



# CABRAMATTA COMMUNITY CENTRE

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## **Comment on Productivity Commission Draft Research Report 'Contribution of the Not for Profit Sector'**

**November 2009**

Cabramatta Community Centre wishes to make some comments in relation to advocacy in the not for profit sector.

Cabramatta Community Centre (CCC) is a large non-profit community based organisation employing over 250 staff which has provided a wide range of welfare services to the aged, young people, women, ethnic communities, newly arrived migrants and refugees and children since 1979.

Cabramatta Community Centre includes Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, Cabramatta Youth Team, Multicultural Community Care Services (which provide in home care to frail, elderly and people with disabilities and their carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds), Cabramatta Neighbourhood Centre and The Heights Community Services which runs neighbourhood centres in Mount Pritchard and Canley Heights.

Workers at Cabramatta Community Centre advocate on behalf of disadvantaged local residents to ensure that they enjoy the life opportunities experienced by other Australians. They also assist community members, particularly in new and emerging communities, to develop advocacy skills so that they have more confidence to engage with government departments in relation to their issues and entitlements.

These activities could fall within the community connections category of the proposed measurement framework but we think they would be more accurately captured by the exerting influence category. But the outcomes for the exerting influence category in the proposed measurement framework would need to be broader than those shown in Table 5.1 to capture these activities.

When engaging in advocacy training and capacity building with community groups, particularly at a small and/or local scale, the outcome is unlikely to be a change in government policy but rather a new set of skills and confidence that community members have to advocate on their own behalf or on behalf of their community. This could be measured by clients reporting that they had made representations to government bodies on their own behalf or on behalf of other members of their community or that they felt confident to do so if they needed to.

The draft report acknowledges the removal of the gag clause in contracts that explicitly prevented community organisations from engaging in advocacy. Cabramatta Community Centre shares the concerns expressed by the CEO of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) Robin Banks at the ACOSS Future of the Sector Day on 12 November 2009. She was commenting on the PIAC, Whitlam Institute and Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney

'A question of balance' report. She expressed a concern that some of the remaining restrictions on community organisations in government contracts continued to prevent community organisations from engaging in the full range of advocacy activities.

We believe that the government needs to more than simply remove the gag clause relating to advocacy from government contracts with the community sector. In the work that Cabramatta Community Centre does supporting people in the community sector to be involved in advocacy, we have found that many people, especially young people or people who are new to working in the community sector, are interested in being involved in advocacy but don't know how to go about it. We believe this is a result of the Howard government's gag on advocacy that has seen community organisations and those who educate people to work in the community sector not focussing on the importance of advocacy.

The government needs to recognise and actively promote the benefits to the whole community that come from the community sector engaging in advocacy. We would like the Productivity Commission report to recommend that the government explicitly and publically acknowledges the benefits to the whole community that come from the community sector engaging in advocacy.

However, beyond just a statement by government that community sector advocacy is important there need to be specific mechanisms to implement such a commitment.

It would be great if the government supported and funded independent organisations to provide advocacy training for the community sector. The Public Interest Advocacy Centre (which is a Registered Training Organisation) provides training to community organisations in NSW. The Change Agency provide similar training across Australia and some other organisations train staff in specific sections of the community sector in advocacy.

The government could explicitly fund individuals in a range of community organisations to train and support others in their advocacy. If this was to be done through existing funding packages for positions in the community sector, the guidelines for such funding agreements would need to indicate that advocacy was considered by the government to be a legitimate activity that the government would fund people to do.

Simple information sheets about how governments make decisions and how to influence them would also be useful for people in the community sector to learn about how to engage in advocacy. A community sector that is informed about how government decisions are made will be able to engage with government more effectively and this will be beneficial to government.

The draft report acknowledges that some peak bodies receive government funding to engage in advocacy activities. Cabramatta Community Centre supports provision of funding to peak bodies to carry out this advocacy role. We also recognise that when peak bodies represent a large number of organisations of varying size that sometimes the views of smaller organisations are not always reflected in the views expressed by peak bodies. For this reason, we believe it is important that the government ensures that funding is available for smaller organisations to access advocacy training and support. Government supported advocacy training can also seek to address issues of accountability in advocacy that are raised in the draft report.