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## Submission No. 667

(Inq into better support for carers)

Thursday, 3 July 2008

Committee Secretary  
House Standing Committee on Family, Community,  
Housing & Youth  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
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CANBERRA ACT 2600



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### Inquiry into better support for carers

Dear Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission to the inquiry into better support for carers. Through our retirement living and aged care operations as well as recent research into the health and wellbeing of carers through the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, our contributions are made in the context of helping to look after the wellbeing of our residents and their families.

#### Who we are

Australian Unity Limited is a national health, financial services and retirement living organisation with more than 400,000 customers and over 1,200 employees.

As a mutual organisation, Australian Unity has a heritage dating back more than 165 years. Australian Unity has significant experience in the retirement living industry, having operated aged care and retirement facilities since 1948.

Today, Australian Unity owns and operates 15 retirement villages and four aged-care facilities in NSW and Victoria. Our Constitution Hill Retirement Village in Sydney's west is a participant in the Federal Government's National Respite for Carers Program with a Wellbeing & Respite Day Care Centre as part of the village.

Also of relevance to this inquiry is a report into the wellbeing of carers in Australia conducted in 2007 by the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index in conjunction with Carers Australia.

Retirement Living  
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## Health and wellbeing of carers

In 2007 Australian Unity partnered with Carers Australia and Deakin University to conduct Australia's largest survey of carers health and wellbeing through the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index.

The Wellbeing Index is a partnership with Deakin University that tracks the subjective wellbeing of the nation at least twice a year. A special edition of the Wellbeing Index conducted with Australian carers, enabled a unique comparison of their wellbeing to the national normative data. The findings are valuable information for the development of policies and programs designed to assist and support carers.

The report provides an in-depth understanding of the consequence of the caring role has on carers. While a copy is included for your reference, key findings from the report reveal:

- Carers have the lowest wellbeing score of any large group ever found through the 19 surveys conducted by the Wellbeing Index over the last seven years.
- 56% of carers having a depression rating of at least moderate depression.
- The average carer also experiences moderate levels of clinical stress.

The alarmingly high levels of clinical stress and depression among the 3,700 respondents is concerning. Given that there are an estimated 2.6 million carers in Australia (ABS, 2004), it is likely that carers account for a significant portion of Australians suffering from depression. It is both costly to the individual in terms of their personal wellbeing and day-to-day lives, and also to society through lower productivity & participation. Depression alone is said to cost the Australian economy \$3.3 billion in lost productivity each year. Six million working days are lost with another 12 million days of reduced productivity (Andrews et al, 1999).

Other findings from the survey highlight carers concerns in the areas of financial security, their role as a carer and their overall health. The following summarises some of the key findings:

### *Financial Security*

- Carers are almost twice as likely to worry that their income will not be sufficient to meet their expenses.
- More than half of the respondents had a household income of less than \$30,000.
- Even carers in full-time employment have a \$7,200 deficit in household income compared with the national population of employed people.

- For those carers who are employed, over one third have a degree of worry about losing their job that is sufficient to further reduce their wellbeing.

#### *The caring role*

- The wellbeing of carers seems to stabilise after two years of a caring role.
- Wellbeing decreases as the number of hours spent caring increases
- Female carers have lower wellbeing than male carers.
- The wellbeing gap between the general population and carers narrows with age but their level of wellbeing still remains low.

#### *Health*

- Carers are almost twice as likely to experience chronic pain.
- Some carers do not receive treatment for their own conditions. The major reason for this is that they have no time or cannot afford the treatment.
- 20 percent of carers are more likely than not to be carrying an injury caused by their caring role.
- A lower proportion of carers are classified as normal weight, and a higher proportion of carers are obese.

### **The growing need for carers in an ageing Australia**

As Australia's population ages, the number of people requiring care, both at home and in the community, will increase. The already critical role carers play will only increase in significance as this happens. Projections suggest that the number of older people needing assistance due to disability will increase by 160% between 2001 and 2031 (NATSEM, 2008). The ongoing role of retirement villages and aged care facilities in assisting carers is therefore an important consideration, as they are at the coal-face of interaction with carers and their dependent loved ones on a day to day basis.

### **Residential aged care**

Residential aged care homes provide accommodation, personal and nursing care to older people who can no longer manage to live in their own home. The Australian Government funds aged care facilities to provide this care. It is a highly fragmented industry with 2,872 mainstream residential aged care services at 30 June 2007 (AIHW, 2008).

Informal family carers are a critical link in the care chain. Firstly, by reducing the overall demand for residential aged care by looking after their loved one at home for as long as possible. Secondly, by reducing the day-to-day care requirements of individuals who are in residential care, that would otherwise need to be fully provided by the facility. To put the savings into context, high-care and low-care beds cost approximately \$130 and \$70 per day respectively to operate.

This reduction in demand for services not only saves significant amounts of money, but also reduces pressure on the system which already suffers from growing workforce shortages in the aged care and retirement living sectors.

The critical role of carers in the future is highlighted by the fact that residential aged care is challenged by an increasingly more dependent group of people. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 70% of residents at 30 June 2007 were assessed as high-care. By way of contrast, 58% of residents were classified as high-care in 1998 (AIHW, 2008).

### **Carers in a retirement village setting**

People choose to live in a retirement village for a variety of reasons. For some it is about the lifestyle, interaction and being part of a close-knit community. For others, it is a way they are able to remain independent longer – as the family home becomes more difficult to maintain. A number of our residents are able to remain in their Independent Living Unit (ILU) through their partner's role as a carer, and other basic services provided or programs such as the Government's cooperatively funded and delivered Home and Community Care Program (HACC).

As people age, their support and care needs often also change. Australian Unity retirement living villages are designed to meet community expectation for older people to age in their local areas and live as independently as possible within a secure and supported environment.

Retirement and aged care sites seek to seamlessly integrate independent living units with access to on call services together with full serviced residential aged care to support residents as they age. Carer needs are not just physical however, it is also the psychological aspects that are critical. Retirement villages provide opportunities for companionship and greater utilisation of other volunteers and carers.

Further, Australian Unity seeks to make these services available to the wider community which will assist both older people independently living in their own homes and provide some respite for the carers of older people. A new government

initiative, the National Carer Respite Program, similarly can operate within retirement villages to offer services to older persons and their carers. Australian Unity is a participant in this program.

### **Constitution Hill's Wellbeing & Respite Day Care Centre**

Constitution Hill is Australian Unity's award-winning retirement living and aged care village located in Sydney's west. Constitution Hill's Wellbeing & Respite Day Care Centre was created for both elderly people receiving care and their carers. It is designed so that carers can have a break or receive some respite from the daily care routine.

Much of our ageing population are cared for by family members or friends. These carers dedicate much of their time to looking after their loved ones.

Constitution Hill offers unpaid carers the opportunity to recharge their batteries. While they are enjoying 'time out' their loved one is looked after by a team of professional health care workers and they also have a range of activities and services to choose from. The Wellbeing & Respite Day Care Centre is funded by the Department of Health and Ageing National Carer Respite Program.

Both direct feedback from carers and findings from the Wellbeing Index survey suggest that relief from their caring role is one of the most valued type of support for carers. Carer support groups and the provision of services where both the care recipient and carer can, for example, enjoy a day out or a short break away together (which is supported with help from care staff) is also highly valued.

The Wellbeing and Respite Day care centre provides respite care allowing carers to have some much needed time away from their caring duties, whether this is just to attend medical appointments, the hairdresser or a social activity. The centre also runs a support group for carers where they can come together to share their experiences and support one another. The centre also facilitates them to have regular time out over coffee, lunch or dinner, or to enjoy a movie at the on-site cinema.

A 'carer corner' is also provided, that contains information regarding community care and services, residential aged care, Alzheimer's Australia information sheets and survival kits, Carers Australia contacts, local council information regarding services and activities. In addition, services at Constitution Hill available for both residents and their carers include:

- A fully equipped library & computer room, swimming pool, hairdressers and a beauty therapist. Carers are offered hairdressing and massage or beauty therapy treatments at significantly reduced rates.
- Access to a fully equipped gymnasium where they can be assessed by our health care professionals and our exercise physiologist can provide them with a suitable training program.
- Wellbeing services including a GP and rehabilitation specialists, physiotherapists, occupational therapist and a nurse specialist. Programs may include but are not limited to chronic disease management, vaccinations, health screening, dietetics and nutrition. These services facilitate both carers and care recipients to maximise their health and wellbeing and remain independent with improved quality of life.

All carers are also invited to participate in a Wellbeing Index survey, to enable us to evaluate the intervention and support strategies provided to them. They complete the Personal Wellbeing Index (the tool used to measure wellbeing as part of the surveys) upon entry to the program, then again at three months, six months and when they are no longer using the service. To build on the experience and success at Constitution Hill, Australian Unity intends to build similar wellbeing centres at all of our new facilities.

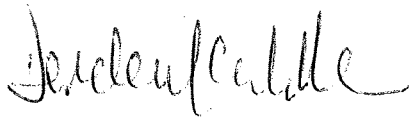
## **Summary & Recommendations**

Carers have the lowest wellbeing score of any large group of Australians on record. This is the result of many contributing factors including isolation, the unrelenting nature of a caring role, reduced financial security and associated guilt with wanting time away from their caring role. Our recommendations for improving the wellbeing of carers include:

1. Increase the availability of day and short-stay respite for carers, especially within a retirement village or aged care facility where like-minded people can provide support and an additional layer of interaction and common understanding.
2. Review the impact of the Extended Aged Care at Home (EACH) program and other high care packages on carers, as a subset of the programs – not just the recipient.
3. Use a measure, such as the Personal Wellbeing Index, to identify those carers at risk of depression, as well as measure the effectiveness of support and intervention programs provided.

If you have any questions, I am happy to provide further information for a public hearing.

Yours sincerely



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