

JOINT COMMUNIQUE ON

EQUAL ACCESS TO ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR OLDER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Assistive Technology for Older People (ATOP) Alliance

SEPTEMBER 2018



ATOP is an alliance of the following Victorian and peak disability advocacy organisations and consumer advocates:

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria, Polio Australia, Motor Neurone Disease Association of Victoria (MND), Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Australia, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), People with Disabilities Australia (PWDA), Post Polio Victoria, Bayside Polio Group, Limbs 4 Life, Vision Australia, Australian Rehabilitation & Assistive Technology Association (ARATA).



ATOP background

The Assistive Technology for Older People Alliance (ATOP) formed in mid-2017 amidst mounting concern over the barriers experienced by people aged over 65 years in accessing affordable and timely assistive technology (AT). Increasing service gaps, inadequate AT assessment and compromises on care and safety in order to purchase Assistive Technology brought together peak disability advocacy and ageing organisations alongside consumer advocates.

JOINT COMMUNIQUE ON ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR PEOPLE OVER 65

Assistive Technology and Quality of Life

Assistive technology is a powerful tool that facilitates social inclusion, economic participation and autonomy while creating cost benefits to health and social services. **If a drug was discovered with a similar cost-profile it would be hailed as the wonder-drug of the age.**ⁱ While the National Disability Insurance Scheme provides a funding pathway to meet the assistive technology needs of younger Victorians with disability, the current policy context does not provide equitable access for older people with disability who do not meet the age eligibility requirements for the scheme.

The Disability Act 2006 requires the Victorian government to ensure there are goods and services available to meet the needs of all Victorians with disability, including those who are over 65 years of age. The needs of older people with disability are also a core focus of the Victorian State disability plan 2017 – 2020.

Policy, Reforms & Implementation

How we got to where we are

1. **In 2011, the Productivity Commission released an inquiry report** that provided a number of recommendations to the Australian Government. These recommendations were intended to help shape a scheme of lifetime care and support for people with disability – a National Disability Insurance Scheme. The terms of reference for the inquiry originally indicated that the proposed scheme was intended to cover people with disability “not acquired as part of the natural process of ageing”.
2. **The NDIS was launched in 2013 and commenced full roll out in 2016.** Section 22 of the NDIS Act states that a person does not meet the age requirements for the scheme if they are 65 years of age or older when their access request is made. This excludes many older people (who have not received services from state or commonwealth programs before) who were born with or acquired a disability prior to the age of 65 and now require access to disability-related supports under alternative service systems.
3. **Programs for people who are over 65 are currently spread across multiple departments at both the Commonwealth and State level.** There is limited coverage under some private health insurance and condition-specific not-for-profits. Despite the spread of funding streams, many people are sacrificing their limited income to

self-purchase or are simply falling through the gaps. The level of complexity and need for interjurisdictional dialogue on this issue is demonstrated in COTA Australia's 'Current AT Programs in Australia: Aged Care Map'.ⁱⁱ

4. **Historically, the Victorian state government has supported the provision of Assistive Technology through the Victorian State-wide equipment program (SWEP) and other state and community-based programs that are funded by the government.** It is still unclear whether the Victorian Government intends to fund these programs beyond the full roll out of the NDIS.
5. **People who are ineligible for the NDIS but were already receiving state-funded disability services prior to the roll out of the scheme, were promised they would continue to access services under the Commonwealth Continuity of Support Program.** While specific continuity of support arrangements was to be finalised by the Commonwealth and the state of Victoria by March 2016, there is still widespread confusion about the implementation of the program in Victoria. Furthermore, there is no clarity around what will happen to this program after July 1st, 2019.
6. **From 1 July 2019ⁱⁱⁱ all older Victorians who do not meet the age eligibility requirements for the NDIS and have not previously received state-funded services will be forced to access services from the aged care system,** which may not fully support their disability-related needs. Funding for older people to live independently in their own home has been consolidated into two main programs: The Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) and Home Care Packages (HCP) Program. Under this new funding structure, it is unclear where responsibility lies for addressing the assistive technology needs of older people with disability, people acquiring a disability because of the ageing process and/or people experiencing frailty.
7. **Older people with disability who have already attempted to access disability-related supports under the aged care system have been plagued by a host of issues.** The entry level Commonwealth Home Support Program provides minimal funding for aids and equipment and does not adequately meet the needs of the majority of older people with disability. While there may be more scope for assistive technology to be funded under a Home Care Package, the waiting list for Home Care Packages is extremely long.
8. **As at 30 June 2017, 47,729 home care packages were provided. More than 60,000 people have no package at all, and 40,000 have a package at a lower level than what they needed.** There were a further 88,904 people waiting to be assigned a package. Latest numbers reveal that from April to October 2017, this figure grew by more than 22,000, with 101,508 people now waiting in the queue for a home-care

package. Whilst the Federal Government has announced an additional 34,000 Level 3 and 4 packages over the next four years, people with a disability who are over 65 are further disadvantaged in accessing the Assistive Technology they need due to this blowout in waiting times.

9. **Anecdotally, we know that current RAS (Regional Assessment Service) assessments** and ACAS (Aged Care Assessment Service) assessments fail to adequately capture an individual's disability-related needs for support. This is because these assessment processes focus on a very medicalised model of need which is inconsistent with the principles that underpin the current disability policy landscape. It is for this reason that the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights had expressed concern with people with disability being moved into the aged care system from the outset. In its report on the NDIS Bill 2012, the Committee noted:

This assumes that the aged care system does or will deliver all the forms of assistance and support required and is organised in accordance with the principles and operates in compliance with the obligations set out in the CRPD and the NDIS. While the incidence of disability may increase with age, the assumption that a person who has lived with disability for many years can transition without difficulty to a different system that may be organised around different principles deserves further examination.”^{iv}

10. **The aged care system has not undergone the necessary reforms to enable it to adapt to the unique support needs of those older people with disability** who do not meet the age eligibility requirements for the NDIS.

In December 2017, the Department of Health released the Aged Care Diversity Framework. The framework aims to

“...embed diversity in the design and delivery of aged care; and support action to address perceived or actual barriers to consumers accessing safe, equitable and quality aged care...”^v

The framework commits the Department of Health to develop targeted action plans which outline how aged care services will be flexible in responding to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Gender Diverse and Intersex.

Despite the unique challenges that are experienced by older people with permanent and severe disability, the Department has not yet committed to developing an action plan to address the specific needs of this cohort.

Call for Victorian State Government to implement workable solutions:

The Assistive Technology for Older People (ATOP) alliance is calling on the Victorian Government to:

1. Initiate an inter-jurisdictional dialog on the support needs of older people with disability, by requesting that this matter be tabled as an agenda item to be discussed at the next meeting of COAG's Disability Reform Council.
2. Confirm that it will honour its legislative obligations to provide support and services to all Victorians with disability into the future.
3. Confirm the funding arrangements to take effect after 1 July 2019 and provide clear information to the sector about where older Victorians with disability will go to access assistive technology services.
4. Ensure sufficient funding is available to meet the low cost, and high cost assistive technology requirements of older Victorians with disability into the future.

Future National Program Required

The Assistive Technology for Older People (ATOP) alliance is calling on the Federal Government to develop a National Assistive Technology Program

Benefits of a National Program

- Providing Assistive Technology greatly improves the lives of people with disability, and provides significant economic advantages. As funding is currently spread across multiple departments, the cost benefit is not immediately clear. A National Assistive Technology Program for people over 65 will simplify the current funding arrangements while providing people the technology they need to lead better quality lives and maintain their connection in the community. This also has the potential to reduce demand in other areas such as acute health and community care.
- The cost of an Assistive Technology program for over 65's will decline as the NDIS roll out continues and more people with disabilities are assessed as eligible for this scheme. These people will continue to receive lifetime support from the NDIS. Program costs are likely to be for maintenance and/or replacement of existing Assistive Technology.
- Current estimates indicate that an Aged Care Package / Centrelink Support, similar to the Commonwealth Home Support Package puts the total cost of the program well below \$100m to provide support for people over 65. It is estimated that within 10 years this amount will halve as people move to other programs.

The Disability Reform Council is well positioned to explore the benefits of establishing a national aids and equipment program for people with a disability over 65.

The ATOP Alliance is calling for all parties involved in funding Assistive Technology at a State and Commonwealth level to come together to resolve this matter.

For more information please contact:

Donna Swan – Senior Policy Officer, COTA Victoria on behalf of the Alliance on 03 96552139 or Lauren Henley, Consultant and Advocate on Disability on 0422098369

ⁱ Audit Commission 2000, "Fully equipped: the provision of equipment to older or disabled people by the NHS and social services in England and Wales, London", Audit Commission, p. 64.

ⁱⁱ Refer Appendix 1

ⁱⁱⁱ This is when the last Victorian region commences the NDIS (according to current timelines)

^{iv}https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights/Scrutiny_reports/2013/2013/12013/c08

^v Aged Care Sector Committee Diversity Sub-group (2017) "Aged Care Diversity Framework (Publications Number: 12028)" accessed 15 August 2018 <https://agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/aged-care-diversity-framework>

