

# Chapter 4

The experience of people with disability and complaint management systems



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### John's story

John lives in a group home. He was very unhappy and wanted to complain about the fact that he never had any opportunities to make choices about what went on in the house. He felt like he wasn't listened to and gave examples of how his individual support arrangements were changed to suit the house's staff roster without first discussing with him. He felt that the meals were not healthy or big enough and often the staff would drink coffee in their area and talk about him rather than with him.

When he contacted the Disability Services Commissioner he found it really hard to talk about what was going on in the house. He didn't want the staff in the house to know that he was complaining because he thought that they would be upset with him and treat him badly.

Previously when he had told staff he wasn't happy he felt like they didn't want to listen and told him that things were done in that way to suit everyone in the house. He told the Assessment Officer at the Office of the Disability Services Commissioner that he didn't have anywhere else to live. He wondered if things would get worse if he made a complaint.

As a result of building trust with John and planning strategies that would protect him, the Assessment Officer was able to ask the disability service to respond to the concerns raised by John.

Research shows that problems arising from poor service and ineffective communication account for up to one-third of an organisation's total workload (NSW Ombudsman, 2007). It is widely acknowledged that dissatisfied service users will talk badly of an organisation and tell many more people than will potentially satisfied service users. Whilst there is currently limited data on the experience of disability service users, research in other areas indicates that dissatisfied service users tell eight to ten people on average. Satisfied service users will tell four or five people (SAI Global and Neill Buck, 2008). Complaints which are not swiftly resolved can generate significant additional workload for an organisation. However, service users who have

experienced service recovery tend to be at least as loyal and supportive as those who have never experienced a problem (NSW Ombudsman, 2007).

Overseas research suggests less than 4% of service users who are dissatisfied with a service bother to complain. Businesses will not hear from 96% of unhappy service users. For every complaint received the average company has 26 service users with problems and six with serious problems (SAI Global and Neill Buck, 2008). Local research suggests Australians are more likely to complain about serious service difficulties. The majority don't complain, preferring not to say anything and just vote with their feet if there is an alternative source, which is not always possible with disability services. Whilst most complaints can be addressed quickly, if they are not handled well then the service user's dissatisfaction can fester, making further contacts difficult and the relationship strained.

Many of the complaints received by the Commissioner reflect this tense or difficult relationship between the provider and the person with a disability and their family. Often the central issue is poor communication. In some instances the relationship has deteriorated because there was nowhere independent for these complaints to be taken prior to the establishment of the DSC.



Under the previous legislation the Intellectual Disability Review Panel (IDRP) found people with an intellectual disability and their families were reluctant to complain about services when they were reliant on those services to meet their day-to-day needs (IDRP, 2005: 6).

In an unpublished paper (Fitch, 2007) the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria in 2006 suggested that people with a disability may not complain about service provision because of:

- fear of being victimised for making a complaint
- fear of having the service withdrawn
- being branded as a trouble maker or appearing ungrateful to the service provider
- lack of confidence that any real or lasting change will eventuate from the complaints process
- costs that may be associated with pursuing a complaint.

These fears, combined with high levels of unmet need and a lack of alternative service options, are often a strong motivation for people with a disability and their families to put up with poor service rather than complain. This is further complicated in regional Victoria, where there may be only one disability service provider in an area.

In Western Australia, complaints about disability services have primarily been in relation to the quality of the service, communication, conduct of staff and funding policy (WA Disability Services Commission, 2006: 36). The WA Disability Services Commission also found that only 7% of finalised cases led to service improvements.



### Thought

*How often have improvements in your service resulted from your experience with complaints?*

According to Goodman-Delahunty (2004), the following factors affecting frequency of complaints also need to be considered by providers when developing, putting into practice and assessing their complaints process and management:

- Complainants may not be aware of the process
- The complaints process may not be readily accessible
- If a complainant has had a negative experience in the past, they may fear unpleasant or unfavourable treatment by the service provider when lodging a current complaint.

Whilst disability service providers may believe that they have sound complaints management systems in place it is important to ascertain the views of service users in order to confirm that this is the case.



### Thought

*What do people who use your service think about your complaints system?  
How do you know?*



### Tip

#### ***Put yourself in the service user's shoes***

*If you were a user of your own service wishing to lodge a complaint, how would you find out:*

- where to make the complaint
- how to make a complaint
- how long will it take before you heard anything
- what was happening to the complaint
- what you should do next
- who else you could complain to, and
- what assistance you could get to lodge your complaint?