

5 November 2020

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal  
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To whom it may concern,

Carers NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in response to the *Review of Rural and Regional Bus Fares from January 2021* draft report. This short submission will focus on the need to ensure affordable and ongoing access to buses in regional areas to enable carers living in those areas to access services, maintain their social connections, attend to their own health and wellbeing and take advantage of education and employment opportunities.

### About Carers NSW

Carers NSW is the peak non-government organisation for carers in New South Wales (NSW). A carer is any individual who provides care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and/or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. Carers NSW is part of the National Carer Network and a member of Carers Australia. Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to:

- Be a leading carer organisation in which carers have confidence
- Actively promote carer recognition and support
- Actively support carers to navigate a changing service landscape that will be characterised by ongoing policy reform
- Promote connected community experiences and opportunities for carers that are inclusive of diverse carer groups
- Lead and advocate for carer-specific and carer-inclusive policy making, research and service delivery
- Continue to be a quality-driven, responsive and carer-focused organisation.

### Carers in regional and rural areas

Of the estimated 854,300 carers living in NSW, nearly 30 per cent live in rural or regional areas.<sup>1</sup> Caring occurs at much higher rates in rural and regional areas, with approximately one in seven people providing care, as opposed to one in ten in metropolitan areas. Rates of disability and chronic health conditions are higher in rural and remote areas, increasing the need for informal carers.<sup>2</sup>

However, carers living in these areas also experience disability and chronic health conditions at higher rates compared to carers living in metropolitan areas.<sup>3</sup> The poorer health and wellbeing of

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Summary 2018*, New South Wales, Catalogue no. 4430.0, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) *Australia's Health 2018: In brief*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/australias-health-2018/contents/table-of-contents>, viewed 13 December 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, B., Gray, M., Baxter, J. and Hunter, B. (2009), *The tyranny of distance? Carers in regional and remote areas of Australia*, Prepared for Carers Australia by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

non-metropolitan carers is often attributed to limited supply and reach of services such as respite, increased isolation, and the tendency for such carers to have fewer informal networks to provide additional support.<sup>4</sup>

Carers NSW commends IPART on their recommendations to address the high costs of public transport in rural and regional areas. Improving the affordability availability of buses in rural and regional areas is likely to improve carers' access to formal and informal supports, reducing social isolation and improving carer health and wellbeing.

### Transport affordability in regional and rural areas

Many carers experience financial hardship due to the additional costs associated with their caring role and as such, addressing carer finances has been identified as a priority in the new NSW Carer Strategy: *Caring in NSW 2020 - 2030*. For rural and regional carers, these costs are often even greater due to the need to travel long distances to access services and supports.

The recently conducted 2020 National Carer Survey<sup>5</sup> found that more than half of regional and rural respondents experienced at least one form of financial stress in their household in the year prior to completing the Survey, compared to just over one in five Australian households. More than one in eight (12.7%) of carers living in regional and rural NSW reported that they had experienced more than 4 instances of financial stress in their household in the prior 12 months, and were therefore considered to have been in financial distress. While many carers reported experiencing financial stressors in the Survey, inner regional carers reported the highest rate of financial distress of all.

Carers NSW commends IPART's recommendation to significantly reduce rural and regional bus fares, as the reduction of fares is likely to enable greater use of available bus routes and services and reduce financial strain on carers and the people they care for when using public transport. However, due to the high levels of financial hardship experienced by carers and the need for carers and those they care for to travel to access necessary services and supports, Carers NSW believes that carers should receive additional consideration and financial supports to assist with transport costs where required.

Carers NSW supports the extension of concession fares to Health Care Card holders, as there are many carers who are likely to benefit from this change. Carers NSW also supports the simplification of existing schemes that enable concession rates for rural and regional bus fares, as this is likely to improve access and reduce administrative burden for many carers. Furthermore, while some carers receive the Carer Payment and have access to the associated concession card, many carers are not eligible for, or aware of, carer-specific income support. Carers NSW recommends that schemes or initiatives that reduce the cost of travel for carers be considered to enable carers greater opportunities to access supports and services and to participate in education, employment and their community.

### Access to services and supports

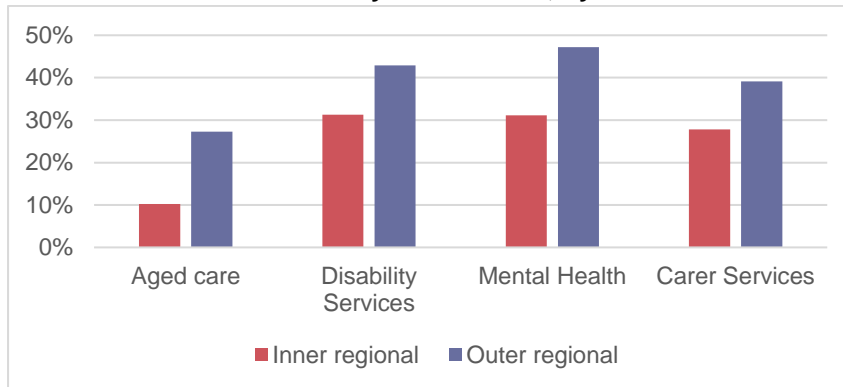
Despite the proportionately higher rates of disability and chronic health conditions in rural and remote areas, health care and community services are not distributed accordingly. The 2020 National Carer

<sup>4</sup> Winterton, R. and Warburton, J. (2011), 'Models of care for socially isolated older rural carers: barriers and implications', *Rural and Remote Health* (online) vol. 11, no. 1678.

<sup>5</sup> Carers NSW (2020a), *2020 National Carer Survey 2020: Summary report*, Carers NSW, North Sydney.

Survey<sup>6</sup> found that many regional and rural carers in NSW reported were not able to access services required by the person they care for in their local area. Furthermore, many regional and rural carers reported that carer-specific support services are not available locally. Table 1 indicates that mental health and disability services are particularly inaccessible in outer regional parts of NSW.

**Table 1. Service unavailability in local area, by sector**



Many services are centralised in regional centres and major cities, and inadequate or inaccessible public transport infrastructure often requires carers to drive vast distances to access the services they and the person they care for require.<sup>7</sup> Not only is this time-consuming, but carers in non-metropolitan areas are more likely than those in metropolitan areas to find transport costs to be an added financial burden.<sup>8</sup> While there are schemes available to cover travel costs for specialist appointments and some other health services, anecdotal evidence indicates that such programs are not being adequately promoted to carers. Furthermore, such schemes have strict eligibility criteria and often do not adequately cover the out-of-pocket costs associated with such travel.

Where schemes do not adequately cover carer and care recipient transport, carers often have no choice to meet these costs, or forego the services and supports needed to maintain their own health and wellbeing or that of their care recipient. The 2020 National Carer Survey<sup>9</sup> found that almost half of inner and outer regional carers contributed to the transport costs incurred by their care recipient. For carers who already face financial hardship, additional transport costs place additional financial pressure on carers or force them to choose between their care recipients needs and their own needs.

Carers NSW commends IPART on identifying the need for caution in the assessment and changes of existing bus routes. While some routes may have low usage, for carers and the people they care for who rely on them, it is important to ensure that this transport is replaced or remains available in a different form to ensure that carers and those they care for are not disadvantaged by changes and are able to continue accessing the services or supports that they need.

<sup>6</sup> Carers NSW (2020a).

<sup>7</sup> Peel, N., Westmoreland, J. and Steinberg, M. (2002) 'Transport safety for older people: A study of their experiences, perceptions and management needs', *Injury Control and Safety Promotion*, vol. 9, no.1, pp. 19-24.

<sup>8</sup> Dew, A., Bulkeley, K., Veitch, C., Bundy, A., Gallego, G., Lincoln, M., Brentnall, J. and Griffiths, S. (2013) 'Addressing the barriers to accessing therapy services in rural and remote areas', *Disability and Rehabilitation*, vol. 35, no. 18, pp. 1564-1570; Carers NSW (2014) *Carers Survey: Main Report*, Sydney; Schirmer (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Carers NSW (2020a).

Carers NSW commends IPART's emphasis on considering the social inclusion benefit in future analyses, planning and provision of bus routes and services. Access to adequate transport supports the optimal health and wellbeing of carers and their care recipients, enabling them to access health, social, education and employment supports and opportunities in their community and surrounding communities. Participation in the community that optimises carer health and wellbeing is likely to support the sustainability of caring arrangements and reduce the need for emergency, high cost supports.

### Ensuring accessibility

Carers NSW believes that the accessibility of vehicles should also be a consideration in the procurement of bus services by the NSW Government to ensure that people with limited mobility can access available public transport. Where the use of buses is limited due to accessibility barriers, carers may need to stand in to provide transport. For carers who are often time poor, this may impact on their ability to maintain their own health and wellbeing or participate in education or employment. Carers NSW recommends that IPART include accessibility as a consideration and incentive in future contracts with service providers.

Thank you for accepting our submission. For further information, please contact Melissa Docker, Policy and Development Officer, on [REDACTED] or melissad@carersnsw.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

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