

Australian Council of Human Rights Authorities

Communiqué

May 2016

The Australian Council of Human Rights Authorities (ACHRA), which comprises the State, Territory and Federal human rights and discrimination authorities, recently met in Sydney to consider a number of issues of common concern and interest.

Willing to work: people with disability and older people and employment

Members heard from Federal Age and Disability Discrimination Commissioner The Hon Susan Ryan AO about her recently launched reports, *Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability*. She highlighted the findings of significant under employment of people with disability and older people and discrimination facing both groups in employment. The members expressed their support for the recommendations of the report and will use the report and the recommendations to progress their work at state, territory and federal levels on equal opportunity in employment for people with disability and older people.

The report is available on the [Australian Human Rights Commission's website](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/projects/willing-work-national-inquiry-employment-discrimination-against):

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Marriage equality

The members of ACHRA noted this issue and the continued focus of ACHRA members on this as an equality issue affecting people's right to participate in one of our society's most valued social institutions. The exclusion of couples from this institution has impacts far beyond the symbolic recognition of the couple's relationship. It affects the way in the couple and any children and other family members are treated in their day-to-day lives and, more significantly, it affects what happens when the couple or family face death or major medical problems.

Universal housing: ensuring housing meets the needs of Australian society

Members discussed the need for more concerted action on improving housing stock in Australia to ensure it is easier to adapt to meet the needs of people with disability and to allow older Australians to stay in their family homes. This could be achieved through the formal adoption of universal housing standards for all new housing stock in Australia. The economic benefits of this improvement were discussed, particularly in light of the significant costs to governments of adapting housing stock that does not meet these standards and the very low costs of implementing universal housing standards at construction stage.

Members expressed disappointment at the lack of progress towards achieving the goals of the National Dialogue on Universal Housing Design, which was a voluntary housing industry approach developed and agreed in 2010. It was noted that the report on progress states, 'The housing industry, as a whole, has

failed to show signs of voluntary systemic transformation. A generous estimation is that the current voluntary approach will achieve less than 5% of the National Dialogue's 2020 target.'

More information on the National Dialogue on Universal Housing Design and the benefits of implementing universal housing design is available on the [DSS website: https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy-initiatives/livable-housing-design/national-dialogue-on-universal-housing-design-strategic-plan?HTML](https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy-initiatives/livable-housing-design/national-dialogue-on-universal-housing-design-strategic-plan?HTML)

The Report on Progress is available from the [Australian Network on Universal Housing Design's website: www.anuhd.org](http://www.anuhd.org)

Elder abuse

The Age Discrimination Commissioner reported that elder abuse is a serious and widespread human rights issue that affects a significant number of older Australians. The Commissioner is pleased that the Commonwealth Attorney-General has asked the Australian Law Reform Commission to conduct an inquiry into laws and frameworks to safeguard older Australians from abuse, which is due to report by May 2017. The incoming Age Discrimination Commissioner is on the advisory committee for the Inquiry.

The Commissioner has recommended a number of other initiatives to the Attorney General that would help address the issue: a national prevalence study of elder abuse, building on the scoping study commissioned by government and undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies; a review of the laws in different jurisdictions covering powers of attorney, and development of a national database of powers of attorney.

Resourcing of supports for people participating in discrimination complaint processes

Members noted the current review of the National Disability Advocacy Program. Concern was expressed about the low levels of funding for this program and for legal assistance programs across Australia. These funding shortfalls have a negative effect on complaint processes under discrimination laws in Australia, with very low levels of support or representation available to complainants in particular, many of whom are people with disability or otherwise disadvantaged.

Information about the review is available on the [DSS website: https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/for-people-with-disability/national-disability-advocacy-program-ndap](https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/for-people-with-disability/national-disability-advocacy-program-ndap)

Sports, human rights and equality

Members discussed the continuing positive involvement of ACHRA members in Play By The Rules, the national inclusive sports program. This program is having a positive impact on ensuring inclusive and respectful sport in Australia. Information about Play By The Rules is available on [its website: http://www.playbytherules.net.au](http://www.playbytherules.net.au)

The meeting also highlighted the need to ensure the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane are fully accessible with the positive benefit of creating a positive legacy for future generations of sports people and fans.

Detention

The members of ACHRA had a very informative and important session with expert input from Professor Eileen Baldry. We noted the urgent need for regular human rights and unconscious bias training for police and staff in places of detention across Australia. There is strong evidence that if people who are detained are treated respectfully there is a reduction in violence and aggression both within the detainee population and to staff. This work should focus in particular on population groups who are vulnerable and at particular risk, including people with disability, Aboriginal people, and women. The meeting also noted that evidence indicates that most people who become offenders are victims first. The more we can do to protect the most vulnerable population groups from offending behaviour, the more likely we are to see reductions in offending.

Professor Eileen Baldry PhD is Deputy Dean, Arts and Social Sciences; Professor of Criminology, School of Social Sciences; and Academic Chair, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Board, University of New South Wales.

For further information, contact:

- Australian Capital Territory: Commissioner Helen Watchirs, 0423 821 718
- Northern Territory: Commissioner Sally Sievers, 08 8999 1444
- Queensland: Commissioner Kevin Cocks, 0402 288 419
- Tasmania: Commissioner Robin Banks, 0459 800 570
- Victoria: Commissioner Kristen Hilton 0447 526 642
- NSW: Acting President Elizabeth Wing, 02 9268 5545
- Federal: Sarah Bamford, 0417 957 525