

Media release

For Release By: Public Advocate

Release Date: Tuesday 23 March 2021

Target Media: State-wide / electronic and print

Subject: Public Advocate calls on the State Government to continue funding disability advocacy

PUBLIC ADVOCATE CALLS FOR THE STATE GOVERNMENT TO CONTINUE FUNDING DISABILITY ADVOCACY

The Public Advocate is deeply concerned about the Palaszczuk Government decision to cease funding disability advocacy services in Queensland beyond 30 June 2021.

The government proposes to stop funding Queensland disability advocacy services, including Queenslanders with Disability Network, the peak body for disability advocacy organisations, and independent and citizen advocacy organisations across Queensland – from Cairns to the Gold Coast.

“I receive frequent calls to my office from people with disability and members of their families and support networks seeking assistance and advocacy to engage with government agencies. I routinely refer these callers to disability advocacy services to provide them with the support and assistance they need to navigate government services that are often unresponsive to the needs of people with disability and cognitive issues.

“In light of the benefits that advocacy services deliver to government and the community, the Palaszczuk Government should be looking at how it can increase funding to these very effective, yet under-resourced services, rather than de-funding them entirely,” Ms Burgess said.

The 2017 report *A Cost Benefit Analysis of Australian independent disability advocacy agencies* found that by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of mainstream services, independent disability advocacy ‘delivers a substantial positive net economic benefit to Australia’ of \$3.50 return for each \$1 of funding.

“Advocacy is not just about achieving a particular outcome for a person – it is much more than that. Advocacy is one way that we, as a community, can help people with

disability to be more included in society and in the processes and decisions that affect their lives,” Ms Burgess said.

Disability advocacy helps people to understand that they have rights and to exercise them. It also helps to build the confidence and capacity of some people with disability, so that over time they are better able to access information, express their needs and advocate for themselves.

The Queensland government proposes defunding these critical services on the basis that Queenslanders with disability can now receive advocacy support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Ms Burgess said that this is not correct.

“The NDIS provides advocacy support to people with disability only to assist them to participate in the NDIS. The NDIS does not fund, and has never committed to fund, disability advocacy generally for Queenslanders with disability to engage with other services, particularly State government services. In any event, only 10 percent of the 900,000 Queenslanders with disability are expected to be eligible to participate in the NDIS.

“If Queensland Government agencies and services were fully accessible and responsive to people with disability, there would be no need to fund my position or disability advocacy services. While Queensland Government agencies do their best to be accessible and responsive to people with disability, there are complex issues and barriers to people with disability successfully and confidently accessing these systems without support.

“The over-whelming majority of calls to my office are from people with disability, or their family members or supporters, seeking help and support to engage with State Government agencies and services, such as guardianship and administration agencies, health, housing, transport, courts and tribunals,” Ms Burgess said.

At only \$4.9M, the amount of funding that the Queensland Government provides for disability advocacy is extremely small in the context of the overall Queensland Budget.

“Without disability advocacy services, the quality of life of many Queenslanders with disability will be substantially negatively impacted.

“I am concerned that people who are unable to access disability advocacy services because they have been de-funded, and as a consequence are unable to access critical government services because they did not have the necessary supports, may be placed at serious risk,” Ms Burgess said.

Disability advocacy services were instrumental in the successful transition of hundreds of long-stay patients from Queensland hospitals to community accommodation, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to free up hospital beds in case they were needed.

Representatives of disability advocacy services were also key members of the Queensland Health COVID-19 Working Groups for disability and aged care. Without the knowledge and insights these agencies brought to the discussions, the Queensland Government response to COVID would have been less timely and effective, especially for these vulnerable groups.

Disability advocacy services are also currently working in Queensland aged care facilities to provide advice and support to aged care residents to encourage them to have the COVID-19 vaccination.

“The de-funding of disability advocacy services by the Palaszczuk Government is also likely to result in dozens of committed and hard-working employees of these services losing their jobs. This will be devastating for them, especially during these difficult economic times,” Ms Burgess said.

The Public Advocate acknowledges the Government’s long history of support and funding for disability advocacy services in Queensland. However, that only makes the decision to de-fund these services more difficult to understand.

The Public Advocate urges the Palaszczuk Government to urgently reconsider its position on the funding of Queensland disability advocacy services, reinstate and increase funding to these critical services and commit to maintaining their funding for this term of government.

The Public Advocate encourages the Queensland community to support the ‘Stand with us!’ campaign, run by an alliance of 15 Queensland disability services.

In a show of support for disability advocacy, there will be a ‘Stand with us!’ public rally outside Queensland’s Parliament House at 1pm on Wednesday 24 March. A public rally will also be held at 10am on Wednesday 24 March outside of the office of the Honourable Barry O’Rourke MP, 192 Quay Street, Rockhampton.

The Public Advocate will attend the rally in Brisbane.

ENDS

Note 1: The Public Advocate undertakes systemic advocacy to advance and protect the rights and interests of Queenslanders with impaired decision-making capacity. People can experience impaired capacity from a range of conditions, including mental illness, intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, neurological conditions, and aged-related conditions such as dementia.

Note 2: Information about the ‘Stand with us’ campaign can be accessed at <https://www.standwithus.com.au/>.