

“PASS THE PARCEL”

As we start the New Year 2009, it is interesting to reflect that over the years there have been repeated calls to “break down the barriers”. The barriers which drive caring parents to despair in their attempts to secure real quality of life care for their family member with a disability before they, the parents, depart this world. Yet, captive market, public service bureaucrats continue to frustrate their every effort, with one of the major inhibitors to questioning service level and quality – “Pass the Parcel”.

With the Department of Human Services (DHS), Disability Services (DS), having direct and indirect control of almost all services throughout the State of Victoria for people with a disability, this government department has a captive market, and responsibility only to the Minister for Community Services. There is, therefore, little natural accountability and transparency, despite the number of government and pseudo government departments purporting to investigate complaints, but are mainly “Passing the Parcel”.

The Minister’s Office has always, in many different ways, taken first prize for “Pass the Parcel”! A letter of complaint to the Minister’s Office about the services of DHS/DS, will be sent on to the department. At best, the response will be transcribed to a ministerial letterhead, and signed by the Minister. The Minister’s Office will not check the response they receive from the department is meaningful and credible. They just, “Pass the Parcel”.

At worst, the Minister’s Office will direct the department to reply directly to the complainant, saying the reply is on behalf of the Minister. Yet the Minister will have never seen the letter sent to the complainant. Despite the Minister having the power to direct and discipline the department, it is not politically advisable to do so, as the opposition party would capitalise of this. Ministers are therefore focused on defending their department no matter what, or how much they “Pass the Parcel”.

Other government and pseudo government departments claiming to handle complaints are. the Ombudsman, the Office of the Public Advocate (OPA), the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC), the Health Services Commission (HSC), the Office of the Disability Services Commissioner (ODSC), the Senior Practitioner, the Corporate Integrity, Information and Resolution's Unit (CIIRu) and the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). These “departments of government” are also very versed in, “Pass the Parcel”.

There is, therefore, no real, meaningful, effective and credible process for handling complaints against the DHS/DS, especially concerning their direct services for very vulnerable people .

We consider the only possible way to achieve a reasonably level playing field for families to challenge the awesome power of the captive market and very public service mindset DHS/DS juggernaut, is to have a complaints board/panel where the members are all from outside industry. A board/panel with the power to direct the department to fulfil its

obligations in a pro active, meaningful, accountable, transparent and customer focused manner.

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