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*“Our Voice Our Choice”*

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Family and Community Development Committee

My name is Trudy Joyce, I work for Grampians disability Advocacy, advocating for and with people that identify as having a disability, I cover the local areas of the Wimmera and the Northern Grampians, I am funded by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Social Services to provide individual advocacy within 28 hours a week. I would like to acknowledge my colleague Fiona Tipping for addressing this inquiry on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 2015, her transcript is available to read on the parliament website and so therefore I will try to not overlap on issues she has already raised.

As of today's date, I have 46 service users needing my support in resolving their individual issues, with my allocated 28 hours per week this generally equates to about 43 minutes a week per service user. I do believe it fair to say advocacy is a definite community need. Under my current funding arrangement, the thought of the National Disability Insurance Scheme rolling out across the local areas I cover is quite overwhelming, their will be added needs to access advocacy for a whole bunch of new issues, things such as complaints, appeals and support to understand the process and requirements that I am sure will arise once the NDIS has commenced here.

Over the years, I have had many disclosures of abuse, some present and some historical. I would like to discuss what I have witnessed within the sector for a person disclosing abuse.

It has become apparent to me that when a person with disability discloses abuse, services often undermanage the severity of the allegation and the support needed to go forth with a disclosure. I have had an instance where quite a large service turned to me to provide required direction on how to proceed for the person disclosing abuse, because no one employed within the service had any idea on what to do, that was a real eye opener and happened in 2014, this issue obviously arose due to lack of training and lack of funding to support.

The person that had disclosed abuse provide a statement to Victoria Police, the person was then deemed to not be a credible witness, therefore there was nothing further done for this victim other than offering counselling support. This is something I have seen a lot of. Victoria Police and the justice system need more clarification and training to be able to better understand alternative communication methods and cognitive disabilities so that they can ensure a higher rate of justice for people that have suffered abuse. An Independent Third Person program is not often utilised by police for the victim from what I have witnessed and the Community Visitors scheme seems to not form strong enough relationships with people they visit so that people suffering from abuse feel they can turn to Community Visitors for the protection and support needed to disclose abuse.

There are so many issues within the current system, it is definitely broken if it cannot protect nor support people with a disability suffering abuse within the disability sector. We have had various Royal Commissions and Inquiries in the past covering many relevant issues for vulnerable people, in 1999, QLD held a Commission of Inquiry into the abuse of Children in QLD Institutions called THE FORDE INQUIRY which specifically addressed allegations of abuse, the relevant recommendation from this report was a mandatory reporting of all abusive situations.

In 2015 the Victorian Ombudsman also refers to a recommendation of an Independent Oversight Body that is accessible and also engages with remote and regional areas along with a recommendation of Mandatory Reporting of Abuse. The matter of abuse within disability services is a disgrace and should be met with absolute zero tolerance therefore the time to start doing something about it is now, otherwise I believe if no action is taken immediately such as Mandatory Reporting then it leaves a broken system in disrepair once again failing people with disability. In other words, how many people need to say the same thing in order to get anything done?

From my experience there are inadequacies within the disability sector regarding the legal implications of human rights. Access to an appropriate complaints body regarding abuse within services is blurred. People with disability are not only vulnerable to suffer abuse, they are also vulnerable within services that are underfunded, uneducated and just down right unethical with some of their approaches in dare I say support.

An example of how underfunded or under resourced some services that people with disability disclosing abuse may need to access are, services such as specific counselling that focus on sexual assault, I know at present with the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, I have made many referrals for these types of counselling supports and this task in itself you would think would be quite straight forward, but it is not. Sometimes

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there are quite lengthy waiting periods for counselling support, sometimes the counsellors are unable to communicate with people that identify with having a cognitive disability or alternative communication need.

This is an issue, when people with a disability have suffered from abuse and the service is so inaccessible, by means of communication, or funding even to arrange care support staff to drive the person wanting to access this service to appointments, or as I have witnessed before, funded carer supports that are unable to support the person with a disability communicate because no service thought it in the person with disability's best interests to educate them using alternative communication methods therefore the victim is unable to even communicate to anybody, the pain or the horror they have experienced.

In order for changes to occur, emergency funding for people with a disability wishing to disclose abuse needs to be implemented to ensure every person within disability services has access to some form of communication support, and then we need to ensure all services supporting prospective clients with alternative communication needs are trained in these methods. We need to ensure services are aware of clear protocols in supporting someone with a disability making a disclosure of abuse, the system needs to be very clear and completely accessible. The current system is too complex, inaccessible and a nightmare for even myself to navigate.

We could also look at a possible Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of people with a disability, another recommendation recently reported on by the Senate Inquiry into Violence, abuse and neglect against people with disability in institutional and residential settings released this week.

Another support that emergency funding for issues of abuse could provide is access to staffed supported accommodation within local areas, if you have ever suffered abuse, it is quite a frightening experience, let alone, from what I have seen, is that if by chance a service finds a secure place of protection to provide for a person, this accommodation is hours away from their local environment, therefore strewn into unknown territory, frightened and scared and a lot of the time unsupported due to funding issues. This is not good enough, too many people with disabilities are not only suffering from abuse, they are also suffering at the hands of an ineffective disability sector that cannot cope with mild diversity let alone the complex requirements of support for a person willing to disclose abuse. I am lucky enough to be able to use my voice, and in using my voice today for people with a disability that will not get a chance to have their say, I will say that I hope change is closer than imagined and i I will finish with a quote.....'how a society treats its most vulnerable, is always a measure of its humanity'. Thankyou.

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