

Chapter 4

The experience of people with a disability and complaint resolution processes



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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 it 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 Resolutions Officer at 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 Resolutions 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 customers will talk badly of an organisation and tell many more people than will potentially satisfied customers. Whilst there is currently limited data on the experience people using disability services, research in business and other areas indicates that dissatisfied customers tell eight to ten people on average. Satisfied customers 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, people 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 people who are dissatisfied with a service bother to complain. Businesses will not hear from 96% of the people who are unhappy with their service. For every complaint received the average company has 26 customers 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. However, 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 person'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 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).

Further to this and based on feedback from people with a disability and their families from both formal and informal consultations over a five year period, DSC has identified a number of reasons why people may not complain about the disability supports they receive including:

- Fear of retribution or withdrawal of service for making a complaint
- Not being aware of their right to complain
- Not wanting to be seen as a ‘troublemaker’
- Concern about how it will affect their relationship with the service provider
- A lack of information about the process for making a complaint
- Previous negative experiences associated with having tried to make a complaint

These fears and issues, 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 service provider in an area.



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 resolution process:

- People wanting to make a complaint may not be aware of the process
- The complaints process may not be readily accessible
- If a person who has made a complaint 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 service providers may believe that they have sound complaints resolution processes in place it is important to ascertain the views of people using services 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 shoes of people using your services

If you were using your own service and 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?