

Submission 003

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Health and Community Services Committee

Your Life
Your Choice

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Examination of the Disability Services (Your Life Your Choice) Amendment Bill 2012

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Submission by Micah Projects Inc
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MICAH PROJECTS INC



Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community

Background

Micah Projects is a community organisation established in 1997 to provide services to homeless and disadvantaged people within Brisbane. It employs 137 people across several teams that include Mental Health and Disability; Homeless to Home Support Services; Families, Women and Children; Supportive Housing Services; Forgotten Australians and the Innovation, Research and Evaluation Unit.

In direct response to the significant disability, mental health, physical health and social issues among people that Micah supports an international survey tool (Vulnerability Index Survey) was introduced in June 2012 as part of the 50 Lives 50 Homes Project in Brisbane. This tool has now been applied to 1594 homeless or vulnerably housed people across Australia in order to assess and identify the risk of mortality among homeless people with key disability co-morbidities when measured against eight key health indicators.

The following health and wellbeing data; obtained directly from homeless and vulnerably housed people in Brisbane; highlights the broad, significant and debilitating disability issues experienced by people that Micah supports and the over reliance on acute emergency social care and health settings in the absence of more integrated and personalised social care services. While there have been international advances in implementing individualised service models of social care; particularly in the UK, Northern Ireland, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, the US and Canada; the *2011 Australian Government Disability Care and Support Productivity Commission Inquiry Report* highlights that there still exists significant service delivery gaps nationally. One of these gaps is the availability of appropriate and effective individualised social care models for homeless and disadvantaged people who live with both undiagnosed and diagnosed disability and chronic life threatening illnesses in Brisbane.

Social care and health profile

In examining those who identified as vulnerable (n=303) of the 444 homeless people who have completed a Vulnerability Index Survey since June 2010 the following was identified.

Complex Social Care and Health Profile:

- 6.6 years was the average length of homelessness.
- 59% are Tri- Morbid - they live with a significant disability, medical condition, or mental illness and abuse substances.
- 64% are dually diagnosed.
- 71% had previously or currently received mental health treatment.
- 36% received involuntary mental health treatment in the past.
- 86% have substance abuse issues.
- 55% received substance abuse treatment in the past.
- 34% have a history of foster care/institutional care.
- 55% have a history of being in prison.
- 81% have a history of having been in the watch house.
- 29 % identified as ATSI or SSI.

Chronic Disease Profile:

- 37% had a previous history of a brain injury or head trauma.
- 32% have liver disease, cirrhosis or end stage liver disease.
- 33% have been diagnosed with Hepatitis C.
- 27% have a history of heart disease or arrhythmia.
- 32% have asthma.
- 13% have emphysema
- 12% have kidney disease/ end stage disease
- 12% have diabetes
- 10% have been diagnosed with cancer
- 4% have HIV/+AIDS

As demonstrated above, the homeless and vulnerable population have complex social care and co-morbid health needs that require careful consideration as part of the review of the new Disability Services (Your Life, Your Choice) Amendment Bill 2012.

Key Concerns/ Issues

Many of the people Micah Projects supports and who require social care services are from a relatively young age group, ranging from their mid twenties to mid fifties. Their personal stories reveal lifelong interaction with the disability, health and criminal justice systems, including periods of institutionalisation. Their experiences compromise their ability to readily engage with or access disability or social care services to assist with their individual needs. Their ability to self manage individual funding without experienced assistance is similarly compromised.

Barriers to accessing social care services exist particularly where intake and assessment processes for social care are complex and centre based. The process of application for funding is not easily understood and is inflexible in its approach. Clear information that can be easily processed and explained through the use of experienced communicators and social educators will provide more positive outcomes in the funding application process.

The ability of vulnerable people to self-assess possible services and select those of most benefit can be compromised and could jeopardise sign off by all parties to an individual funding agreement.

People in our most vulnerable cohorts need to have their individual needs supported in an integrated, holistic and personalised manner. Limited or absent provision of essential community care supports increases mortality and suffering as people become less and less engaged in the mainstream community. This leads to subsequent disengagement with all forms of supports and community care available outside of emergency or acute care settings.

Homeless people distrust the “service system” and while “Your Life Your Choice” can offer individualised service for people with complex needs, the face of service access will need to be flexible to meet them where they live. This is often in precarious and vulnerable places. However, this flexibility will avoid needless slipping through the cracks of the community care system once again and any subsequent blocking of emergency and acute care settings.

Many of the people that Micah supports with complex care needs are indigenous, necessitating the need to design and deliver social care services that are culturally appropriate in terms of the person's indigenous background along with their homeless or transient lifestyle. All funding agreements and supporting documents will need to be in formats that acknowledge their respective cultures and allow for their personal communication needs, this will include alternate forms of media and Plain English Easy Read versions of any contractual documents.

Currently, long waiting times for required generic psychological and social support vacancies lead to disengagement with the entire service system. Your Life Your choice, if available to people who are vulnerable, can create opportunities to purchase these supports that better meet their care needs. This will subsequently increase inclusion and community participation.

Due to the complex and sometimes non-existent education and learning difficulties faced by the people Micah Projects supports, their ability to understand and process the sophistication of individualised funding will need further supports from the funding stream. This will need to be built into their allocation and be included in the assessment tool. Success for the person with direct funding will be dependent on their ability to feel in control, while supported to maintain systems of accountability and transparent, approved and agreed use of public monies.

Future Plans

Micah Projects has continually allowed for the people who access disability funded social care to maintain choice and control over all aspects of their service provision. While direct funding is not always applicable due to the skills of individual people or their capacity is assessed as requiring the support of the Adult Guardian and the Public Trustee of Queensland, nevertheless all people have control and choice over the worker who supports them, the times and nature of service delivery design and planning and the activities and opportunities they wish to strive for.

The future for Micah Projects is to extend the level of choice and control, assist people to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens receiving direct funding and to plan and develop with them the means to a good and productive life of their choosing.

Recommendations

Micah Projects strongly upholds the rights of people with a disability who are homeless or vulnerable to achieve lifestyles of choice that improve their longevity and increase opportunity and inclusion. As a consequence we recommend the following to the Committee:

That there is a need to incorporate into *Clause 7 Part 5A section 43A* of the legislation in recognition of the depth and breadth of .the nature of disability as outlined under the *Disability Services Act 2006*. The importance of this change is to ensure that there cannot be any aspect of a person's disability that will prevent them from applying for individualised funding under "Your Life Your Choice".

Where a person is deemed by the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal to require a financial administrator rather than an appointed Guardian as decision maker in all financial matters, the Act will need to be amended in *Clause 7* to reflect the nature of their financial decision making powers in the individualised funding agreement. This is to ensure that the person's autonomy, choice and control over service selection remains paramount while remaining in consultation with the appointed Trustee's role in financial management and contractual aspects of consent to the individual funding agreement.

We recommend the establishment of a specialist "Your Life Your Choice" education and information unit that exists specifically to support vulnerable people and their families and guardians with understanding and negotiating funding agreements, service selection and ongoing financial reporting duties. Their role will be to "translate" the intake and access system and processes, provide information and advice on applications, assist with planning and negotiation with service providers and assist people with the management of their individual funding and reporting obligations. That this unit be included in *the Act* will ensure that the rights of each person are supported and maintained as described in the new amended *Clause 6 section 19*.

References

Disability Services Act 1986

Disability Services Act (Qld) 2006

Australian Government Productivity Commission Inquiry Report – Disability Care and Support, Volumes 1 &2. No 54, July 2011