

RASAIID



ADHC GOOD NEWS STORY

The good news stories keep coming and it is enlightening to read how the disability dollars are spent. One story that caught my eye this month was the story of Stuart, whose family has achieved the much-sought-after prize of supported accommodation after only twenty-two years of caring. We rejoice for the Chandler family, we wish Stuart well in his out-of-home placement and we hope his parents will enjoy their post-caring years. But the question must be asked: how did they do it?

How did the Chandler family achieve a supported accommodation placement when their son is only twenty-two? Please don't misunderstand me. I think that this is about the correct age for leaving home. It is just that in an environment in which there are so many middle-aged men and women still waiting for the privilege, how did a twenty-two year old become the highest priority? I suppose what I am asking is how does one become a priority on a list that isn't a list?

Perhaps Stuart has very high support needs. Nevertheless, I have fellow carers with profoundly disabled offspring who are twice Stuart's age. These carers have compromised their own health with all the lifting and turning, yet still await supported accommodation. Perhaps Stuart has what used to be known as challenging behaviours, now behaviours of concern. Again, I know parent carers who are daily placed in dangerous situations and even injured by the concerning behaviour of their family member, but still await supported accommodation after many decades.

Perhaps the family abandoned Stuart at the door of the department (which seems to no longer be a department now that the D is missing from the ADHC)? If so, the good news story is being less than candid in its representation. Perhaps the family had a Rottweiler for a case manager, someone who presented their case with such conviction that it melted hearts? Perhaps the family enlisted the help of the local member of parliament who leaned heavily on the Minister? I have no idea - I am just thinking up possibilities. I don't know how any of us achieves supported accommodation. If anyone reading this can enlighten me, please do so. Perhaps we have to sleep with the Director General or bribe the Minister? Is that how it's done?

The only clue that the story gives us is that Stuart's parents are caring for their own ageing parents. But we have all done that at an earlier stage in our lives, sandwiched between the needs of ailing parents and disabled children. My group of carers are at the stage in life at which their own parents have long since left this earth. Some of them are thinking about their own demise. Two local carers I know are aged respectively ninety-one and eighty-seven, both caring for middle-aged sons and both afraid to die and leave them. They are desperate to see their adult child settled before they go and they would wonder about a twenty-two year being considered a higher priority than their sons.

In a climate with no entitlement to services but just a "priority needs based" system, we become competitive. We look over our shoulder and ask "Why them and not us?" We do not wish our fellow caring families anything but good, but we become accustomed to comparing our needs and those of our family member to others. In a country that fails so spectacularly to provide for other than a tiny minority of its disabled citizens, we, the caring families, become jaded and dispirited after many decades. We are told that in the past year, ADHC has had more than 1700 applications for immediate accommodation and has met just 112 of those. Stuart is one of the lucky seven per cent, but what happens to the rest of us?

We hear about all the new places under Stronger Together and about building capacity. In the responses to questions posed in last year's Budget Estimates, it was revealed that only TEN new places had been made available for people coming directly from the family home in the entire greater metropolitan area for the first two-and-a-half years of Stronger Together. Almost all the places went to young people leaving the care of DOCS and the prisoners leaving Corrective Services. This year, when the same question was posed, the answer was that ADHC no longer keeps that data.

Another answer in the Budget Estimates gives a further clue to ADHC's current thinking around supported accommodation. I refer you to answer 2b of the hearing, which says:

Given that supported accommodation is a highly interventionist service, with a significant potential to distance a person with a disability from their family and community ties, the Agency does not have a priority waiting list for supported accommodation. The Agency's approach is to make every effort to maintain a person's family and community ties. Waiting lists are counterproductive in this regard.

Of course, we all know what it is that distances a person from their family and community ties and it is not waiting lists. It is ADHC's vacancy management policy, which single-handedly breaks up communities, ensures that people with a disability are placed well away from their families and known locality, kills any incentive to support local service providers, nullifies all past support for those same service providers and dictates a gross waste of time and energy as clients criss-cross the city every morning and afternoon from distant residences to day and work programs.

The philosophy of propping up families rather than assuming responsibility for their disabled members corresponds with a policy found in a document called " Guidelines for the Support Co-ordination Program for Older Parent Carers" which can be found on the ADHC website. It states under 2.2:

The objectives of the Support Co-ordination Program are to identify, engage and support older parent carers of a son or daughter with a disability to maintain their caring role FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

There you have it! We are to care, not until age-appropriate supported accommodation has been found, not until we reach retirement age, not until our son or daughter reaches a certain age but indefinitely, interminably, FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. We are to care until we die and then coerce our other children into caring for their sibling. This is known as "maintaining family and community ties."

So we must offer congratulations to the Chandler family that they were able to escape this life sentence, that they were able to find themselves included in the elite seven per cent and that they were able to find a way to achieve supported accommodation for their loved one. We are delighted they can avail themselves of this highly interventionist service and trust that their son will not be distanced from his family and community ties. If they could just let us know how they did it, we would be ever so grateful.

Estelle Shields