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Jenny Price
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601
agedcareemployment@pc.gov.au

Productivity Commission on Aged Care Employment

Carers NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission on Aged Care Employment. This brief submission will discuss workforce models in the context of the aged care industry and the implications they have for family and friend carers in NSW. Carers NSW supports structural improvements to the aged care employment landscape. However, as the aged care workforce also often works in other care sectors—such as disability care—workforce shortages, precarious working conditions, and under skilling needs to be addressed across the broader paid care sector. Carers NSW is concerned that a siloed approach to care employment reform could lead to shortages elsewhere and impact informal carers who may be required to fill the gap in necessary care.

Carers NSW is the peak non-government organisation for carers in New South Wales (NSW). A carer is any individual who provides care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and/or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. Carers NSW is part of the National Carer Network and a member of Carers Australia. Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to:

- Be a leading carer organisation in which carers have confidence
- Actively promote carer recognition and support
- Actively support carers to navigate a changing service landscape that will be characterised by ongoing policy reform
- Promote connected community experiences and opportunities for carers that are inclusive of diverse carer groups
- Lead and advocate for carer-specific and carer-inclusive policy making, research and service delivery
- Continue to be a quality-driven, responsive and carer-focused organisation.

Thank you for accepting our submission. For further information, please contact Jade Alexander, Policy Officer

Yours sincerely,

Elena Katrakis
CEO
Carers NSW

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the nature and extent of precarious employment and the implications it has for rights, financial security, and quality of life. In the context of the care industry, the highly casualised nature of the paid care workforce means that workers are commonly engaging in paid employment from a variety of employers or across diverse online employment hubs, such as Mable and HireUp in 'gig' employment.¹ Casualisation of the care industry also means that people are often working across multiple care sectors, including aged and disability care, in order to earn a liveable wage.

For carers of people who are ageing, increases in insecure and irregular aged care employment resulting in high turnover of paid care workers, has seen reduced consistency in workers, inability to secure services that meet their needs and concerns about reduced quality and safety of formal care options. Where carers are unable or hesitant to utilise formal care services, especially on accessing replacement care, there is increased risk of breakdown in caring arrangements and premature admission to residential aged care.

Carers NSW has provided extensive input to government inquiries and reviews regarding the paid care workforce, particularly regarding critical shortages of adequately skilled and available paid care workers, the insufficient support given to providers to appropriately train and remunerate their staff and the impacts of workforce issues on family and friend carers, who often fill the service gaps of formalised supports if they are unavailable or inadequate.

This submission will contextualise aged care employment issues, highlighting that regardless of the employment model adopted, failure to address fundamental workforce issues will result in ongoing critical workforce shortages. In addition, improvements to aged care employment alone will result in emergent and worsening issues in other care employment sectors (such as disability), and will lead to increased pressure on family and friend carers. The Productivity Commission's *Indirect employment in aged care: Issues Paper (2022)* identifies numerous employment issues, including the casualisation of employment, low remuneration and limited education and training opportunities, yet, these issues are reflected in and weaken the broader care sector, and therefore have far reaching impacts on the care workforce, service users, their families and carers. To improve the aged care workforce, ensure quality care, and support the diverse and crucial networks of unpaid carers, Carers NSW respectfully puts forward that change needs to occur across care sectors in the form of collective and systematic workforce reform.

Employment in aged care

Quality and safety of care

Carers are often highly involved in the planning and organisation of aged care services with, or on behalf of, the person they care for. The Carers NSW 2020 National Carer Survey found that, of respondents caring for someone receiving aged care services, 88.1% provide assistance with coordinating support services or care workers, 82.7% provide support with cognitive and emotional tasks such as decision making and 73% provide administrative support to the person they care for.² Therefore, it is vital that carers have access to clear, consistent information about the quality and safety of services so that they can support the person they care for to access appropriate, safe services that enable optimal outcomes for both parties. Carers NSW has concerns that increased administrative work involved in auditing the quality and safety of aged care workers in indirect employment may place greater strain on aged care providers and carers, and is also likely to create greater risks for people

¹ Indirect employment in aged care: Issues Paper (2022) Productivity Commission, available online at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/aged-care-employment/issues>, viewed on 7 April 2022.

² Carers NSW (2020) *2020 National Carer Survey*, unpublished data.

receiving care. However, Carers NSW acknowledges that this also remains an issue for providers onboarding staff in direct employment.

Currently, there is no government mandated national register for aged care workers. As such, providers have limited avenues to ensure that potential future staff, whether directly or indirectly employed, have not previously been involved in aged care incidents or have an adequate level of accredited training. Carers are therefore also faced with uncertainty concerning the quality of care for the person they care for if paid support services and/or respite is needed. For carers, this can lead to reluctance to utilise paid support services or respite, even if such services are available, potentially risking carer burnout.

While some indirect employment platforms such as Mable collect and showcase qualifications and security checks or clearances such as police checks for potential employers, including family and friend carers directly employing staff, there is no independent, consolidated national register for collecting this information. This can make it difficult to monitor previous incidents relating to individuals within the care sector across different service sectors or jurisdictions. The NDIA has recently introduced a national Worker Screening Check and Carers NSW believes that a similar initiative should be implemented in the aged care sector, which is well integrated with the NDIS Worker Screening Check to ensure quality and safety of potential employees across sectors and both direct and indirect models of employment.

Carers NSW believes that all workers must be registered and screened, regardless of their employment mode so that adequate due diligence has been undertaken to ensure their suitability and appropriateness to work with people who are ageing and who may be vulnerable. Carers NSW recommends that the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission be tasked with introducing and managing a similar database to ensure worker monitoring and reduce the possibility of abuse of people accessing aged care services.

Carers NSW, in line with the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, further advocates that the Australian Government explore best practice staffing models and implement a legislative framework from these findings that outline minimal staffing requirements for aged care providers to provide consumers and carers with peace of mind, ensure high quality care, minimise the likelihood of neglect and reduce the pressure on carers to fill staffing gaps.

Employment conditions

While consumer-directed care has allowed for greater choice and competitiveness within the aged care sector, it is evident that employment conditions have been directly affected by marketisation and demand for flexible service delivery models.³ As a result, paid care workers are often left to balance multiple roles in order to earn a liveable wage, and may still experience fluctuation in their income due to roster changes and service cancellations. For workers in regional or remote areas, workforce issues are felt more acutely as demand for services is comparatively lower due to smaller population sizes, across a wider geographical distribution. These conditions often result in a level of instability that is undesirable for balancing family life and other responsibilities.⁴ Of concern is the ways this instability and casualisation has led to many care sector workers needing to work across different care sectors—including the aged and disability sectors—as well as across multiple employers and/or filling employment gaps through indirect or ‘gig’ employment.

³ Hart, A., Bowman, D. and Mallett, S. (2019) *Improving the health of older aged care workers*, Brotherhood of St Laurence: Vic.

⁴ Cortis, N., & van Toorn, G. (2020). *Working in new disability markets: A survey of Australia's disability workforce*. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; HSU and United Voice (2019) “*Excessive workloads, chronic under-staffing, workers planning to quit sector*” [Media Release] 14 October 2019

For carers, instability in the paid care workforce can mean higher turnover resulting in a need to frequently reorient a new paid care provider to the needs and preferences of the friend or family member they care for. This can increase carer stress and anxiety relating to the quality of care received by the care recipient. An unstable care employment landscape also results in additional administrative work, often completed by carers.

Furthermore, throughout current aged care reforms, there has been an ongoing focus on the need to prepare for the increasing demand on the aged care workforce and mitigate workforce issues that have arisen due to sector changes. The Senate Standing Committee inquiry into the future of Australia's aged care workforce resulted in a number of recommendations, the initiation of the Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce and the subsequent development of the Aged Care Workforce Strategy which was released in 2018. However, it was highlighted at a recent hearing of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety that the Government has not yet responded to one of the 14 recommendations outlined in the Strategy.⁵

Carers NSW recommends that workforce conditions be improved in alignment with previous recommendations stemming from the Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce and Royal Commission into Aged Care, including increased remunerations, greater access to training and supervision and increased security in employment agreements. Carers NSW believes that regardless of which model of employment is preferred, failure to improve these workforce conditions will continue to undermine growth of the aged care workforce.

Carers NSW believes, consistent with the findings of the Aged Care Financing Authority (ACFA)⁶ and the ALRC,⁷ that under-resourcing and a lack of clear staffing requirements have impacted on the quality and safety of care provided in residential aged care facilities. Therefore, Carers NSW recommends governments take action to address current systemic issues which underpin workforce challenges and subsequent dangerous and negligible levels of care.

Addressing the broader care workforce issues

The 2021 Australian Jobs Report identified healthcare and social assistance—which includes the aged and disability care sectors—as the largest industry, making up 14% of Australia's workforce, 45% of which are employed on a part-time basis.⁸ Healthcare and social assistance is also the highest projected growth industry, which the National Skills Commission estimates as increasing by 14.2%. Yet, ongoing changes to the workforce and an increase in multi-purpose services have resulted in an increasing number of paid care workers finding employment across multiple care sectors (i.e. aged care, disability and health). Additionally, the issues identified by the Productivity Commission—casualisation, indirect employment models and the rise of a gig economy, as well as high employment turnover—are issues reflected in other care sectors, including disability.

⁵ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2019), Transcript of Proceedings: Melbourne, 14 October 2019, available online at: <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/hearings/Documents/transcripts-2019/transcript-14-october-2019.pdf>, viewed: 03 December 2019.

⁶ Aged Care Funding Authority (ACFA) (2019), *Submission to Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety*, available online at: https://agedcare.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2019/acfa_submission_to_royal_commission_-_april_2019.pdf, viewed 26 November 2019.

⁷ ALRC (2017), *Elder Abuse – A national legal response*. ALRC Report 131, ALRC: Sydney.

⁸ Australian Jobs (2021) National Skills Commission, <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/publications/australian-jobs-2021>, viewed: 26 April 2022.

Carers also often need to negotiate an array of systems and care providers across multiple care sectors. This can be due to the combination of their caring responsibilities and their own disability or ageing, or due to the person they care for ageing with a disability, chronic illness, or experiencing end of life care. As such, carers have extensive, diverse, and often acute awareness and lived experiences of care sector employment issues, many of which have been reported to Carers NSW.

Carers NSW is concerned therefore, that focusing on improving the employment conditions, pay rates, and issues of job security in one care sector only will result in an employee migration between different care sectors. For carers, this could mean greater difficulties finding paid care workers for family members and friends with complex care arrangements and result in carers being required to 'fill the gap' in care for their ageing, frail, disabled, or chronically ill friend or relative.

Carers NSW recommends that the Government consider the increasing overlap of the aged care, disability worker and healthcare workforce in their response to care workforce issues, developing one national body overseeing all care industry workers and streamlining employment conditions and regulation to maximise the safety of care recipients and their carers.

Conclusion

Carers NSW welcomes the Productivity Commission's investigation into the aged care employment sector, and thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to submit a response on this important issue. Carers NSW acknowledges that the issues identified in aged care employment are entrenched, systemic, and associated with broader and ongoing economic shifts and therefore are difficult to correct. Yet, we believe it is crucial to reiterate that the issues inherent in aged care employment are emblematic of those in the care sector more broadly. Carers NSW wishes to emphasise that changes to aged care employment models alone are unlikely to address longstanding workforce issues and addressing care sector workforce issues through only an aged care lens invites further strain on carers.