and State levels will also be critical for the disability support sector in service planning.

More sustainable funding models also provide greater intermediate and long-term reassurance to people with a disability, their families and carers that essential services they require will 'be there' into the future, reducing their sense of uncertainty and anxiety about support they will be able to receive.

YMCA Australia is also concerned about the implications for service planning when the level of funding provided to agencies does not necessarily correlate to the actual hours of direct service delivery, creating a lack of equity within the disability support sector. An additional issue of concern for service planning is the increasing utilisation of 'portable' individualised funding. While YMCA Australia acknowledges that this model provides the service user with a greater level of choice and ensures that service providers are meeting their clients' needs, this needs to be coupled with a sustained level of core funding for agencies to ensure they can remain responsive and provide clients with greater flexibility of service.

Infrastructure issues such as access to transport remain critical issues of concern not only in terms of accessibility, but also in relation to service delivery and planning. Access to public and private transportation continues to be the main barrier to accessing services and participating in programs and there is a direct correlation between success of a program and the availability of adequate and suitable transport. Ensuring that critical issues of transport are addressed, particularly in outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas are an essential element in service planning and will need to be a central focus of the National Disability Strategy.

Critical issues with service planning are also being increasingly experienced in regional and rural areas. As housing prices and accommodation costs rise in larger regional centres, many people with a disability are relocating to outer regional and rural areas in order to access more affordable housing. Typically, there is a limited capacity for disability support services to reach people affected by housing stress in rural areas and many people with a disability, their families and carers are becoming increasingly isolated as a result. In terms of service planning, YMCA Australia would like to recommend that the National Disability Strategy provide incentives and structured funding models to encourage greater collaboration and partnership between service providers enhancing their capacity to deliver outreach services to rural and regional areas.

4.4 Building people centred service delivery

YMCA Australia believes that building people-centred service delivery must be underpinned by fundamental principles of caring, respect, responsibility and dignity. Through service providers taking on greater case management roles, this can be a highly resource intensive process but it critical in ensuring that:

- clients, their families and carers are fully informed about the services available to them and what their funding dollars can provide;
- clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds receive targeted services that are culturally appropriate providing community connection;
- clients, their families and carers are at the centre of service planning, delivery and decision-making in relation to their current and future care.

4.5 Early intervention and prevention

While YMCA Australia acknowledges the initiatives and commitments made by the Federal Government in relation to providing improved support to children and their families living with autism spectrum disorders, we believe the National Disability Strategy provides an opportunity to enhance early diagnosis and intervention strategies. This must also include increasing community awareness and providing support that builds the capacity of families of children with autism. This can also be facilitated through a sector-wide shift away from traditional scientific and medical intervention models to a community development approach.

To enhance early intervention initiatives, the National Disability Strategy also provides an opportunity to build greater collaboration with the early childhood education and care sector and the school system more broadly.

4.6 Workforce capacity

YMCA Australia believes one of the most critical issues affecting the disability support sector is that of workforce capacity. Attracting and retaining quality support staff is a key concern for the sector and typically there exist few opportunities for professional development and advanced career pathways.

We believe that underpinning many of these issues is a lack of value placed on the sector by the broader community and that appropriate recognition of the status of disability support professionals must be a central element of the National Disability Strategy. Enhanced remuneration for support workers will also contribute to improved workforce capacity and retention, enabling agencies to plan their services and programs accordingly.

To better reflect the diversity of support choices for people with a disability and their families and carers, YMCA Australia is also supportive of more flexible work conditions

and work arrangements for support workers that avoid industrialisation and restricted work hours.

An additional issue of concern related directly to workforce retention is that of 'burn out' and the urgent need for greater access to support mechanisms for workers. The YMCA believes that the development of a National Disability Strategy provides an opportunity for the implementation of improved strategies towards enhancing support for disability workers to ensure greater retention of highly trained, quality staff.

As a provider of disability support services in a number of regional centres and rural areas, the YMCA is acutely aware of the critical issues and lack of capacity to recruit, train and retain disability support staff in rural and regional areas. As part of the National Disability Strategy there needs to be developed a range of measures and incentives, including additional funding to meet the needs of clients and service providers in rural and regional areas.

4.7 National consistency

While the YMCA recognises the value in national consistency in service quality standards, the development of the National Disability Strategy will need to consider the implications for the implementation of existing strategies and plans at the state level.

Through the COAG National Reform Agenda and greater collaboration between the states and Commonwealth, the National Disability Strategy provides an opportunity to greatly improve housing and accommodation services for people living with disability

Broader national health reforms including the development of the National Preventative Health Strategy must also give greater consideration to those living with disability and their carers. To date, there has been a lack of a consistent strategy in relation to improving and sustaining the health and wellbeing of persons with disability.

4.8 Ageing carers

A concern of YMCA Australia is not only the broader issues affecting ageing carers, but also the lack of advanced planning and supports in place to ensure that carers enable the person with the disability to truly develop their capacity to achieve the highest level of independence possible. The co-dependency of many relationships can often result in a poor development of independent living skills and the National Disability Strategy must focus on providing parents and carers with the necessary supports and access to initiatives that enable their child or dependent adult to achieve the greatest level of independence possible.

5. Conclusion

YMCA Australia is encouraged by the ongoing efforts of the Australian Government, both in its willingness to consult with the community sector, and in promoting and upholding the rights of persons living with disability.

The development of a National Disability Strategy will be a critical step forward in ensuring that fundamental human rights principles contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are fully realised in the Australian context. YMCA Australia believes the development of the National Disability Strategy provides an opportunity to enhance the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, their families and carers and elevate the status of volunteers and professionals working in the disability support sector.

YMCA Australia is committed to working alongside people living with disability, their families, carers and service providers to ensure that the National Disability Strategy achieves its intended outcomes and we look forward to continuing collaboration and dialogue with the Federal Government in this regard.

Please do not hesitate to contact us regarding any aspects of this submission.