

OPINION EDITORIAL

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Building a better NDIS

By Professor David Gilchrist
Chairperson – Nulsen Group

Imagine for moment, you are driving your car down the freeway and the truck in front of you swerves to avoid road debris and rolls. Your sedan collides with the five-tonne vehicle at high-speed and even though you are wearing a seatbelt and the air bag deploys, you suffer massive head and spinal injuries.

The result of those injuries means you can no longer walk, talk and feed yourself, for basic life-functions and is at this point; that you and your family become actively invested in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and how it can best support your new way of life.

The NDIS is an individualised scheme which offers you financial support to cover the mounting costs of your care, multiple therapies and on-going services that are likely to reach more than \$250,000 each year.

If you are fortunate, after several months you get a place in a specialised support home which is what Nulsen Group provides for people with complex disabilities like you, as well as access to care and support services to help you enjoy a quality of life.

The intentions of the Federal Government through the NDIS have always been good, but we cannot forget the adage that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The roll out of the NDIS has been clumsy at best, disastrous at worst and while the disability services sector recognises that no-one is perfect there are two things that the government and the NDIA have failed to do;

1. Demonstrate they have empathy for the people with disabilities and their families; and
2. Adequately consult the sector which provides care and services to people with disabilities.

Unlike the hypothetical scenario at the start of this article – the rollout of the NDIS has been a car-crash that State and Federal Governments should have seen coming.

As one of Australia's most experienced providers of care for people with complex disabilities, Nulsen Group joined a chorus of like-minded organisations, people with disabilities and their families to point out the glaringly obvious flaws in the roll-out of the NDIS.

National Disability Services (NDS) which is our industry's peak body has raised a myriad of issues with the scheme including the fundamental change in the funding model for not-for-profit disability service providers.

As a result of the rapid change in funding, Nulsen Group is one of many not-for-profits which is haemorrhaging hundreds of thousands of dollars just to 'keep the lights on', money which could be better spent on our efforts to maintain the high-quality of services which improves the lives of people in our care.

In Western Australia, the McGowan State Government has been forced to recently provide \$6.8 million in transition funding to 34 disability service providers in an effort to plug the NDIS funding gaps. While it might seem like a generous amount it does not account for the funding that was taken away back in December 2017 when WA signed up to the nation-wide NDIS.

The WA Government no longer provides vacancy funding for residential care providers of people with complex disabilities. For example, if you are living in a specialised support home with two other people with complex disabilities and one of your housemates unfortunately passes away that person's funding immediately ceases. But you and your other housemate still rely on the shared resources of the household and, it can take at least 12 weeks for the NDIS to approve a funding package for your new housemate.

Nulsen, together with other residential care providers are now covering the shortfall and it is not only putting organisations at risk, it is also jeopardising the on-going care for the people the NDIS is supposed to support.

To put it in perspective, the vacancy funding gap will cost Nulsen more than \$1 million this year, and if you multiply that across other service providers that is an incredible burden which places not-for-profits in the disability services sector at risk of shutting down.

It is estimated that the McGowan Government has banked more than \$200 million in cash that should be available to support people with disabilities and the NDIS' underspend of \$1.6 billion is now part of the Morrison Government's federal budget surplus.

Right now, the McGowan Government is preoccupied with balancing its books ahead of the next State Budget and the Disability Services Minister Stephen Dawson has failed to act on advice from the sector and concerned families to address the vacancy funding crisis. As a matter of urgency, Minister Dawson needs to reinstate vacancy funding for disability services organisations that provide residential care to ensure their sustainability.

All of this means that for the first time in Australia's history the Disability Services Sector is underwriting the government.

In essence, people with disabilities and disability service organisations are funding the State and Federal Governments budget surpluses.

While Prime Minister Scott Morrison has recently promised to increase the hourly rate to cover the cost of services provided to people with disabilities in an attempt to appease the electorate and quieten down the NDS' 'Deliver the promise' campaign, it still does not address the flaws in funding for disability service organisations. There is in fact no new money.

The cost of doing business with the NDIA has placed additional pressures on the disability services sector and the operating budgets of organisations.

Nulsen will need to spend up to \$1.5 million in rolling out new IT platforms and license fees to do business with the NDIA including claiming, invoicing etc.

It's also costing Nulsen Group approximately \$400,000 in resources to facilitate the negotiation of care plans, including management of reviews and appeals with the NDIA; money that would be better spent on people in our care.



And why should you care about your taxpayer dollars underpinning Nulsen Group and other disability services providers? You need organisations made up of empathic and skilled people who devote their expertise and time to supporting people with disabilities. A NDIS without disability service providers is like a health system without hospitals or an education system without schools.

The solution is simple, State and Federal governments need to take an empathic approach to policy and funding decisions and consult with the disability sector to understand where how they can best support each person with a disability.

For 65 years, Nulsen Group's number one priority has always been the people in our care. We are not asking the government to go back to the drawing board, we are simply asking for them to fix the glaringly obvious flaws which are putting service providers at risk and therefore, jeopardising care and services to people in our community who need it most.

ABOUT NULSEN

Nulsen Group is a not-for-profit organisation that provides care and services to more than 200 Western Australians with complex disabilities. We have been part of the WA community for more than 65 years.

ABOUT PROFESSOR DAVID GILCHRIST

Professor David Gilchrist BA BBus PhD FCA FAIC is a chartered accountant and a historian. He holds a PhD in economics from the University of Notre Dame Australia and is currently a Professor at the University of Western Australia as well as the Public Sector Accounting and Disclosure Research Cluster. Over his 25-year career, David has held many senior roles in the not-forprofit, commercial and public sectors. He has taught at several universities across the globe, sits as Chairman on multiple boards and has published several key national reports. Achievements include: working as the Assistant Auditor General WA, the Associate Dean of the School of Business, University of Notre Dame Australia, Chairman to Nulsen Disability Services, and the Kimberley Individual and Family Support Association. David produced the "Australian Charities 2013" and the "Australian National Costing and Pricing Framework" issued jointly with National Disability Services. He is widely published as an academic and a journalist.

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