

Australian state government closes disability support facilities

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In 2012, the deeply unpopular federal Labor government, facing a landslide defeat in elections due the following year, launched the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and made it a central plank in its platform, hoping to garner electoral support.

Amid considerable media fanfare, and with the support of the Liberal-National opposition, as well as the trade unions and the Greens, Julia Gillard, then the prime minister, proclaimed the scheme to be a progressive policy that would ensure the disabled and their carers received high-quality, life-long treatment and support.

Last October, the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government announced the closure by 2018 of the disability residential support Stockton Centre in Newcastle, along with other similar centres across the state. The decision underscores the real character of the NDIS as a regressive, pro-market program to facilitate the further privatisation of disability services.

The Stockton Centre is part of the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care Hunter Residences, which employs approximately 1,200 staff over several sites in the Hunter Valley region, including Stockton, Karangra and Tomaree. Stockton provides for about 450 people with multiple disabilities and complex support needs, including behaviour intervention.

The fears of the staff and the families of disabled residents were confirmed last October when the director-general of the NSW government's Family and Community Services agency, Michael Coutts-Trotter, emailed the staff about the NDIS. "By 2018 our department will no longer provide disability services," he wrote.

Wendy Cuneo, whose disabled son David has been a

resident at Stockton for 16 years and who has other children with disabilities, told the media that many of the Stockton Centre parents were "alarmed" at the prospect of the institution closing.

Marilyn Gemmell, whose son John lives at the Stockton Centre, spoke to journalists about previous moves to close the facility, saying the current announcement gave her a "sense of déjà vu." Commenting on the false claims made about the NDIS, she said: "Unrealistic statements such as 'making their own choices' and 'being part of the community' flowed freely, and protests as to the fact that they would not be able to do so were waved aside."

Privately-run facilities, which typically house six residents, are ill-equipped to support the complex needs of most of the Stockton clients. In the likely event that these operators prove unable to cope, many of the clients will end up in psychiatric hospitals, thereby isolating them from the community and making family support extremely difficult. Older residents, some of whom require 24-hour care, will end up in under-resourced and understaffed private aged-care facilities.

The Stockton Centre's team of employees, who over long years have forged strong relationships with the clients and developed strategies for providing for their needs, will be broken up. These dedicated and skilled workers will be thrown into the private sector, with inferior wages and working conditions.

All this flows directly from the NDIS Heads of Agreement signed by Gillard and NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell in December 2012, which stipulated: "Following commencement of the full NDIS, the New South Wales Government will not provide any residual specialist disability services or basic community care services."

The resulting National Disability Insurance Scheme

(NSW Enabling) Act 2013 gives the state government the power to shut down all state-run disability services, which employ 12,000 workers in 580 group homes and six large residential facilities across NSW, including Stockton.

The Act gives no assurances that the workers' wages and conditions will be maintained. Its transfer provisions, touted as a protection net for employees, allow "transfer agreements" to be imposed without the consent of the person being transferred.

The legislation is completely in line with the underlying premise of the NDIS, which is to hand over all public services to private operators, which will compete for business by further slashing labour costs and thus the quality of services.

The NDIS is a virtual voucher system, allocating nominal amounts to disabled people to purchase their own care packages on the private market. This is a central agenda item in the wider austerity offensive being conducted by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Similar closures of disability support centres are underway in other states. In Victoria, the state government is closing the large Sandhurst institution in Bendigo and possibly Colanda House, a disability centre in Colac.

Labor's NDIS was wholeheartedly embraced by the Liberal-National Coalition and the entire political establishment. The Greens, who propped up the minority Gillard government, rushed to put a progressive face on the NDIS. Greens' spokeswoman for disability services Jan Barham claimed it was "a ground breaking process for people with disabilities that will provide self-determination and dignity for those people and their families."

Last October, speaking in state parliament on the NDIS enabling legislation, Greens MP John Kaye continued to hail the NDIS, while falsely claiming that it was not intended to privatise the entire disability sector. The NDIS, he maintained, was "about empowering people with disabilities" and ensuring that the services for people with disabilities "are appropriate to their needs and aspirations."

Similarly, the trade unions covering disability services joined the official chorus endorsing the NDIS. The Australian Services Union (ASU) played a pivotal role in the Gillard government's "Every Australian

Counts" public relations campaign to promote the NDIS as a historic "reform."

The NSW Public Service Association (PSA) continually proclaimed its support for the "goals and ideals" of the NDIS. Like the Greens, it then insisted that the closure of facilities did not reflect the real intent of the scheme. Instead, the O'Farrell government was utilising the NDIS as a "Trojan Horse" to privatise services.

In reality, as Kerry Stubbs the chief executive officer of Northcott, a non-government disability organisation, confirmed: "The NDIS (NSW Enabling) Bill 2013 fits with what the Productivity Commission recommended when it designed the NDIS, because it removes government as the dominant service provider and creates a real market where disability services are competing to attract clients."

The NDIS model, drawn up for the Gillard government by the Productivity Commission, is also based on removing at least half of the recipients from the Disability Support Pension (DSP), supposedly to pay for the roll-out of the NDIS.

The DSP currently provides more than 800,000 people with a meagre pension of up to \$813 a fortnight, which is inadequate for the provision of even basic necessities. The Productivity Commission anticipated that just over 400,000 DSP recipients would be able to access the NDIS, with the remainder being shunted onto the even lower Newstart unemployment allowance or into the low-wage workforce.



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