

Waiting times for aged care in Australia quadruple over past decade

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An Australian Productivity Commission report, released last month, shows that a growing number of elderly people across Australia are left waiting more than nine months to receive vital aged care services.

In 2018–19, just over 40 percent of people who were assessed as needing care waited nine months or more to be admitted into residential aged care. This number has skyrocketed, from just 5.4 percent in 2008–09.

In 2018–19, the median time between being assessed as eligible by the Aged Care Assessment Team (ACAT) and entering residential aged care was 152 days, or around five months. This was out of a total of 60,657 admissions into care. The median wait time increased more than fourfold in a decade, from 36 days in 2009–10.

The percentage of people entering residential aged care within three months was lower in outer regional and remote areas, at 40.3 percent and 37.8 percent respectively, compared with 42.5 percent in major cities.

The report shows a similar trend in the wait times for home care packages. Home care packages provide funding for elderly people to access aged care services at home, including personal care, social and medical support.

Home care packages are assessed in four levels, ranging from low-level care needs (Home Care Package Level 1), to high-care needs (Level 4).

Once a person is assessed as needing home care, the approximate wait time for Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 packages is over a year, according to the Australian government's *MyAgedCare* website. For Level 1 Packages the wait is 3–6 months.

The Productivity Commission report found that across all home care levels, total admissions fell from 36,474 in 2015–16, to 24,156 in 2017–18, while the

median time for receiving a home care package rose from 73 days in 2015–16 to 137 days in 2017–18.

These waiting times are in addition to the process of applying to receive aged care services, and having this application approved by ACAT, which typically takes up to six weeks.

The Australian Health Department's latest quarterly report showed that as of December 2019 there were 112,237 people waiting for a home care package. This had increased from 108,456 people in January 2018.

Many elderly people have died before their home care package was delivered, while others have been forced to go into residential aged care. In its interim report, released last November, the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety noted that in 2018, more than 16,000 people died waiting for a home care package, and 14,000 were forced into residential aged care.

The Productivity Commission report cites the lack of availability of aged care places/packages as one of the main reasons for increased wait-times, as well as an older person's "need to delay entry into residential aged care due to personal circumstances, such as selling their home," and decisions to reject a place in residential aged care due to the cost.

According to *MyAgedCare*, all residents of aged care facilities are charged a maximum "basic daily fee" of \$51.63 per day, or \$18,844.95 per year. This is around 85 percent of the basic age pension for a single person, which is a maximum of \$850.40 per fortnight.

This amount is in addition to a "means-tested care fee," which can be up to \$252.20 per day based on an income and assets test, and a refundable accommodation deposit, which has no maximum amount and averaged \$316,876 in July 2019. Many aged care facilities also charge additional "service

fees” that are not government subsidised. These services can include providing residents with “a preferred brand of toiletries” or “accessing a hairdresser.”

Such is the failure of capitalism and the contempt of the ruling elite for the working class, that elderly people who have worked all their lives are then forced to give up their assets and savings to obtain care. By contrast, the wealthy can afford expensive private services.

A recent report published by Flinders University and submitted to the royal commission in January, shows that of 22 countries in its study, Australia’s spending on long-term aged care was among the lowest. The report also states that staffing levels for residential aged care in Australia is “at the lower end of the range internationally, both for total staffing and nursing.”

After the Aged Care Royal Commission delivered its interim report in November, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s Liberal-National Coalition government announced just 10,000 additional home care packages. This is an insult to the well over 110,000 people already assessed as needing home care services and on the waiting to die list.

Following the release of the Productivity Commission’s January report, the Labor Party’s shadow minister for ageing, Julie Collins, called the figures, “another wake-up call for the Morrison government on the terrible state of our country’s aged care system.”

However, during the May 2019 federal election Labor’s response to the aged care crisis was to pledge to “immediately investigate” how to better triage those waiting for home care packages, fast-track a “workforce strategy” and encourage doctors to do home visits. Labor outlined no strategy for addressing the poor quality and lack of aged care services, and no increased funding.

Moreover, both Labor and Coalition governments have overseen the lengthening queues and the extensive privatisation of aged care services.

In 2010–11, after three years of a Labor government, the number of residential aged care services managed by government organisations had dropped to 10 percent. Not-for-profits (charitable, religious-based and community based organisations) and private corporations owned 60 percent and 30 percent,

respectively.

By 2018, the proportion of residential aged care services managed by government organisations had fallen further to 9 percent, according to the most recent GEN Aged Care Data.

Continuing this privatisation, the Morrison government announced last December that it would tender out ACAT, which approves applications for aged care services, to the private sector this year. This is another indication that corporate profit interests are increasingly placed above providing for even the most basic needs of workers as they age.



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