

Millions of disabled Australians to be denied national insurance support

By Max Newman
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Millions of disabled people face being locked out of the Australian government's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and left to receive negligible or inadequate assistance. This includes more than 200,000 people with severe mental illnesses who have a primary diagnosis of a psychosocial disability.

Now being rolled-out nationally, the NDIS is a voucher-based plan launched by the previous Labor government in 2012, designed from the recommendations of a 2011 Productivity Commission report.

While the corporate media and the entire political establishment presented the NDIS as a progressive and compassionate "reform," the recommendations focused on cost-cutting and privatising measures. These included the closure of all state-run and government disability support programs, and their replacement by services offered, on a market basis, by profit-making or non-government operators, a process already underway.

Labor, which lost office in 2013, also instigated a related drive to push about half, or 400,000, Disability Support Pension (DSP) recipients off the pension, with a heavy emphasis on shifting disabled people into low-paid work.

Part of the plan was to limit the number of NDIS participants to 490,000. This is dramatically below the number of people living with a disability in Australia which is, according to a Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2015 report, one in five Australians, or 4.3 million people.

Most of those, 78.5 percent, report living with a physical disability, while the remaining 21.5 percent report mental health or behavioural problems. The Productivity Commission limited the number of people with severe mental illness permitted to access the NDIS

to just 57,000. The NDIS has since capped the number from this category to 64,000 by 2019–20.

According to unpublished findings from the National Mental Health Service Planning Framework, reported in the *Australian*, of those identified by the 2015 ABS survey, at least 290,000 require ongoing psychiatric and community support for mental health problems. Of this group, at least 100,000 have or are losing all support services as the NDIS rolls out.

Mental health programs and facilities have been chronically-underfunded for years, leaving many in need unable to obtain help and support. This social crisis will now worsen.

Among the programs on which those with mental illness currently rely are the federally-funded Personal Helpers and Mentors program (PHaMs) and the Mental Health Carers Respite scheme, each worth about \$200 million annually. Over the next three years, they will be shut down, despite large waiting lists.

The acting CEO of the Anglicare charity in Tasmania, Darryl Lamb, said that by its estimates at least 30 to 40 percent of those current receiving support via its delivery of PHaMs program in that state will be ineligible for the NDIS.

Since the NDIS rollout began nationally last July, there has already been a significant impact in the areas initially targeted. In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the quota of 5,075 NDIS places was filled in just three months. More than 2,000 others, particularly those with serious mental health conditions, have been told they cannot access the scheme unless a person dies or their circumstances change.

The federally-funded Partners in Recovery (PIR) program in the ACT supports around 160 people with severe and persistent mental illness, but only 20 to 30 participants were determined to be eligible for the

NDIS. This was compounded in December by the closure of The Rainbow, a psychosocial rehabilitation program in the ACT that provided outreach and community support, as well as supported accommodation, for those with acute psychiatric disorders.

Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT executive officer Simon Viereck said there had been an expectation that all of those accessing PIR would be eligible. He told the media there was now great uncertainty about the future for those denied help.

Similar concerns are being expressed across the country. Connie Digolis from the Mental Health Council of Tasmania told the media: “As we’re starting to understand more about the criteria and how people are being assessed for their eligibility, then we’re starting to see figures that are suggesting perhaps 90 percent of people with a mental illness who are currently receiving services may not qualify for NDIS.” Many of those excluded “may end up becoming more ill.”

The Turnbull Liberal-National government has denied there are problems. A Department of Social Services representative said there was “no evidence” from the trial sites of inaccurate forecasts of people with psychosocial disability. “Any of our Commonwealth clients who are not eligible for the NDIS will receive continuity of support,” she said.

This “continuity of support” is to be delivered in the NDIS’s second-tier program, which the Productivity Commission predicted would affect four million people with a disability. Entitled Information, Linkages and Capacity (ILC), this arm of the NDIS is slated for roll out from this year with paltry funding of just \$132 million over four years, which is estimated to equate to around \$8 per person in need, per year.

The treatment of the mentally-ill is a graphic expression of the pro-business agenda behind the NDIS, which is designed to outsource and cut services, as part of a wider drive to slash welfare and social programs. It was announced by the Gillard Labor government in 2012 alongside similar “reforms,” including cuts to aged pension and sole parent payments.

The author also recommends:

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