

MOW Australia National Conference 2020

President's opening address February 19, 2020

Thank you, Chris. It's so exciting to finally be here for the opening session of our National Conference.

We are meeting on Palawa country. I honour the deep connection of the Palawa people to this land and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I acknowledge:

- Mrs Bridget Archer, MP Member for Bass, representing Senator the Hon. Richard Colbeck, Minister for Aged Care & Senior Australians;
- Mayor Wayne Johnston, of Meander Valley Council;
- keynote, plenary and workshop presenters;
- exhibitors and sponsors;
- my fellow MOW Australia Board members,
- members of state peak body boards and members of MOW service governing bodies.

And I acknowledge you. All of you who have travelled to this gathering. The best minds in this movement and enterprise that we call Meals on Wheels. Thank you for your commitment to driving MOW forward.

I am thrilled to have been chosen to lead the concerted efforts of Meals on Wheels Australia, representing one of the greatest social enterprises that this country has ever seen.

The idea of Meals on Wheels took off internationally during the 1950's, becoming the pioneer of home support services in Australia, and is as important now as it was then.

Meals on Wheels is the leading example of evidence-based early intervention and prevention in aged care. Our network of local services creates an essential piece of social infrastructure, providing front-line, early intervention and prevention in the home, reducing the malnutrition risk faced by 1.2 million older Australians, and social isolation risk to one in four who live alone.

We understand how poor nutrition and loneliness rob people of the quality of life that we Australians aspire to. Our meal programs are a proven, effective intervention to increase the nutritional intake and social connection of older people. The research base is solid and unequivocal.

The simple act of bringing a nourishing meal into someone's home, with human connection and concern for well-being, plays a significant role in preventing frailty, reducing falls, avoiding hospitalisation and more intense in-home support or residential aged care admissions, diminishing anxiety about living alone, and creating peace of mind for family carers.

Together, we deliver more than two thirds of meal services provided under the Commonwealth Home Support Program. We also deliver a growing number of services to Home Care Package and National Disability Insurance Scheme participants.

We are supported by a staggering 76,000 volunteers nationally, who donate some \$600 million in labour to prepare and deliver 10 million meals a year to more than 120,000 older people across regional, rural and metropolitan Australia.

We are an essential, critical, irreplaceable service.

Yet, much of this is hidden from view, and easily dismissed by those influencing the future of home care. We are perceived as an old charity, 'yesterday's heroes', with old volunteers serving old-fashioned food to old people.

There is little awareness or understanding of the innovative, flexible, contemporary services that most of us deliver. We are seen by some as a service that creates dependency, and old hat compared to the proliferation of cheap, convenient prepared meals available in supermarkets, and not-so-cheap drop-shipped meal businesses.

Each year, the Productivity Commission releases a Report on Government Services, which contains data on the number of meals provided per 1,000 members of the target population under the CHSP and old HACC Programs. The latest report shows a 40% reduction in meal service provision within these programs between 2012 and 2019. That's about 2.5 million meals per year at a time when the number of older people living at home is increasing, along with rates of malnutrition and social isolation.

Some states have fared worse than others, especially WA and Tasmania. The reduction in services not only risks increasing the rates of poorly nourished and isolated older people, it also risks the viability and sustainability of services, especially in regional, rural and remote communities.

The fewer service users there are, the fewer economies of scale, consumer prices go up, cost becomes a barrier and fewer people choose to use the service. It's a death spiral. Sadly, there are now large areas within WA where people can no longer get Meals on Wheels and there do not appear to be other providers stepping in. It's market failure at its worst.

Meals on Wheels services are frustrated, to put it mildly, with the ongoing uncertainty about government funded home care services after 2022. We are maddened by the upsettingly poor experiences that many clients and carers have when trying to navigate My Aged Care. And we are perplexed by the inequitable levels of government funding within the CHSP and between Commonwealth Programs, which forces some of us to require consumer contributions that are unaffordable for many seniors, and others to erode scarce operating reserves while hoping for a big bequest or windfall.

This causes huge anxiety and frustration to our community of volunteers. An over-reliance on volunteers committing more time and effort to fundraising activities in an attempt to relieve consumer cost pressure has escalated volunteer fatigue, with many contemplating leaving the sector.

So, what is Meals on Wheels Australia, your national peak body, doing about it?

MOW Australia is your voice in Canberra. We aim to work with, not against government, for we both want the same thing. People living healthier and independent lives for as long as possible.

At our 2017 conference in Queensland we were thrilled to receive the announcement of an injection of \$8 million funding as the first step in creating a more equitable system for older Australians. It was the result of collective effort and activation of our members. We had flexed our political muscle.

The funding ask then was always a stop gap measure, to get us to the next round of funding agreements in 2018. It helped half of our members, who were receiving the lowest level of CHSP funding. Delays in the planned integration of Commonwealth funded programs, kicking the can down the road, means that the other half of our services have received no relief in unit pricing, other than lower than CPI indexation, for a decade or more.

Through the efforts and advocacy of MOW Australia, meal services were one of only five CHSP service types to receive uncontested CHSP growth funding in late 2018, as part of a \$50 million package.

In the lead up to last year's federal Budget, we advocated for greater clarity regarding the future of the CHSP, particularly for the continuation of grant funding. While the Budget announcement of a further two-year extension of the CHSP was welcome, we remained concerned that this simply prolongs the gross disparity in consumer payments within and between jurisdictions, along with continuing the financial pressures being experienced by many Meals on Wheels services.

The piecemeal, stop gap solutions have done little to relieve the discrepancies, inequities and financial pressure.

Right now, Meals on Wheels Australia is calling on the Australian Government to double its investment in meal support through the Commonwealth Home Support Program to make it simpler, fairer and more affordable for older Australians to receive meal services.

The inequity across Commonwealth funded programs is vast. On average, a Home Care Package pays \$12.00 per meal service while the NDIS pays up to \$14.63. In most jurisdictions, CHSP meal funding to Meals on Wheels services is restricted to the threshold payment of, currently, \$4.85 per meal output, for the agreed number of meals.

Consumers cover the shortfall, including the cost of the ingredients. This means that most Meals on Wheels consumers pay, on average, between 50 and 80% of the full cost of the service depending on where they live. This stands in stark contrast with the percentage consumers contribute to the total service cost in the remainder of the CHSP (9.7%) and Home Care Package program (5.8%).

With 25% of older people living in poverty, high consumer contribution costs are forcing older people out of the system.

Meals on Wheels Australia is calling for an equitable system, in which older Australians pay only for the cost of the ingredients used in their meal service. This would make payments fair and affordable, regardless of which Commonwealth funding program they are eligible to access, where they live, or in which setting the meal service is delivered. It is also necessary to enable the unification of the CHSP and Home Care Package programs, recently announced by the Government.

This estimated \$80 million per annum recurrent investment entails raising the threshold CHSP government contribution from \$4.85 to \$12.00 per meal service output from 1 July 2020.

We have raised this in a Pre-Budget Submission to Treasury and in representations to the Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians. We have briefed officials at the Department of Health and stressed the urgency of this measure – many members cannot wait another two years until the home care programs are redesigned. They will become insolvent or transition out of service provision.

You are vitally important in this process. We know that you are raising your concerns with your local MPs and state senators, at organisational and individual level. Their support is growing. We need you to keep shining a light on this issue. We cannot let up. We must not let up. It is too important. It needs to be fixed.

Alongside our funding campaign, we are actively participating in debate, discussion and design of the future aged care system. This has included participation in national advisory groups and roundtables, and especially various submissions made to the Royal Commission on Aged Care Quality and Safety. Indeed, on Monday I will be briefing counsel assisting about the volunteer workforce, on your behalf.

We need to leverage our collective strengths, as we have never done before, to raise visibility, deepen awareness and drive more resources to enable us to have greater impact in our communities. We need to work together. Success depends on the input, feedback and active participation of all MOW services.

We need to improve our ability to tell our real value story, and demonstrate with data that we offer a smart and economic solution to relieve some of the financial pressures on our health and aged care systems.

We need to continue to demonstrate our relevance, and change perceptions of our brand by putting consumers at the centre of our service and adapting to their changing needs.

And we need to strengthen our ability to present ourselves as a cohesive network of local service providers who can pivot to meet the needs and desires of a rapidly ageing population in a significantly changing marketplace.

MOW Australia has invested in a part-time Executive Director, Kate Thiele, who has been instrumental in delivering on our strategies over the past 20 months and will share with you on Friday what we have achieved and what is to come.

Our national Patron is one channel through which we raise awareness about Meals on Wheels.

I am delighted to officially announce today that Meals on Wheels Australia now enjoys the shared patronage of His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) and Mrs Linda Hurley. We look forward to forging a strong bond with Their Excellencies throughout their term.

And now to the next few days. We will be engaged in a conference program designed to challenge and inspire, to help us adapt and thrive in this rapidly changing environment.

We will hear from experts and leaders to inspire new thinking, learn from our Australian and Canadian peers, compare notes, share stories of success and failure, and contribute to shaping the future of Meals on Wheels in Australia. There will be plenty of opportunities to connect during breaks and social events, with both other MOW providers and our trade partners, and I encourage you to seek out new connections.

Australian Meals on Wheels services are united in our mission to nourish, care for and strengthen our communities. We are committed to flourishing in every Australian community, successfully adapting to the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world in which we operate. And we share an unwavering belief that MOW is an irreplaceable solution to serving Australia's most vulnerable people along the continuum of nutritional and social need, for anyone, anywhere in the country.

Thank you.

Sharyn Broer

President

Meals on Wheels Australia

president@mealsonwheels.org.au