



**Aged & Community
Services • Australia**

**Submission
to
The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee**

December 2011

Recommendations.

In light of the Government's overarching Social Inclusion agenda, Aged and Community Services Australia (ACSA) recommends:

- 1. That the aged and community care industry be identified by Government as a priority industry for technology roll-out and innovation, with particular focus on the needs of regional, rural and remote aged and community care.**
- 2. That following evaluation of the current telehealth initiative, additional incentives be developed to encourage the uptake of telecommunications and e-health technologies by regional, rural and remote aged care providers.**
- 3. That the Electronic Medication Management (EMM) system developed by the Aged Care Industry Information Technology Council and DoHA be funded and rolled out in 2012.**
- 4. That funding be made available to support comprehensive training for regional, rural and remote aged care staff in the use of e-health and digital technologies. Specific training should also support regional, rural and remote aged and community care staff as the new 'tell-us-once' reporting regime is rolled out so that these communities are not left behind.**
- 5. That funding be provided for appropriate technologies to support new assistive technologies for consumers in residential and community aged care.**
- 6. That funding be provided to trial the aged care digital hub concept in selected rural and remote communities.**

A systematic approach to digital capacity building will further encouraging the development and roll-out of such technologies across an industry keen to move forward.

Introduction

Aged and Community Services Australia (ACSA) is the national peak body for aged and community care providers representing over 1100 faith based, charitable and community-based organisations providing residential and community care services, housing and supported accommodation to almost 1 million older people, younger people with a disability and their carers.

ACSA strongly endorses the views expressed in the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee's (RTIRC's) Issues Paper, which captures the future promise and challenges of digital telecommunications in the daily lives and service interfaces of people living and working in regional, rural and remote Australia. As providers of services to older Australians in metropolitan and regional, rural and remote settings, our members are aware of the benefits of e-health and e-communications and technologies and digital assistive technologies for state of the art service delivery, and of the challenges entailed in accessing and making best use of the new technologies.

The aged care industry welcomes the national mandate to link regional, rural and remote health and aged care systems – including those in ‘the last 7 per cent’ - to the best services the nation can provide and we are pleased to make this submission to the RTIRC with its focus on identifying and planning now for the evolving telecommunications’ needs of regional, rural and remote Australians.

The Aged Care Information Technology Council

Unlike other areas of the health and care system, aged care currently has had very little investment by Government in information technology. Investment in information technology to support aged care service delivery, including seamless navigation through the system for consumers and reliable and accurate communication between service providers, is fundamental to taking aged care forwards. The Aged Care Industry Information Technology Council (ACIITC) has been created by the industry peak bodies to give a focus in this area. It has provided oversight on a recent major project, funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, to develop an approach to Electronic Medication Management (EMM). This is now ready for implementation and needs to be funded and rolled out in 2012. We offer the expertise of the ACIITC for ongoing consultations with the RTIRC.

Digital Solutions for a Workforce in Crisis

The ability of aged care services in RRR Australia to deliver best quality care – a right due to all Australians regardless of where they live - is substantially a function of services’ ability to attract a skilled workforce to RRR Australia.

The critical shortage of aged care professionals in RRR Australia, especially nurses and allied health professionals, is well documented. A study by Rural Health Workforce Australia, (*Rural Health Professionals Program: Progress Report: market demand, supply analysis and planning, 2011*) found that while the number of nurses (RNs& ENs) employed in metropolitan Australia rose by 14% between 2003 and 2007 and in inner regional areas by 11%, in outer regional Australia the employment of nurses rose by only 3.6%.¹ In remote Australia the number fell by 0.36%. In very remote Australia the supply of nurses fell by 10% from 2003 to 2007. Data are difficult to obtain for aged care nursing rates, but we know that the lower wages across the board for aged care professionals means that the deficit of aged care nurses in RRR Australia is even more marked. The nursing workforce nationally is also ageing, with 40% of all employed nurses aged 50 years and over,² again a figure known to be higher in non-metropolitan Australia and in aged care. There is, quite simply, a crisis in non-metropolitan aged care that is likely to be exacerbated in the near future.

Given this workforce crisis, digital telecommunications will be critical to a number of aspects of future aged care delivery in RRR Australia. It will

- provide a key part of the solution to the ongoing acute shortage of aged care professional and support staff by optimising the capacity of the available workforce;

¹ *Rural Health Professionals Program: Progress Report: market demand, supply analysis and planning*, Rural Health Workforce Australia, 2011:10

² Rural Health Workforce Australia, 2011:11.

- link RRR aged care facilities/services and older Australians to the same best practice health care that is available to metropolitan Australians;
- support ongoing innovation in care in RRR aged care settings, and
- support training opportunities in RRR aged care.

The roll out of broadband, wireless and satellite telecommunications through the NBN will provide the key technologies to maximise the capacity, capability, flexibility and adaptability of the RRR aged care workforce, such as it is. At the direct care level, these technologies will enable

- real-time telehealth linkages between rural and remote services and metropolitan or regional medical and care specialists and practitioners, including the real-time transfer of electronic diagnostic data;
- real-time audio and televisual linkages between outreach nurses/care professionals and central rural or remote services, eg for real-time consultations, transmission of information and cares support relevant to daily care decisions, wound management, medication management etc.,
- the linking of RRR Australia to the new personally controlled e-health records system (PCEHR);
- professional networking, enabling rural and remote aged care professionals to keep abreast of innovations and to stay connected across regions and with their metropolitan colleagues; and
- improve safety and support for staff travelling in rural and remote community areas.

The roll out of digital technologies across RRR Australian will bring the professional interests of health and aged care staff into lockstep with the care needs of older Australians. Affordable, 100 per cent digital coverage will open up regional Australia to itself (laterally/intra-community) and to the 'outside' world. It will support the government's commitment to equality of opportunity and care nationwide.

We note that the *Telehealth* funding incentives initiated by the Commonwealth through Medicare on 1 July 2011 provide one-off lump-sum and ongoing payments to residential aged care services (RACS) to assist in developing telehealth. This is highly commendable. This program needs to be carefully evaluated when it concludes in 2014/15 to ensure that there has been sufficient uptake by RACS. If there has been insufficient coverage, ACSA will argue for a more 'direct action' approach to ensure that there is sufficient coverage and that RRR areas benefit.

While it is impossible to predict the specifics of future digital telecommunications usage in aged care, it is indisputable that aged care and health care will become increasingly telecommunications technology-focused. It is imperative that the hard and soft systems that support those linkages be a first-stage priority in the national NBN roll out. Digital technology cannot provide all the answers to the RRR aged care workforce problem, but it can ensure that the available workforce capacity is optimised.

Assistive Technology

Technology that enhances older people's capacity for independent living is already 'coming out of the lab' and into aged care services. For example, home monitoring and personal remote medication management systems are being trialled across leading regional, rural and

remote aged care providers,³ but our members report available internet capacity is unable to reliably support such innovations. Trials include a system to monitor vital signs of frail older people living in the community being trialled by Feros Care in regional NSW and Queensland, and a system to monitor breathing for nursing home residents with chronic airway obstructions in the Hunter Valley of NSW. Findings from both trials confirm that these effective and labour efficient technologies are hindered by unreliable connectivity at current internet service levels. A systematic approach to digital capacity building will further encouraging the development and roll-out of such technologies across an industry keen to move forward.

Aged Care Services as Digital Hubs

The RTIRC Issues Paper seeks advice on how greater participation in the digital economy can be encouraged in regional, rural and remote Australia (Questions 5 &6). A study done by ACSA into e-learning outcomes in 2008 found that face-to-face mentoring and training in the use of digital learning and communications technologies was a critical factor in their successful uptake. As your report notes, non-metropolitan Australians and older workers are less likely to be familiar with digital technologies than their metropolitan counterparts. These factors are doubly relevant in the aged care industry in non-metropolitan Australia with its older workforce.

We draw your attention to the potential opportunities that aged care services present as community hubs, as potential sites for community-wide upskilling and training in the use of digital technologies in rural and remote Australia. In Indigenous communities, in particular, the care of the aged is a community-wide concern and aged care facilities are 'door-open' to all members of families and communities. They therefore present as potential active hubs for community-wide digital training, or digital familiarisation, in concert with other key community services (eg schools). The benefits of digital technologies and training options situated in aged care services will fan out across communities.

In the right circumstances we therefore call for aged care services to be 'noticed' as suitable locations for 'Broadband for Seniors' kiosks, diabetes telehealth trials, 'Telehealth in the Home' trials, for sites under the Indigenous Communications Program; and as candidates for hubs under the funded Community Resource Centres program. We recognise there will be issues to resolve around such inclusion and would welcome the opportunity to work on these during the roll out.

The Business of Aged Care

Aged care services are 'businesses' as well as 'services' and as such they necessarily require access to affordable, high speed and reliable digital technology. The RTIRC Issues Paper notes the whole of government move towards 'tell-us-once' data collection/input. This will have enormous benefits for aged care with its heavy reporting and record keeping requirements for funding and accreditation. This includes a strong intersection with the major reforms being rolled out by Treasury in the Not-For-Profit sector.

As the national peak, ACSA is aware that the available data sets for aged care are limited and we envisage that these digitally supported data systems will enable more effective and efficient mapping and planning of the national aged care system both by government and by service providers.

³ *Aged Care Insite*, June/July 2010.

We are the 9th largest employer in Australia and are facing huge growth over the next decade. Given the limited availability of staff to meet that growth, we are keen innovators in the use of technology and see this as a business opportunity that will return value to the community and government.