

Media Release

The Office of the Disability Services Commissioner, Victoria

7 October 2015

Disability Services Commissioner empowers complaints – 2015 Annual Report

The Annual Report of the independent Victorian Disability Services Commissioner was today tabled in Parliament, recording a strong service trend, and improvements in complaints handling.

The Commissioner, Mr Laurie Harkin AM, said:

“The mark of the success of this office is in our ability to facilitate and empower some of our most powerless and vulnerable citizens to speak up when they have a concern. The critical element in achieving this is to make them feel safe and protected in doing so.”

Mr Harkin said people with disabilities typically felt exposed and fearful of retribution and withdrawal of services if they complained. Historically this had stopped many having a voice.

“My commitment, and the passion of all in my office, is to support people with a disability to reclaim that voice as equal citizens deserving and using their equal right to be heard in our community,” he said.

“My approach to assessing or investigating complaints is informed by this: what will make it easiest for people to speak up, what will make them feel safe, what will achieve the best outcome for them.”

Mr Harkin said the results achieved by his staff showed that continued improvement of the approach and accessibility of the office was effective. The complaints numbers are the highest since the office was established.

Since 2007, complaints managed and reported by service providers have more than doubled from 992 in 2007 to 2,224 in 2015. Over the same period, people with a disability whose complaints were managed directly by his office increased by 60% from 133 to 209. Enquiries increased nearly 300% from 178 to 689 in the same period. “We see this as a sign of people developing confidence in raising issues.”

More significantly, the satisfaction of clients who complain had increased, Mr Harkin said.

“Of those who complained, 88% were satisfied with the resolution and felt treated respectfully and that their complaint was taken seriously. This has improved from 58% in 2009,” Mr Harkin said.

“These are the kinds of improvements and outcomes that have real meaning for people with a disability who find their voice and feel empowered and protected to speak out.”

Mr Harkin said a key to achieving these outcomes was striking the right balance in his office’s approach to managing complaints.

“I am obliged by my legislation to achieve outcomes with the least possible formality and fuss. This makes particular sense for people with cognitive impairment, because formal investigations can intimidate and deter people who feel vulnerable. The assessment processes is equivalent to an investigation by any other name, and less intimidating.”

“Nevertheless, I recognise that there is genuine belief among some that more formal investigations are needed. I agree investigations have an important place, and in 2015 I have initiated four formal investigations, two relating to allegations of abuse.”

2015 Annual Report and Our Year in Review (summary) are available at www.odsc.vic.gov.au

For further information contact 1300 728 187 or email contact@odsc.vic.gov.au