

Parents fight for greater protection

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Disability Reporter: Engel Schemidi

A Watsonia couple's fight to have their son's voice, silenced by disability, heard by authorities has been validated in a damning report.

www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/publications/123/

But Tony and Heather Tregale say the annual report by the Public Advocate's Community Visitors program, tabled in state parliament this month, scratches at the surface of problems in disability group homes.

The couple are campaigning for Community Visitors volunteers who visit and report to the Public Advocate's Office on the conditions of homes caring for the disabled - to be compelled to speak to guardians of residents, many of whom are unable to communicate.

The Tregales are now content with the care their 33-year-old son, Paul, who has autism and an intellectual disability, receives.

But their concerns about violence and neglect in his previous homes are backed up by the report. "Those with limited intellectual capacity are extremely vulnerable to abuse and neglect, often by the people intended to care for them," Mr Tregale said.

He said Paul had been left to stare at walls for hours because residents were not taken out. "You would see his bank balance go up and that showed they had not bothered to take him anywhere."

Some of the findings from the report include: Concerns residents didn't complain for fear of reprisals; Staff monitoring conversations between Community Visitors and residents; and Poor staff-to-resident ratios impacting quality of care.

Mr Tregale said a clause should be added to the Disability Act 2006, outlining Community Visitors' obligations to speak to guardians. Mr Tregale said guardians could direct complaints to the house supervisor, regional director and the disability services commissioner, but that process had not resolved his issues in the past.

The Office of the Public Advocate would not comment on the Tregales' concerns. Community Services Minister Lisa Neville said Community Visitors could speak to guardians if they wanted and many disabled people could speak on their own behalf.

LISA Comment: It is interesting to note, the reporter got a "no comment" from the Office of the Public Advocate ("OPA")! Whereas the failure of commonsense by this pseudo government department, affects almost all residents of supported accommodation group homes throughout the State of Victoria.

Most residents have insufficient capacity to fully understand the level and quality of care they are receiving, or if this is within the service provider's care policies, standards and values. Those who might have some understanding, understand the consequences of saying anything.

Community Visitors therefore, at best, get only service provider staff views when visiting the majority of group homes, as the OPA ensures parents, families, guardians, advocates or friends of the residents are not consulted where Community Visitors have had no meaningful communications with a resident or residents during a visit to a group home.

In total contrast, when the community visitors concept was first enacted under the Intellectually Disabled Persons' Services Act 1986, community visitors were actively encouraged to go everywhere, meet everyone and spread their personal contact details through cards and posters. And we did! As we were community visitors for six years from when the program first started in 1987.

Now, under the Disability Act 2006, the program legislation is watered down, the program is introvert and community visitors protected from the very people they are intended to protect - vulnerable people and their families.

Finally, the reporter failed to mention, "The Minister responsible for the services in supported accommodation group homes, is the same person responsible for the service monitor - the Community Visitors Program"..... It is little wonder the program has been watered down, sanitised and introverted!

Tony & Heather Tregale

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