

[REDACTED]

What are the key challenges you face in providing out of home care services?

One of the key challenges we are facing at the moment is the chronic shortage of carers. Carers are constantly reporting that they are undervalued and underserved by the Department. There is a lack of appropriate supports, financial and other, to support our carers to provide care to our most complex children.

The Department is ready to spend upwards of a million dollars a year for a child to remain in an alternate care arrangement but under \$20,000 a year for a foster placement. Interestingly enough, the carer allowance is less than it costs to board a dog for a fortnight. Do we really value our most vulnerable children less than man's best friend?

Many carer households rely on an income to be able to pay the bills. With rents skyrocketing in our local area to around \$900 a fortnight for a 3-bedroom home, even dual income households are struggling to keep up with day-to-day costs.

Carers are expected to use the care allowance for the following:

Typical costs include items such as food, clothing and footwear, household provisions, daily travel, holidays, gifts, haircuts, pocket money, general education costs, hobbies, music lessons, sporting activities, school excursions, general hygiene needs, general medical costs, general pharmaceutical costs, and suitable car restraints.

This is all well and good 10-15 years ago when inflation had not increased as it has. The average costs to engage a child in football can be more than a fortnight's allowance, just on boots, a uniform and, registration fees, leave alone petrol and time to get to games etc. School camps can often run into \$300 and \$400 price ranges, and although a t-shirt can be as little as \$5 at Kmart carers are expected to ensure that children have quality items provided to them so they don't feel out of sorts with their same-aged peers who often get brand names.

Where a child has a disability or diagnosis that is not covered under the NDIS, they are provided support through DCJ psychological services or the LINKS service or CPCS. Waiting for support under these services can be months at a time. Other free services like Headspace and CAYMHS also experience the same lengthy wait times, forcing carers to have large out of pocket costs for services. Although Medicare will reimburse approximately \$85 a session in some cases, the gap fee can be upwards of \$100 for service. Children have OT, Speech, psychology needs that are not being met.

With our children in ACA's there are usually more complex care needs such as school refusal or behaviours that don't allow them to be engaged in schooling full time. For a carer that relies on a full time income, this then does not become feasible to meet bills and other day to day needs.

What is the most important change you would like to see come out of our review?

Structure to how DCJ carers are paid care+1 and care +2 allowances through use of a structure decision making tools such as Child assessment tool, rather than special needs assessment that caseworkers often do not complete or do not know how to complete and is a basis word document.

Increase to the care allowance or a professional carers model to match the cost of living and provide a liveable wage to carers who are usually unable to work due to their carer commitments.

Easier service system navigation. Centrelink can take months to process any payments, including childcare subsidies.

A review of contingencies and ad-hoc payments to ensure that our most vulnerable children are receiving the supports that they need.

Less complexity for caseworkers in requesting financial support for children and carers.

More service support for children so they can get what they need in-house rather than out in the private sector.