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MEDIA RELEASE

LABOR'S SUPPORT AT HOME IMPLEMENTATION OFF THE RAILS

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The Albanese Government's implementation of the Support at Home program is off the rails, with the first full-day hearing of the Senate inquiry into the program exposing a litany of failures leaving older Australians without the care they need and were promised.

Witnesses including providers, peak bodies and academics gave evidence about the perverse outcomes of the algorithmic assessment tool overriding clinical judgement, a hardship scheme so difficult to access it has become a barrier rather than a safety net, grandfathering arrangements failing to protect people from cost increases and an administrative burden so severe it is driving up prices for older Australians while collapsing provider margins at the same time.

Shadow Minister for Health and Aged Care Senator Anne Ruston said the evidence confirmed that Labor's rollout of the program was threatening to put Australia's aged care system into crisis.

"This inquiry heard from witness after witness, that Labor's Support at Home program is failing the very people it was designed to look after," Senator Ruston said.

A blunt instrument replacing clinical judgement

Provider Flexicare told the inquiry that Labor's rigid, algorithm-driven assessment tool was a disproportionate response to inconsistency between assessors, a problem that should have been fixed through better training, not a one-size-fits-all computer system.

"There's been a very... sledgehammer to a nut kind of approach," Flexicare's Adrian Morgan told the committee.

A hardship scheme too hard to use

Providers gave evidence that the financial hardship process which was meant to protect the most vulnerable older Australians from unaffordable co-contributions is so onerous it is deterring the very people it exists to help. Kirinari Community Services told the inquiry it had lodged just 16 hardship applications, of which only three were approved.

Healthy Ageing Partnerships described the hardship form as "a 16 page document that is absolutely ludicrous to expect somebody to try and navigate," particularly for people without family to assist them. Another provider described it as a "very daunting" process.

Grandfathering failing to deliver on its promise

Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland told the inquiry that despite being promised a "no worse off" guarantee, grandfathered older Australians are in fact worse off with hidden administration costs built into the hourly rate eating into what their package can actually buy. "There certainly is a worse off, and it's largely around the lack of transparency... of how administration is built into the hourly rate," CEO Lisa Ward told the committee.

Complexity driving up costs for families and collapsing provider margins

The inquiry heard that the administrative burden of the new system is doing real damage by pushing up prices for older Australians while simultaneously making the program financially unviable for the providers meant to deliver it.

Catholic Health Australia told the inquiry provider margins had collapsed from 4.4 per cent to 1.7 per cent, a fall of 60 per cent, describing it as "the most pressing challenge there is in Support at Home."

Senator Ruston said the evidence should be a wake-up call for the Albanese Government.

"Labor was warned this is what would happen if it pressed ahead with a rushed, budget-driven overhaul of aged care. Now we have it confirmed, on the record, by the very providers this Government relies on to deliver care," Senator Ruston said.

"The Government must urgently support the Coalition's Aged Care Amendment (Restoring Human Override for Aged Care Needs Assessments) Bill, fix the hardship process so it stops being a barrier to care, and come clean on the true cost this implementation is imposing on older Australians and the providers who care for them."

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