

Families worse off under Australia's privatised disability scheme

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As Australian governments roll out the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), hundreds of thousands of people with a disability are facing worsening services, poorer funding and reduced essential support programs.

Launched in 2012 by the Gillard Labor government, the NDIS has been fully supported by the Liberal-National Coalition and the Greens. Labor's scheme was heralded by the trade unions, as well as the corporate and media establishment, as a progressive "once in a lifetime" reform.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned from the outset, the NDIS is a pro-business scheme designed to dismantle public services and slash government spending via a voucher-based system. Participants must now "buy" services from private operators, with their funds set by care plans imposed by a cost-cutting government agency.

The most crucial component of the NDIS is the privatisation of services, creating a disability "market" with private operators competing to make profits by gutting programs and cutting the wages and conditions of disability workers.

Across the country, services are being shut down, including residential disability support facilities that have for decades provided support for people with complex and multiple disabilities. The residents are being forced into under-funded group homes, often run by charity organisations.

Many families are now reporting they are worse off under the NDIS. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), the agency overseeing the scheme's implementation, has taken a slash and burn approach. Mandated annual plan reviews have seen people's funding cut severely.

Kathryn Gilbert, a mother of three children with

disabilities in Sydney's west, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) she had her funding cut by half for her seven-year-old son. "The review was a horrible experience," Gilbert said. "I was told we would have four hours to go over everything he needed but we only had 45 minutes. He lost his community support placement ... [and] therapy support. It was all cut."

Briana Blackett, a single mother of two children with autism, said the review process was highly distressing. "You have to focus on all the worst parts of my life and all the things I'm not able to do anymore over and over and over again," she said.

For Blackett and her children the NDIS led to a massive cut in their funded support services. Speech therapy and behavioural therapies were ripped away. Such therapies are essential. They are evidence-based early intervention programs for children with a disability. If these supports are not provided for children, particularly those diagnosed with autism, it severely limits their lives, leading to isolation and lack of social engagement.

Participants have no basic right to challenge or correct their plan before it is imposed. The first time they see their plan is after it has already been approved by the NDIA. A survey by National Disability Services (NDS), the body representing disability service providers, found that 25 percent of NDIS participants felt that they were worse off under the scheme.

NDS also reported a high rate of casualisation of the workforce in NDIS-funded services, estimating that about four in ten workers are casual. Previously, most services were staffed with full-time and permanent workers, providing continuity and experience.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is the first territory or state to have completed the full NDIS roll

out. In the process, the ACT Labor-Greens government has forced out 350 public sector workers and overseen the dismantling of essential respite services. Three of the four respite services in Canberra have shut their doors.

Under the NDIS price guide, which determines the costs for all services, 24-hour respite is charged at a fixed rate of \$501.71 per client per night. Tracey Hall, acting CEO of Marymead, a disability service that was forced to stop providing respite, told the *Canberra Times* that the rate “assumes one staff member can care for three children at a time but, for those needing one-on-one care, the cost is at least double that NDIS rate.”

Lives are already being lost. In 2013, as part of the NDIS takeover, the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government announced the closure of the Stockton Centre in Newcastle by 2018. Earlier this year, two former Stockton Centre residents who were forced to transfer into a group home died after being taken to hospital. It was suspected that they suffered from dehydration. A third ex-resident was sent to hospital after developing pneumonia.

In Victoria, the state Labor government is overseeing the shutdown of state-run homes, affecting potentially 4,500 disability workers and thousands of people with a disability.

The trade unions covering disability workers supported the introduction of the NDIS and have assisted this destructive process.

Last month, the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) announced a protest campaign, including a rally in Melbourne, to appeal to the Victorian Labor government to “make things right” and “protect disability care.” The rally was summarily called off after the government entered “high-level discussions” with the union and agreed to four weeks of “intensive” negotiations, chaired by the Fair Work Commission, the federal industrial tribunal.

These negotiations will do nothing for the public sector workers or the people depending on disability services. The HACSU helped bring the Labor government to office in 2014, and joined unions nationally in backing the NDIS and disguising its pro-market agenda.

The political and corporate elite’s enthusiastic support for the NDIS flows from the fact that it is paving the way for further privatisation of basic public

services. The basic social right people with a disability, their families and carers to have access to free and high-quality health care and support is being sacrificed for corporate profit.



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