



COUNT US IN!

Thursday 23rd August 2012, Brisbane.

COTA QUEENSLAND SOCIAL INCLUSION FORUM

FINAL REPORT 2012



**Prepared by
COTA Queensland
December 2012**

SUMMARY

COTA Queensland held its annual Seniors Week forum on 23 August 2012 on the topic of social inclusion of people as they age.

More than 50 representatives of community, government and seniors groups identified barriers to inclusion in the areas of workforce participation, housing and health.

Entitled *Count Us In!*, the forum developed potential solutions with the guidance of expert presentations from Professor Philip Taylor (Monash University), Dr Maree Petersen (University of Queensland) and Ros Walker (Queensland Council of Social Service). Consumer perspectives on the theme were also contributed by Michael Po Saw (Australian Myanmar Friendship Association of Queensland) and Bernice Ralph (Ipswich Regional Tenants Group).

From the Forum a number of key messages were evident. These include:

- Social inclusion is significantly impacted when there are one or more barriers of workforce participation, housing and health. Research and lived experience of consumers attest to this.
- Withdrawal of government funding to public housing participant groups impacts on support mechanisms and the capacity for residents to remain socially included in their communities.
- Older people who are at greatest risk of homelessness are those who live alone in private rental accommodation and have fixed low incomes.
- There is increasing awareness of the positive and valuable contribution mature age workers make to the workforce and the wider economy.



Frances Grant, friend of COTA Queensland



Col Davies, Retired Unionists and Pensioners Alliance



Margot Salom, Social Inclusion Forum Advisory Committee

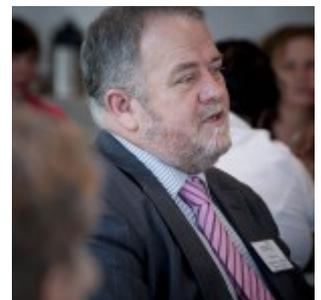
- Recent health reforms may result in increased barriers for consumers in understanding changes to health systems and services.
- Creative and sustainable solutions are required across all levels of government, community organisations and the general public to ensure social inclusion is attainable for all people as they age.



John Okello, African Seniors

Everyone needs to work together across government, community and business to address social isolation and barriers to increased participation in society. It is critical that the voices of older people are continually heard.

As one participant said: "Give seniors a chance to tell their stories".



Clinton Miles, Office of the Public Trustee



Back row: Laraine Hinds, Mark Tucker-Evans, Mark Young, Anna McCormack, Leonie Swainston
 Front row: Cae-Maree Meacham, Lorella Piazzetta, Fiona Jackson

Presentations from the Forum can be accessed from the COTA Queensland website at: <http://cotaqld.org.au/>

METHODOLOGY

To prepare for the Forum, COTA Queensland worked collaboratively with an external advisory committee. Membership of this committee consisted of service providers, consumers, members, and government representatives. This working group provided valuable information and guidance both before and on the day.

The Forum aimed for a balance of expert and consumer presentations, and the opportunity for participants to interact, identify barriers and provide solutions for both COTA Queensland and governments. Forum participants were either allocated a specific issue area or chose an area of interest. Workshop groups included:

- Workforce participation
- Health
- Housing
- Universal Housing Design

Each workshop group worked to the following questions:

- Does your experience correlate with what the panel speakers spoke about?
- From your own experiences, and the experiences of your friends, family and community, what are the top three issues that need to be addressed to support the social inclusion of people as they age.
- Did the speaker miss any important points that your own experience can throw light on?
- What do you see as some of the solutions in this area (i.e. workforce, housing, health)?
- What are some of the things that government needs to work on now?
- What do you think COTA Queensland should be doing to ensure people are included as they age?

FORUM FINDINGS

Workforce Participation

Professor Philip Taylor from Monash University outlined the context and emerging research on mature age employment. In light of the demographic trends (such as more people living longer), there is a need to ensure that society and businesses value the participation and contribution of a mature age workforce. It is critical for society to embrace and practice flexible practices about retirement and workforce participation. Professor Taylor cautiously welcomed the shift which is taking place regarding the appreciation of the mature age workforce. He also noted that early retirement is not tenable if industrialised economies are to remain competitive and to respond effectively to the challenges of an ageing population.

Professor Taylor critiqued the rhetoric of 'flexible working' for older workers in the transition to retirement. Many older workers find themselves trapped in involuntary part-time work for long periods, particularly women. He has written:

"Despite the shift to a knowledge-based economy, many older workers are still found in physically demanding jobs, in work environments that carry occupational health and safety risks, or in roles that make it difficult to maintain skills currency. As a consequence, these older workers do not lend themselves to prolonged working lives, and instead face the serious prospect of social exclusion and poverty."

From a consumer perspective, Michael Po Saw spoke on his experience as a migrant from Burma (with a professional background) and the challenge of finding employment in South East Queensland. Michael's story resonates with many jobseekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds who find it difficult to obtain employment aligned to their experiences and capabilities. Issues such as the lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, the lack of local work experience, language barriers and discrimination are often cited in research and testimonies as recurring problems.

Common issues across the workshop groups on workforce participation included:

- Negative attitudes and discrimination still existed in relation to older workers and cultural diversity. It was generally felt that young people do not recognise the skills of older people, who are often not afforded appropriate respect.
- The changing nature of work and increasing reliance on information technology creates further challenges for many mature age jobseekers, particularly those from culturally diverse or refugee backgrounds who have limited or no experience with technology or computers. As one participant mentioned: "People are being left behind, some can't even send texts - how do they cope with increasing technology in the workplace?"

- There are a lack of programs and services to support and assist retrenched mature age jobseekers. It was agreed that Job Network providers often were not suitable for mature age and migrant/refugee jobseekers. It was also identified there is lack of information about available training courses, financial information and retirement services.
- Often formal qualifications are preferred over the longevity of practical experience. This is particularly evident for jobseekers from culturally diverse backgrounds but not exclusively. Participants identified the lack of recognition of skills and their potential value to the broader community.
- Some industries identified people over 50 years of age as a workplace health and safety risk, which is demoralising and unfounded; it is not the case that people over 50 years of age have more accidents in the workplace.

A range of practical solutions were raised for COTA Queensland and governments to consider. These included:

- Promote case studies of 'success' stories of older workers from a range of backgrounds
- Encourage employers to use incentives for mature age jobseekers, especially from diverse cultural backgrounds, and distribute information widely on these incentives
- Create and develop linkages between employers and mature age jobseekers seeking assistance and support
- Consider existing models of employment that can be modified for mature aged jobseekers (e.g. apprenticeship system)
- Strengthen recruitment strategies (e.g. have a coach one day a week to help mature age jobseekers link with services such as Volunteer Queensland, support jobseekers until they are able to undertake work, studying or training, strengthen corporate champion models)
- Promote the value and contribution of older people
- Provide free computer training for mature age jobseekers and older people across the state as the demand for such courses is large.

There was specific mention across both groups on the need for the media to become educated (and re-educated) on the value, worth, and contribution of older people. Participants also felt there was a general lack of respect towards older people which contributed to feelings of disappointment, sadness, disconnection, and concern about their position in society.

Health

Ros Walker from the Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) spoke about the economic and social costs of the health care system, as well as the need to remove inequalities particularly in primary health care. Older people often experience difficulty in navigating the health system, as well as discrimination by some service providers. There is a need for health promotion and education programs through the media and community organisations, such as neighbourhood centres and senior citizens clubs.

Ros Walker argues that an effective primary health care should include the following features:

- local participation
- multidisciplinary service delivery
- illness prevention and health promotion
- services which empower ageing people to prevent risky behaviours
- strategies to improve health literacy.

The small groups at the forum agreed the lack of an integrated service model is a critical issue for older people. They often felt shunted between General Practitioners, specialists and hospitals without any coordination of their care or health needs. This lack of integration is particularly evident upon being discharged from hospital when ad hoc processes can have a negative impact on older people living on their own or who have little family support. Aged care assessments can also be difficult if there is a lack of integration between health and community services.

Older people report feeling they are not a high priority within the health care system. Social exclusion is made worse by chronic health conditions (such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes), mental health disorders, low income, insecure housing, as well as cultural and geographical isolation.

Lack and cost of transport to and from medical appointments is also a significant issue for many older people, especially in rural and remote areas. Often the expense for transport and accommodation to access specialist care in regional towns is prohibitive.

Both groups agreed that patient care varied across hospitals. Concern was expressed about the duty of care, especially when older people were leaving hospital malnourished and ill-informed about their future care (including medication use).

There was strong agreement that governments should be raising the profile of older people and their health issues. Addressing the workforce issues (e.g. shortage of frontline staff) and increasing the grassroots involvement of local communities in older people and health care were also key themes.

Finally there was agreement that many older people are socially isolated due to a combination of factors e.g. elders abuse, lack of suitable and affordable housing, lack of family support and other cultural and socio-economic factors. For some older people from special needs communities (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) the issues were more complex and challenging when there is a lack of basic services (e.g. dialysis machines). There is an overdue need for the health system to address the wide range of issues for older people. The call from the Forum is overwhelmingly for older people to be treated with more respect and care and for systemic barriers to be addressed.

Housing and Universal Housing Design

Dr Maree Petersen from the University of Queensland reported that one-fifth of homeless Australians are aged 55 years and older; and many more are living in precarious housing circumstances. She argued that developing a strategy to address homelessness amongst the older population should be a core requirement of any government homelessness strategy.

Australia's population is ageing and persons aged 50 and over are predicted to more than double numerically from 2010 to 2050. Consequently, later life homelessness is likely to be a growing issue. Despite this trend, older homeless people have received less attention in public policy than other groups of homeless people, and there is no integrated strategy designed specifically to reduce the number of older people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

The Workshop Group on Housing identified a number of concerns, including:

- the high demand for seniors' accommodation in regional areas
- the closure of government owned caravan parks originally purchased to protect housing security
- the need to follow through on the recommendations of the Australian Government White Paper on Homelessness ("The Road Home")
- older people living in boarding houses are at risk of homelessness or personal injury
- loss of government funding for tenant advice and advisory services, as well as public housing resident participation groups
- increases in rent assistance are sometimes lost in rent increases
- the changing assumptions of public housing ("it is no longer a home for life"; "you got a home and you knew you were there")

- cost of living increases which impact on use of lighting, heating, cooling, as well as safety (for example, the use of candles is a potential fire risk), and personal nutrition
- the need for a database of Independent Living Units
- the lack of security for older people in Residential Parks.

The housing group reflected on the factors which influence future housing choices - e.g. affordability, accessibility (and adaptability), maintenance (both house and yard), proximity to shops and public transport, safety, as well as connections to the community, the loss of a driver licence and the lack of superannuation.

The housing group agreed there needed to be increased rent assistance for older people in private rental accommodation, as well as increased support for the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) and for public housing. More could be done to highlight the plight of older people in private rental housing and to challenge the philosophy that "the private sector will look after things". The statement 'housing is a human right' was affirmed.

The other housing group identified the principles and practice of **universal housing design**. Universal design is a proposition that products and environments should be designed with the whole population in mind. It is about maximum amenity and usability by the widest number of people possible regardless of background, age, gender, or status.

Examples of universal design in housing include: level entry to the home; corridors at least 1000 mm wide; and a hob-free shower. The technical issues related to these features have been resolved as evidenced in the construction of homes with such features. But these homes are designated specifically for people aged 55 years or older. If technical issues do not present a barrier to implementing universal design in all new housing, what does?

There is a general impression across the industry that universal design 'costs a lot more', although there is little evidence to support this contention. Landcom carried out a cost analysis of universal design features in various housing types and found that the cost was minimal (1-2% of construction costs) if changes to existing designs were made, and almost zero if the features were considered from the outset of the design. However, such evidence has done little to change industry practice.

In spite of the onset of an ageing population, governments have been reticent to press industry into building more universally designed housing stock. However, disability and ageing advocacy groups have maintained their lobbying and as a follow on from the successes gained in the public environment, the design of dwellings has become the next challenge.

With the property industry reticent to change their product lines to embrace universal design (save for specialist housing developments such as retirement villages), the Federal Government called industry, community groups and government leaders together in 2009 to find a non-adversarial approach to increasing supply. This group became known as the National Dialogue on Universal Housing Design (2010).

The aspirational goal agreed by all stakeholders was to have all new homes universally designed by 2020, with a target of twenty five percent by 2013. To help achieve this, the Livable Housing Design Guidelines were produced in 2010, with a second edition in 2012. To date there has been little movement towards this aspirational goal in mainstream housing. It is likely, therefore that the aspirational goal of all new housing designed to the Livable code will remain just that – aspirational.

With fears of cost increases and lack of consumer demand, together with the complexities of the house-building system, industry is likely to remain reluctant to implement universal design voluntarily. Consequently, governments will be faced with instituting mandatory regulations if change is to be brought about. This seems to be the logical outcome if we are to sustain our older cohorts in comfort and safety in their own homes and where they can receive community care services at a lesser cost than institutional care. Each year some 145,000 dwellings are constructed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), which equals more than one million dwellings within ten years. Over time as more housing stock becomes universally designed and the benefits are better known, perhaps renovations to older homes would follow suit. We cannot continue to design environments as if we are never going to grow old.

Conclusion

The Forum concluded that a societal response is pivotal to addressing social isolation and barriers to greater participation. It is critical that the voices of older people are heard. As one participant said: "Give seniors a chance to tell their stories". As disability advocate John O'Brien said: "When people not used to speaking out are heard by people not used to listening then real change is made."