

SUBMISSION
DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT ENQUIRY
6 APRIL 2003

The contents of this submission is based upon experiences encountered as an elected Inverell Shire Councillor since 1987, as its delegate to its, in-house community committees; its external delegate to inter councils 'auspiced' joint community committees: 27 years as a diagnostic radiographer in city and country private radiology rooms and public hospitals; and my own disabilities as a result of toxic and hazardous chemical trauma plus its legacy of multiple chemical sensitivities.

The advent of the DDA Act 1992 and the instigation of the government's signatory to the UN Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Treaty gave hope to many people who were locked into the unrepresented faceless world of disabilities, regardless of type.

Unfortunately, hope rapidly faded for all concerned. The. HREO processes became a 'toothless tiger'. It was, and still is by some, regarded as a 'federal' body without relevance to any state or local government matter, and was, effectively pigeonholed or sidestepped by these bodies - even derided, as were those people who raised its existence in any circle.

Local government, in rural NSW, is dominated by elected males and senior staff.

The rural industry nature of the majority of elected councillors and technical staff limits their knowledge and understanding of the day-to-day handling of disabled people of all ages and types; especially the need for public transport services; and the hardships which carers and often ageing spouse have to cope with perpetually, 24 hours daily every day.

The attitude of sickness/disability being regarded as 'women's business' still prevails.

The often stated attitudes of 'disabled people are a minority group in this community -we have to look to the needs of the majority' defiles the purpose of elected representatives, who, under the NSW Local Government Act., Section 232(2), have three obligations, being

- a) to represent the interest of the ratepayers,
- h) to provide leadership and guidance to the community,
- c) to facilitate communication between community and council,

and ridicules its own Inverell Shire Council Management Plan Mission Statement, 'to work with community in providing and facilitating the provision of services that enhance the quality of life of all Shire residents. See later specifics.

The NSW Electoral Commission is another classical example of bureaucratic ignorance, obstinacy, and lack of ability to respond to changing needs of an ageing population and the related legislation which it is supposed to incorporate into its election responsibilities.

Hats off to its counterpart, the Federal Electoral Commission. whose new regional officer saw fit to physically inspect the traditional voting venues in this area, and made the decisions to change to disabled accessible voting venues., when the access problems were brought to his attention. Alas, his predecessor refused to act.

At the very recent state election. once again we were faced with inappropriate disabled venue problems which had been documented at the Armidale regional office and Sydney headquarters for the previous two state elections! The Sydney officer still had on his file all the previous correspondence but had, again, failed to act.

Also, the new Armidale regional officer was totally ignorant of the needs of disabled access as this woman again rented the first floor conference room in the Inverell Government Office Block for the Pre-Poll Voting venue. This building does not have a passenger lift nor any method of communication between the ground and first floor. It also has fourteen steps up to the front door - an absolute nightmare for any emergency evacuation. It took a concerted effort of political lobbying to the Labor party MLC, Amanda Fazio, and the letting agent for the building withdrawing the tenancy on the grounds of safety etc., to negate this venue before the advertising processes occurred.

In conjunction the Sydney OIC was adamant. He would not change the Inverell CBD Saturday Polling Venue - he stated it was classified 'assisted disabled access'. This, despite his file documentation and new information of two other available fully disabled access buildings in the CBD. He did not provide the electoral staff to do the 'assisting'

How do you negotiate steps in a self-propelled wheelchair, a carer propelled wheelchair, an electric wheelchair and scooters up steps and stairs?

This ageing community, some 4% higher than the state average, has a known 400 such vehicles in this region. Inverell is a service town for the population in the surrounding 80kms radius.

Such obstinacy, and lack of willingness and ability, to act by the staff of the Electoral Commission is totally unacceptable.

History and related documentation evidences the facts that these officers, will not take on board 'local knowledge' of its local Inverell electoral officer, other community representatives, another local MLC, myself, the local Disability Association, as to the suitability of access at local voting venues. Nor was the Sydney OIC prepared to send an officer to inspect the sites he had decreed.

More so when this commission does not have to outlay any funds for the modification of any building it rents for the purpose of state and local government elections.

To complement the entire contents of this submission, I refer to the research and contents contained in the document 'Women in Australia, 2001' compiled by, the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, 2002, ISBN 1443-3710, and ISBN 1-877042-35-8.

This document establishes many facts concerning the disabilities of remote rural life, lack of school transport, disabilities discrimination, lack of public transport and much more.

Most state, federal and local government legislation and regulations are now accompanied by GUIDELINES, supposedly to assist in the interpretation of the acts and regulations in a practical application. Not so. Historically, these guidelines are useless! They; have no legal clout, cause confusion and, in reality, become instruments of circumvention of any real decision making process, especially by supervisory departmental and case manager bureaucrats. Guidelines are a vortex into which individuals, particularly the disabled, become ensnared and spin around and around down into the depths of despair and hopelessness and are 'lost' in the bowels of the related bureaucracies and so called assistance services.

Most local government and allied instrumentalities use this very fact of 'nil legal clout' to circumvent most Guidelines, therefore nil obligation to act in the spirit of such documents. This applies to elected representatives, councils and management directors/ work practises. And, ironically. disabled elected councillors, become victims also as they are silenced by not having a majority vote - common sense and facts ignored.

As this enquiry is being conducted under the auspices of the Productivity Commission, I pose the question, "Do the outcomes of this enquiry have a direct bearing on the government's future agenda for disability services in relation to the implementation of the contents of The GATT'S TREATY ? If so, I fear the ultimate long-term financial and assistance services outcomes for any disabled purpose 'In the bush' - remote rural and smaller towns and village populations.

Already, the Inverell shire and the surrounding rural towns and villages which it services have lost so many services, formally provided by both New England Area Health Service and private medical practitioners - specialists and general practitioners - lost air services - it is now suffering from a quickening of population loss. The losses are making it extremely difficult to attract any qualified people in any field of endeavour to settle in our lovely town, and very viable local government operation. Qualified people are now reluctant to move to anywhere west of the Great Dividing Range.

Monopolised paramedical city based companies will not employ relevant professionals to continue the operations they have swallowed up in our town, e.g. radiologists. Women are forced to travel 132kms to Armidale or 243kms to Tamworth for mammography and follow up chemo /radiation treatment processes. There is no public transport Countrylink coach service to Armidale, NSW. There is no public transport from Ashford, Gilgai, Tingha, Bundarra to Armidale, NSW This badly needed - see later specifics.

Community, based supplementary transport, i.e. HAAC, and IPTAAS are inadequate and too costly when required for multiple trips to Armidale and Tamworth for health related needs HAAC charges \$40.00 per person per trip. IPTAAS refunds doled out very slowly by NEAHS requires pre-paid first \$40.00 and refunds a mere \$1 per trip from Ashord to Armidale; nil refund from Inverell, and 'assess' the distance to Tarnworth as 222kms instead of the real distance of 243kms. Tingha/Tamworth is 222kms, so Inverell environs residents are being financially disadvantaged on every Journey.

These costs for these 'government subsidised services' which are manned by volunteer, unpaid drivers, are now overflowing onto other supportive systems such as St. Vincents de Paul Society and the Salvation Army for either \$40.00 HAAC charges or self driven petrol costs. This is now reducing the ability to handle usual demands on these bodies.

It should be noted that the NEAHS Dialysis Mini-bus thrice weekly Tamworth trip is driven by volunteer drivers. One man did this for over 15 years until he required cardiac surgery.

A new Countrylink rail coach service to Armidale, three days per week, would be far less costly to government funds - state or federal - and be able to be utilised by far more needy people - aged, frail aged, disabled, students, for more than just illness. It would enable a balance to be brought into people's lives of social interaction and a greater range of activities enjoyed by the population mass in metropolitan areas.

It is not unusual for more than twenty people per day travel to Armidale for health matters and/or to attend the Armidale Court as some of these services have also been removed from Inverell. Whilst others have to get to Armidale to catch a Sydney flight.

And there is no guarantee that the Countrylink coach rail service from Inverell via Warialda, Tamworth to Sydney will exist for much longer, due to the danger rail conditions of the two railway bridges at Tamworth. These should have been replaced by 4 years ago according to a report of 1976 by a then railway chief (Sun-Herald 13/4/03 p10).

The defunct Airlink return fare Inverell / Sydney was \$660 which the majority of the population just could not afford.

Until my 26 page report came into being on 7 / 2 / 2002, this New England Region, particularly Inverell shire, had never had a public transport need study, conducted by any private or public instrumentality.

The people of the Inverell shire and surrounding environs which it services are land locked by an invisible barrier for an increasing number of people, particularly the ageing population who can no longer afford nor are fit enough to drive their own vehicles such long distances to access basic human needs.

There are no disabled access government public transport service vehicles/buses in this entire region. The town of Inverell township has just one 'disabled taxi' for wheelchairs but this private operator's regular town commitments means that this taxi cannot be utilised for long journeys to Armidale, Tamworth, or elsewhere.

The surrounding towns and villages and rural populations of Bundarra, Delungra, Gilgai, Tingha and Ashford have no external transport to anywhere. Along with Bingara, these populations can access mini-bus (actually school buses) services to Inverell just once a week or once a fortnight. These return trips have to be conducted in between these remote school bus trips morning and afternoon. This leaves barely, 2 hours in Inverell, which always extends across the lunch hours 12 noon to 2.00 p.m, which makes it a very rushed, unsatisfactory trip when doctors, chemist, health services and inevitable waiting delays occurs., which does not allow sufficient time to complete basic food shopping let alone anything else, such as a visit to the shire public library or a friend or the picture theatre.

Because of this lack of public transport, very few Ashford High School pupils complete their Higher School Certificates due to the constant long distance travel to access the three High Schools at Inverell. Many of these students live further out of Ashford township. Ashford is 57kms north of Inverell. Similar situation for Gilgai, Delungra, Tingha, Bundarra, Bingara and Warialda.

Some years ago the NEAHS rationalised Community Health Services at Inverell from a CBD located building which was easily accessed by all forms of disabilities. It sold this building, relocated the 'services' and has continually cut them out ever since. The statistics tell the story, NEAHS hospital and services are located on an extreme edge of the town limits on the side of the town with the least quantity of residents. It is on a hill. The privately operated town bus routes do not service this facility as the company maintains that it does not pay.

This is partly due to 'local traditions' where the men traditionally always have access to a vehicle, particularly older generations. Plus the local ethos of 'cadging lifts' from anyone who does own a vehicle. Generational rural men do not even consider suburban transport even when they 'retire' into own from out-of-town farms. This attitude remains even when their wives are forced to carry the load of ageing and caring and being forced to drive their invalid husbands everywhere, including long distances. Often these women have no experience of long distance driving even when young.

MOBILE PHONES are useless in this terrain, especially, to Armidale. These roads can be very lonely. Assistance cannot be readily sought or obtained. Risks are high.

ACCOMMODATION. Of 200 available motel hotel beds in this town, there is only one motel room which could be rated as a wheelchair / disabled unit.

STATE GOVERNMENT OFFICE BLOCK. Nil passenger lift to access first floor.

DENTAL SERVICES do not exist for anyone who cannot pay full fees. Desperation extractions have become the norm for all age groups

RENAL DIALYSIS PATIENTS who reach an acute care level, which can no longer be handled with 'at home' or non-medical supervised dialysis at the local hospital facility, are obliged to travel three times weekly in a mini-bus to Tamworth Base Hospital - a round trip of 486kms each day. Many of these patients find the continual strain of these trips just too much, drop out of the programme and are dead between 5 days and a month. Patients living in the surrounding area have the extra travel burden of connecting into this mini-bus service. Nil quality of life. Kidney transplants rarity.

As part of the BROC - Border Region Of Councils - A combined across the Qld / NSW border study into all forms of transport needs / planning for the next 20 years involving local government, Dept. Transport/ Roads and rail and air services all of which concentrated on freight in the main. I researched and submitted a 26 page report on the lack of public passenger transport systems to and from Inverell and the surrounding rural areas and the towns and villages it services, including those in neighbouring shires. Airlink services ceased some months ago, This report was submitted to the Minister for Local government, the Minister for Transport, the Local Gvt Advisor to the state government, Shires Association, state Member for Northern tablelands, federal Member for New England. As a result, our state member, Mr Torbay succeeded in achieving \$2.20 single fares concession rates for eligible people to travel to Tamworth on the Countrylink coach rail service.

This \$2.20 single fare also applies to Armidale, BUT no Countrylink service exists to Armidale. It is badly needed, as most of the health related support services and specialists are located at Armidale due to contraction of NEAHS cutbacks.

Incidentally, the \$2.20 single fare has now been extended statewide on the grounds of 'Community Obligations' by state rail. BUT, state rail refuses to introduce a new Countrylink service to Armidale - so desperately needed.

It is indeed unfortunate that the Inverell shire Council refused to address the contents of this 26 page report. Even to 'support in principle' to assist lobbying for this new service.

Such a service would open up access the UNE Armidale. It is an expensive exercise for parents trying to transport students to and from this education facility. It often means taking days off work to achieve this constant requirement.

Such a Countrylink service would open up access to this city' s cultural activities, greater public libraries, art gallery,, regional archival depository, and connect with other coastal transport systems, and a more direct rail coach service to Sydney.

However, the indwelling philosophy of trade and travel restrictions are firmly entrenched within the population of Inverell. Statements of "You can't give them a bus to Armidale - they'll shop there" are common amongst the business and related entities. The community-at-large is being held to ransom because of this entrenched attitude. No individual, body, or government instrumentality has the right to prevent the freedom of movement by law abiding people in times of peace in this nation, especially for medical and health requirements.

EMPLOYMENT Unemployment is high at Inverell. The largest employer, Bindaree Beef., is a high risk OH&S work-place. This negates openings for many people. The majority of women exist on casual or part-time employment which disadvantages them for long term superannuation benefits. Employment for the disabled just doesn't exist in these areas. This is not likely to improve, especially in view of the downturn in the region's economy due to the worst drought in history. It will take at least 2 years or more for an upturn, if the drought doesn't continue.

The HILMER REPORT saw the rationalisation of many former public utilities. This Inverell area lost some 300 fulltime jobs with the downturn of Telecom and the local government ratepayers owned North West County Council which was stripped of \$30m cash reserves and all of its capital assets /facilities/efficient services

This, despite Mr. Hilmer publicly stating at his address to the National Press Club when he launched his book, that he did not take into consideration the effect of his (unproved) rationalist visions would have on the population and entities at local government level. Federal and state governments have ignored the resultant impacts.

This, has stripped our community of its working age and employed population with the resultant domino effect - Wives of these men made up our areas nurses, office staff, shop assistants. Their children meant full school enrolments. These families were able to provide support to their ageing parents. These families contributed to community welfare by volunteer activities ranging from service clubs, school aids, volunteer staff/ Support a multitude of organisations which were the strength and backbone of community and welfare activities and associations. These families were forced to move elsewhere. School enrolment were lost along with classes and higher level specialist subjects and these teachers. A multitude of skills, expertise and valuable practical experience has been lost forever.

Now, since the HIH crash and other world events which have caused massive increases in small organisations, domestic and business insurance premiums, IF cover can be obtained. many of our community based organisations infrastructure are collapsing.

This because of reduced participants because of above loss of the local population, lack of earning capacity, especially women. The social fabric of our society is dying.

Both of our state and federal parliamentarians took up the challenge to have an insurance scheme established for non-profit community activity bodies. The CUA - Community Care Underwriters Agency was established. Alas, an enquiry last week to this organisation for cover of a very low risk health and wellbeing activity for 10 - 15 women was to cost \$500-600 + GST + Stamp Duty = \$700. Incorporation costs are additional to this premium. This group is looking at around \$1,000 to establish and there is no guarantee that insurances won't increase for the second year of operation. This amount is beyond the income scope affordability for these women. Not all are employed, some are pensioners, some are single parents. This is not an isolated case. All such organisations are now in crisis. The fabric of our society and its viability has been destroyed by the above impacts.