



Looking at Issues through an Age-friendly Lens
Report of the COTA Queensland Senior Stakeholder Forum
Townsville - 4 June 2014

Prepared by
COTA QUEENSLAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Council on the Ageing Queensland (COTA), as the peak body representing seniors' organisations and seniors in Queensland, is holding a series of forums throughout Queensland to enable ongoing dialogue amongst senior stakeholders. Outcomes from the most recent workshop held in Townsville provided insight into the sector's expectation within the Townsville region of COTA, as well as the most pressing issues faced by North Queensland's senior citizens.

The sector's expectations clearly demonstrate their desire for COTA to be an active and well-informed communicator and assist with the advancement of improved service delivery and policy for older people. The following key themes were communicated by participants to COTA:

1. COTA is seen as a connector between the sector and the Government, and must:
 - build and maintain intra-sectoral relationships throughout regional Queensland
 - continually gather, synthesise and provide easy access to current information and prioritised issues that meets the needs of seniors in North Queensland.
2. To be the strong and active voice of the sector in North Queensland, COTA should:
 - maximise the use of COTA's own and sector resources in the region through innovative communication
 - inform the Government of emergent issues and advance the interests of service providers (and therefore consumers) in the development of policy that meets the needs of Townsville and surrounds
 - have a more active presence in the region through more frequent engagement.
3. COTA can support the sector to more effectively tackle issues faced by Queensland's seniors:
 - *Aged Care*: an imbalance in demand versus availability which is worse in more rural communities, confusion over the availability of assistance and entitlements
 - *Transport*: affordability, large distances and travel time involved, availability, reliability and cost
 - *Cost of living*: Strong concern over the possible cuts in pensioner concessions, insurance costs hikes unsustainable, transport, energy and retail costs all of concern
 - *Community Issues*: Concern about breakdown in traditional structure and values coupled with increased crime and violence.

COTA is committed to addressing these expectations and communicating across the sector. COTA will continue to engage regularly with the sector and visit regional areas to understand the diverse issues throughout Queensland.

Introduction

COTA Queensland has been appointed as the Seniors Peak Service for the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services for the three years, 2014-2016. This responsibility requires COTA to be the connection between sector stakeholders and the government. To commence this process in North Queensland, COTA convened service providers, older persons' organisations and government representatives in Townsville on 4 June 2014 to discuss COTA's new role and communicate their expectations of COTA on behalf of the sector. The Townsville forum followed a successful forum held in Brisbane in March, 2014. The Townsville forum which had 80 participants was the first of an ongoing series of forums to be held outside of Brisbane.

Forum objectives were to:

- introduce participants to COTA as the Seniors Peak Service
- understand the sector's expectations of COTA's role and the communication pathways required
- confirm and prioritise issues for senior Queenslanders.

It is important to stress that the views and issues presented in the forum report are presented the way they were provided by participants. COTA has not attempted to contextualise these views and issues as it is vital that the views of participants are reported as presented on the day. However, during the forum COTA Queensland officers did seek to clarify any misunderstandings that participants may have held over the workings of both State and Commonwealth policies particularly in the areas of health and home care reforms.

COTA's role as sector peak is an important link in the communication chain between the Queensland Government and service providers within the sector. The sector expects COTA to be a connector, via sector bodies, between end-users and the government.



Townsville Mayor Jenny Hill opens forum

To be successful COTA must:

- provide insights to the government on actions and services performed by sector bodies
- inform the sector of actions and changes that occur within government
- provide insights to the government (through information gathered by service providers and other agents) on what is occurring in the community.

The first session of the forum was to draw out stakeholder's expectations of COTA, particularly around communication pathway requirements between all levels of the sector. The second session aimed to prioritise and articulate the main issues faced by senior Queenslanders in the Townsville region.



Mark Tucker-Evans, COTA Queensland Chief Executive, addresses the forum

Stakeholder Expectations of COTA

The point was made quite strongly that to effectively communicate with regional centres it is not appropriate that COTA only visits once a year. Having a single forum as an annual event with no tangible results will not help improve COTA's capacity to work with regional Queensland. Participants stressed that they do not want to attend a *talkfest* that does not provide some benefit to the seniors within the region.

COTA needs to be *more in your face* in rural areas to lift the regional profile of the organisation. To achieve this COTA needs to explore alternative communication methods that are more effective within regional areas. COTA should build upon the effective peer educator strategy by training more peer educators and using them to get the message out in the community. Look at

utilising the capacity and role of volunteer seniors' ambassadors to help COTA promote key themes and messages within regions.

Some participants also expressed the concern that they were unclear as to what type of organisation COTA was, where it obtained funding and what its role and purpose is. There was also confusion about the role of TR COTA and its relationship with COTA.

Participants requested more frequent meetings with COTA, face-to-face interaction is felt to be more effective than other forms of communication. It was also recommended that COTA should reintroduce the regional forums it previously facilitated with Committees on the Ageing. It was also stressed that issues raised by the forum needed to be followed up through actions on the part of COTA. The lack of permanent presence on the part of COTA within the Townsville region was also raised as a concern, having a local presence would help raise the profile of COTA and the role it plays in advocating on behalf of seniors.



Townsville Forum Participants

Further expectations of COTA expressed by participants included:

- COTA would play an active role in influencing the formation of government policy on Seniors' issues
- COTA would be a supplier of information to all senior stakeholders
- COTA would provide support to senior stakeholders to assist in making decisions at the local level
- COTA would work to establish effective communication links with the region
- COTA would hold more frequent public forums within the region
- COTA would seek more coverage in the regional media to inform seniors
- COTA would make information on membership more visible and have stronger membership drives
- COTA would work to have closer interaction with TR COTA
- COTA would place hardcopy information in relevant places such as hospitals and doctors surgeries
- COTA should also utilise the networks of health centres, libraries and other community centres to disseminate seniors' related information.

Aged Care

Participants at the forum expressed concern that there were not sufficient aged care facilities in Townsville to cope with both current and future demand. Planning for aged care service delivery appears to focus more on broader regional level needs rather than need at the individual community level. Participants believe that Governments need to give greater recognition to the current and projected senior aged population profile for each community and based on this analysis, plan to provide aged care services that meet actual demand. For example, the planning needs to take into account the number of people currently over 65 years in a community and what the population projection is for the aged target cohorts over future years, future delivery planning also needs to recognise that seniors are not a homogenous group. Seniors are representative of the broader population and are similarly diverse in make-up and related age care requirements.



Sarah Baker, COTA Queensland Program Coordinator, discusses health reforms with participants

Another concern expressed in relation to aged care facilities was in respect to the low apparent standards of both the aged care facilities and level of care offered. The question was asked about how often were aged care facilities audited under the national aged care provider accreditation arrangements and how rigorous were the audits given the low standard of care currently offered by some providers in the region.

It was also stated that it was still difficult for older people and their families to navigate the various information sources to find out about what support and health services existed for seniors and whether or not the aged person in question met the required eligibility criteria. The existence of a more centralised seniors' information service covering all levels of government programs would assist older people to more effectively access much needed support.

There was also concern within the community that Community Aged Care service providers do not provide support for the full range of home support needs. The unmet needs include:

- Having ceiling fans cleaned.
- Having air conditioner filters cleaned.
- Not being able to have curtains taken down, washed and rehung.
- Window and insect screens cleaning.
- Cleaning of mildew and mould cannot be undertaken as this is not deemed basic cleaning. This is a particular issue in the tropical wet season when mildew and mould are a part of life in many homes.
- Most recipients of basic support services are only able to access domestic assistance on a fortnightly basis which they deem insufficient.
- Personal care - many clients are only able to access showering for 3 days a week unless the assessment shows the need for more frequent showers because of skin conditions and continence issues. Showering is not available on weekends through the basic support programs. Many people in the tropics have two showers a day, particularly in the summer months.

It was suggested that there is also a need for a better mutual understanding of the respective roles of service providers and the development of more integrated approaches to aged care service delivery at the local level. It was reported that the situation in areas outside of the major regional centres was even more desperate given the increased difficulties in accessing services by seniors particularly any form of emergency care.

The need for better discharge planning and follow-up for patients being released from hospital was raised as a pressing issue given the present difficulties in accessing transition care. It was stressed that such care was vital in ensuring that older patients were able to achieve a full recovery where possible.

The forum participants stressed the need for communities to be designed to be health and aged care friendly for senior residents particularly those with vision impairment. They also stressed the need for more in the way of respite services to ensure that those people who are looking after seniors are able at appropriate intervals to get some relief and rest from their 24/7 care responsibilities. Respite needs to take two forms - there needs to be the opportunity to have respite support for those in care who are home-based, in addition there also needs to be the option where those individuals can be relocated to a respite bed at another location to enable the carer the opportunity to have a break.

There was a stated need for the Townsville City Council to consult more with specialty groups to determine how Council could offer assistance to those groups. There is also a need for a register for seniors particularly those who have some form of disability and may not be able to self evacuate during times of natural disaster.

Transport Issues

Transport was a key area of concern to those in attendance at the forum as the lack of appropriate transport inhibits seniors from accessing not only shops to obtain food and clothing and other needs it also impairs seniors from accessing health services and other support services. The lack of appropriate transport can also prevent seniors from accessing important social interaction opportunities and other cultural and recreational pursuits. There was an overall feeling that transport needs to be available both after normal business hours and on weekends as well as during normal business hours. Existing public transport services do not provide services to cater for those seniors living in outer suburbs as well as more outlying rural areas and communities around Townsville.

Many seniors have to travel to Townsville from regional Queensland to undergo medical treatment and it is often difficult to organise community transport from the airport to hospital or other accommodation while in Townsville. The example of travel time from Charters Towers was provided, with the trip to Townsville by road taking 1.5 hours and the drive to Brisbane over 12 hours. In addition, for those who must remain in Townsville while undergoing treatment it is also at times difficult to organise appropriate transport from the place of accommodation to the place of treatment or for that matter simply accessing shops or other community facilities.

Cost of Living Issues

Forum participants were deeply concerned by the previous day's announcement made in the 2014-15 Queensland State Government Budget, that individual concessions for electricity, gas, rates, water, car registration, and public transport fares would be reduced, unless the Australian Government reinstated its National Partnership funding for concessions. It was felt that any reduction in concessions would have a significant adverse effect on the budgets of seniors.

Cost of living is increasing on all fronts including insurance, food, rent, electricity, rates, medical costs and transport costs. High on the list of cost of living issues is that of high insurance costs in northern Queensland. Forum participants cited that costs for insurance had doubled in recent years across far north Queensland. Concerns were expressed over how insurance companies assess the impact of weather events particularly if the weather event is only minor and would not rate as a severe cyclone or other severe natural disaster. They believe there is a strong need to lobby for change in the way that insurance charges are set and how risks are assessed.

Health costs are also on the increase and it is becoming more difficult to meet the costs of seeing doctors and purchasing medicines while on the pension and also for self-funded retirees. The ongoing talk about the introduction of the Medicare levy co-payment is also of concern to seniors.

Seniors who own their own property are facing increased difficulties in being able to afford the upkeep of the property and as previously mentioned there is concern about HACC services and the range of household maintenance activities that can be gained through HACC. It is felt that the funding made available is insufficient to help older people maintain and retain their place of living. For those residing in regional Queensland who choose to sell their own home with a view to moving into aged care facilities are often faced with a difficult decision when they realise the amount that they will obtain from the sale of their property will be insufficient to support the length of stay that may be required in aged care facilities. There was a call for better education for seniors around budgeting as well as in regard to what services and concessions are available to offset the rising costs of living.

Community Issues

Seniors often experience social isolation and this can be caused by sudden changes in health status, a lack of transport, changing family structures and lifestyles with many children and their families being forced to move away from the Townsville region to find work. The cost of participating in community activities can be prohibitive for seniors on extremely low incomes. Seniors are adversely affected by the loss of the sense of community and neighbourhood as people in the neighbourhood, especially those of younger age groups, tend more to live apart from their neighbours. This when coupled with ageist attitudes and perceptions make seniors more isolated in what were once close communities.

The layout of community facilities such as shopping centres and public places are still in many instances not suitable for the physical capabilities of seniors. This then restricts access to those facilities by seniors.

Seniors also feel that younger people no longer respect them and they are often spoken to as inferior and not valued. There is a belief that retail staff and service staff need customer service training to help them better understand the needs of seniors. It may also be of use to have more seniors employed in service management roles to help ensure a better understanding of seniors and the difficulties they face and what service standards would best support their needs.

The other community issue that seniors are facing is the increased rate of crime with seniors becoming the more frequent victims because of their vulnerability and the inability to defend themselves against violence and theft. In addition, within families there is increased evidence of elder abuse with older members of the family being taken advantage of both financially and emotionally?