A SNAPSHOT OF BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION SERVICES IN AUSTRALIA

Summary Report – August 2015

Centre for Applied Disability Research
An Initiative of National Disability Services

National Disability Services

VISION 2020 THE RIGHT TO SIGHT AUSTRALIA

abf Australian Blindness Forum

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Centre for Applied Disability Research

An Initiative of National Disability Services

The **Centre for Applied Disability Research** exists to improve the wellbeing of people living with disability by gathering insights, building understanding and sharing knowledge. The Centre for Applied Disability Research is an initiative of National Disability Services.

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NDS National Disability Services

National Disability Services is the peak body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote quality service provision and life opportunities for people with disability. NDS's Australia-wide membership includes more than 1030 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.

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VISION 2020 THE RIGHT TO SIGHT AUSTRALIA

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, representing around 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye care; health promotion; supports and services for people who are blind or vision impaired; research; professional assistance and community support. Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

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abf Australian Blindness Forum

The **Australian Blindness Forum** (ABF) is the peak body for the blindness sector that comprises 22 major service providers for people who are blind or vision impaired across Australia. Members of the ABF are organisations whose primary objects are the provision of services to people who are blind or vision impaired; those whose activities are substantially connected with the welfare of people who are blind or vision impaired, and those whose activities are substantially related to the prevention of blindness.

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OVERVIEW

It is estimated there are over 575,000 people who are blind or vision impaired currently living in Australia, with more than 70 per cent over the age of 65 and over 66,000 people who are blind[1]. However, despite the fact that blindness and vision impairment affects a significant proportion of Australia's population, no comprehensive data exists on the provision of blindness and low vision services at a national level. Given the significant reforms in disability and aged care in both policy and service delivery now underway across the country, reliable data on the provision of blindness and low vision services is paramount, to ensure people who are blind or who have low vision are supported to remain independent and empowered to participate in their community.

In 2014, Vision 2020 Australia, the Australian Blindness Forum (ABF), and National Disability Services (NDS) undertook an online survey of their collective members to gain a national snapshot of the blindness, low vision and rehabilitation services sector. Being the first survey of its kind, the research aimed to benchmark the capacity of the sector and provide a measure for future planning and monitoring to ensure the sector meets the needs of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

1 The Economic Impact and Cost of Vision Loss in Australia (2010), Access Economics

METHODOLOGY

An online survey was developed which contained predominantly quantitative and some qualitative questions around five domains: services offered; geographic area of service delivery; supply and demand of services; staffing and volunteering; and funding arrangements.

The survey was completed by 30 participating organisations (77 per cent response rate) representing service providers, consumer groups and research bodies and who are members of either Vision 2020 Australia, Australian Blindness Forum or National Disability Services. The survey captured services or advice to people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia and did not include data on services delivered internationally.

Organisations who participated in the survey are anticipated to make up more than 90 per cent of the market outside mainstream tertiary and primary health. Questions were not compulsory for respondents to answer and as such response rates varied across the survey. On average, 22 organisations responded to each question. The maximum number of responses to a particular question was 30, while the minimum was 12. This represents an average response rate of 73 per cent, with a range between 40 per cent and 100 per cent.

KEY FINDINGS

1. 90,203 clients accessed services[2] with two per cent identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
2. 60 per cent of clients were aged 65 years or older, 28 per cent were aged 19 to 64 years and 11 per cent from zero to 18 years.
3. There were 343,391 client presentations over 580,195 service hours. This is an average of approximately one hour 45 minutes per client presentation.
4. 1,505 full-time equivalent staff made up the employed workforce, with 890 (59 per cent) health/allied health professionals and 615 (41 per cent) non-health/allied health staff.
5. Half of the respondents that recruited staff reported difficulty in doing so, with orientation and mobility specialists, guide dog instructors, orthoptists, assistive technology consultants and optical dispensers (remote location) being cited as being especially difficult to recruit.
6. Volunteering contributed 17,820 hours per week (equivalent to one-third of the paid workforce hours). This equates to approximately $30 million of unpaid support per year facilitated by participating organisations.[3]
7. The services offered by most respondents were community awareness/education; advocacy and advisory; information services; education support; and aids, equipment and assistive technology.
8. The most utilised services by unique clients were allied health clinicians, library; aids, equipment and assistive technology; and information services.
9. 27 per cent of respondents reported that they have had to refuse service to clients because of high demand.
10. The total operating budget for respondents was $188.2 million. The greatest proportion of income at 43 per cent ($81 million) was generated by fundraising and bequests, with a further 18 per cent from sales ($34.4 million) and nine per cent from investments, grants and other sources. Income from all government sources amounted to 30 per cent at $56 million.

Based on data collected for the 2013 calendar year, A Snapshot of Blindness and Low Vision Services in Australia (the Snapshot Survey) found that a broad range of services are being delivered for people who are blind and/or have low vision by a group of diverse organisations, of varying size, scope and focus. The sector is comprised of a majority of specialist health or allied health staff and significantly supported by volunteers. Organisations employ a broad range of strategies to generate income, with 43 per cent of income derived from philanthropy and community fundraising, and with only 30 per cent of funding derived from the Government.

The findings indicate that the need for services exceeds the financial capacity of the sector, with most respondents citing demand outweighing supply and one in six noting staff being required to work outside set hours. More than half of respondents reported an increase in service wait times on the previous year and more than a quarter reported having to refuse service. The majority of respondents anticipated that demand would further increase in the 2014 calendar year, across all service types.

2 Note that some clients might present more than once.
3 Based on the Social and Community Services Industry Award. **http://www.fairwork.gov.au/Pay/** Community Services Worker Level 4, and the number of organisations surveyed.

The Snapshot Survey also found that respondents were generally optimistic about the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), expressing the potential increase in opportunities for people aged under 65 years, greater access to a broader range of services, the opportunity for increased income and the underpinning philosophy of fostering empowerment for people who are blind or vision impaired. However respondents were equally concerned about the impact of the NDIS on fundraising and philanthropy, increased administrative burden, their ability to offer greater flexibility and the expertise of the National Disability Insurance Agency to understand consumer needs and for consumers to understand the system.

Respondents also expressed deep concern about the capacity to provide services and supports for people aged over 65. These concerns are anticipated to grow over time, resulting from the increased financial pressure created by the NDIS on philanthropy and fundraising, and the increased focus on meeting operational demand for people aged under 65.

REPORT CONCLUSION

This report presents the first ever snapshot of services relating to blindness and low vision services in Australia, but has only partially addressed the lack of national data about this important sector. Vision 2020 Australia, ABF and NDS are confident that it accurately captures an overall picture of service provision together with the main 'pressure points' as reported by the network of service providers that plan and deliver services to the nearly one million Australians that are expected to have vision loss by 2020.

We recommend:

1. **That further research is undertaken** to determine the capacity and preparedness of the blindness and low vision service sector, particularly in monitoring the impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and aged care reforms. Research that supports business and workforce planning including projected demand for blindness and low vision services is urgently required.
2. **That a government advisory committee comprised of consumer representatives, service providers and departmental staff be established** to report to the minister responsible on how the projected demand for blindness and low vision services will be met in the medium to long term. There is a need for an industry development strategy which builds on advice from consumers, service providers and the Government to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired have the services and supports they need to fully participate in the community.

Note: This summary report should be read in conjunction with the full report and any representation of these findings considered against the context presented in the full report.

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