

Submission to the Family and Community Development Committee

Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

22 April 2016

Introduction

Disability Advocacy Victoria is the peak body for independent disability advocacy organisations within Victoria.

We endorse the submissions provided to the Committee from our members Communication Rights Australia and Disability Discrimination Legal Service.

Feedback from our members overlap the issues raised by the aforementioned two organisations, however we take the opportunity to reiterate two main points.

Education

One of our member organisations stated unequivocally that the most pressing issue for their clients with Autism Spectrum Disorder was access to education.

The barriers to education run across a number of areas.

1. **Exclusion**

Students with Autism continue to be banned from extracurricular activities such as camps and excursions.

2. Funding

Information about funding allocated for students with Autism is often not passed on to families, who do not always have knowledge or decision-making involvement into how it is spent. The Student Support Group process is rarely undertaken with any regard to guidelines and therefore the opportunity to have input into education supports is limited. This is particularly important for students with Autism who often have multiple disabilities and challenging requirements.

3. Planning

Due to the complex nature of Autism, the ability to write meaningful and measurable individual learning plans is vital. Teachers appear not to have such skills and there continues to be no consistency in the writing of these plans. As individual learning plans create the framework of a student's education and socialisation, such plans need to be formulated in a manner which is measurable and takes advantage of the views of the students, family members and practitioners. They often do not.

Disability Advocacy Victoria are concerned that the barriers to education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are the same in 2016 as they were in 2012 when the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission wrote its report "Held Back-Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Victorian Schools."

We note the recent release of the report from the review of the Program for Students with Disabilities earlier this week and continue to be concerned at what seems to be a continuing lack of mandated processes. Many of the issues raised have been raised for many years, with the Department of Education and Training claiming to have addressed those issues. They have not. Students with complex disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder rely even more heavily on a high-quality education system that makes decisions about planning and education in response to individual needs. There continues to be no commitment to respond in that manner.

Quality Support

Another of our members provided direct client feedback in relation to the general lack of knowledge about Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the quality of support in relation to disability services.

It is difficult to respond competently to people with Autism Spectrum Disorder when there is a vacuum of knowledge about their needs and requirements.

Given the length of time the Department of Health and Human Services has been providing services to people with disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, it is disappointing that generally speaking the feedback from clients themselves is that there is little understanding of their disorder. This is particularly noticeable with people with "high functioning" Autism Spectrum Disorder who due to often appearing not to have a disability, can be ignored when asking for adjustments to be made to service provision.

Like the response to other “invisible” disabilities, service provision often does not take into account that the social and communication disorder inherent in Autism can be debilitating - particularly if not accommodated.

People with Autism feel they are ignored when they request adjustments to service provision. In this respect, clearly there are significant knowledge gaps in understanding Autism that need to be addressed.

Recommendations

Disability Advocacy Victoria provides the following recommendations for consideration:

1. That the Department of Education and Training require mandatory training of teachers in Autism Spectrum Disorder that is informed by external experts.
2. That the commitment made by the Australian Labor Party to establish the role of a Schools Commissioner be honoured.
3. That the Department of Education and Training adopt the recommendations in the recent review of the Program for Students with Disabilities in relation to a new funding model based on functional need in order that students with Autism on the higher end of the spectrum gain access to individual funding.
4. That disability service employees of the Department of Health and Human Services and their contracted service providers undertake compulsory Autism Spectrum Disorder training with strong input from people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.