



3 March 2016

Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

## **Senate Inquiry on the Future of Australia's Aged Care Sector Workforce**

*This submission will address Terms of Reference a, b, d and i*

The Aged Care Illawarra Workforce Action Group (ACIWAG) was formed in July 2014 to promote the aged care sector as an attractive option for workforce participation in the Illawarra region (Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama Local Government Areas). It includes representatives from Aged and Community Services NSW and ACT, TAFE Illawarra, Training Services NSW, NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, Regional Development Australia Illawarra and Illawarra Forum. Conveying a positive image of the sector has emerged as a key objective.

Some of these partners will contribute separate submissions to this inquiry, in addition to industry stakeholders, so it is not intended to duplicate their respective arguments here but to highlight the key concerns of ACIWAG by reference to selected Terms of Reference listed:

### **The current composition of the aged care workforce (ToR a)**

The profile of staff engaged in both residential and community care contexts has been well documented. Reliable sources point to very high participation rates for women and high rates of mature aged and those born outside Australia. If recruitment of suitable staff for the sector is to meet demand we must experiment with innovative ways to attract more males and younger persons into it, both for entry level positions and those roles that may attract experienced workers coming from other sectors.

Implicit in this is the recognition that the current workforce composition is too narrow and needs to change if the sector is to offer a career of choice for a wide range of career aspirations and to meet escalating demand. Resources developed by ACIWAG attempt to demonstrate the many paths by which staff may enter the industry and how they have prospered since.

### **Future aged care workforce requirements, including the impacts of sector growth, changes in how care is delivered, and increasing competition for workers (ToR b)**

A Federal Government report in 2012 estimated a requirement for 827,100 aged care workers by 2050, assuming current models of care are maintained (Commonwealth of Australia Living Longer. Living Better. April 2012, p15). Current trends and anticipated innovation in the sector would suggest that this demand will grow out as well as up, providing a range of ancillary services to clients exercising choice under a consumer directed care regime. There is a pressing need to fund demonstration projects that trial alternative models of care and challenge current terminology and attitudes towards the needs of aged persons.

ACIWAG has responded to the competition for workers through the kinds of marketing collateral developed, a vibrant social media presence and the conduct of an annual Careers Expo for the sector. This work at a regional level could be greatly enhanced if supported by government initiatives that reinforced its key messages. In particular, as regions like the Illawarra experience a contraction in traditional manufacturing vocational opportunities, the aged care sector provides options for those mid and later career workers who have experienced redundancy or simply want a career change for the greater satisfaction it offers. Some pressure to secure adequate wages and flexible working arrangements can also be anticipated.

### **Challenges in attracting and retaining aged care workers (ToR d)**

The aged care sector has been at some disadvantage in the employment marketplace due to inaccurate and narrowly conceived perceptions of its vocational possibilities. Attempts are being made by the industry itself and regional bodies like one of our members, Illawarra Forum, to modernise this image and introduce job seekers to a range of rewarding career options.

The Illawarra Regional Workforce Planning Strategy for the Aged Care Sector recommended a strategy to “enhance community awareness about the Aged Care sector and improve its visibility in the community”. It does this by producing promotional material, conducting Career Expos, promoting government programs such as Young at Heart with TAFE and using social media platforms to advance aged care and the broader community and disability services sectors.

ACIWAG believes that it is important to use positive language when describing the sector. The inquiry will doubtless find that attracting and retaining staff is a significant challenge. Efforts in this regard would be assisted by promotion of an adequate language by which to refer to the industry and its clients.

The sector needs to be promoted as highly skilled, rewarding in its meaningful human services contact, with opportunities for advancement across a wide vocational spectrum. It needs to be better represented by career counsellors and Job Active Agencies and should be included among Structured Workplace Learning and intern placements in both community and residential contexts.

### **The role of government in providing a coordinated strategic approach for the sector (ToR i)**

Addressing the need for an adequate aged care workforce is a key public policy issue and one which is potentially intractable. However, the public debate needs to move beyond demographics and an

ominously diminishing tax base to a re-assertion of the value that older people represent for our economy and society. Indeed, many have failed to note that, with the future retirement age adjusted to 70, our nation will gain possibly five to ten years additional productivity from the skills and knowledge gained through tertiary and vocational education expenditure.

This is a sector that provides an opportunity for economic and social development. Governments can certainly take a lead in how the sector is referred to and what the opportunities are for job seekers and job changers. We look forward to pursuing government priorities for the sector under the Aged Care Workforce Development Fund.

ACIWAG liaises closely with our regional Federal MPs and, at the State level, with the Parliamentary Secretary for the Illawarra. Local Councils have developed policy positions which support the sector. A coordinated strategic approach needs to be agreed by public sector agencies to assist the sector to meet the demands placed upon it.

Thank you for the opportunity to put forward some of the aged care sector workforce issues that ACIWAG is concerned about in our region.

Yours sincerely

David Muscio

On behalf of the Aged Care Illawarra Workforce Action Group