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Australia is Failing its Elderly – We Need Action Now

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You don't need to be a regular visitor to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety to know that our system is at breaking point. The stories of abuse and neglect emerging on a daily basis from this forensic examination reflect an aged care system that simply can't cope. It's outrageous that these people have to wait for the Government to respond to a Royal Commission to have their needs met.

Australia is failing its elderly. Badly. We need action, and we need it now.

Right now our aged care system is on fiscal life support.

Nearly half of all residential aged care facilities are operating at a loss, according to the latest data reported by industry analysts StewartBrown. The picture is even more bleak in rural and remote areas where a staggering 70 per cent of aged care facilities receive insufficient funding to cover the costs of services for these communities. It's not just the drought ravaging communities in inland Australia.

The Federal Government's own financing agency reports that aged care expenses are rising steeply, at 5.3 per cent each year, dwarfing an increase in income of just 1.7 per cent. The home care packages program is so grossly underfunded that some people will wait 18 months for the right level of support.

The nation needs a system that is equipped to deal with the demographic wave that is coming.

The UnitingCare network, one of the largest aged care providers – with nearly 100,000 elderly people in our care – like so many others, is caught up in the eye of this perfect storm.

For too long, the most challenging reforms of aged care have been placed in the too-hard basket.

We are hopeful that the Royal Commission will make strong recommendations that meet these challenges once and for all. But there are steps the Government has to take now. Older Australians in need of services cannot wait for the Government to respond when the findings are handed down in 2020, or perhaps even later.

We ask the Prime Minister Scott Morrison to build on the leadership he showed last September when he called the Royal Commission, and make aged care an immediate national priority. Enlist the states and territories to work with you on long-term and

sustainable policy and actions. Providers are willing and able to act, but we all need to act together, along with communities.

There are key priorities the Morrison Government needs to address now. Firstly, the shortage in home care packages. Secondly, restoring the \$3 billion that has been cut from the residential aged care budget over the past decade. These cuts undermine the critical goals of consumer-directed care and the long-term sustainability of the sector. Thirdly, an investment in rural and remote services to address the health disadvantage in these areas.

Finally, but critically, we need significantly more investment in our dedicated workers who are committed to providing the highest level of care. An investment in our workforce is an investment in our elders. It is not a numeric outcome, it is an outcome whereby every person can say I get quality care and services when I need them from people who are knowledgeable, capable and caring.

The horror stories emerging from the Royal Commission – so graphically reported in this newspaper – highlight the impact of a decade of underinvestment, both in our people and in the infrastructure that is required for the future.

Prime Minister, we call on you to spearhead national action in these four areas now and challenge the systemic ageism at play.

A first step would be to form an Ageing Council under COAG. The ageing of Australia’s population cannot continue to be ignored. It needs an intergovernmental response in the same way as disability or the environment. Ageing is more than a footnote to the health system.

For those who argue the Royal Commission should be allowed to run its course, we agree. However, we do not need to wait until the final report to make changes. The nation cannot afford to wait any longer.

The ageing of the population is a reality. It is equally true that without immediate help, our elders will continue to suffer. The services they depend on run down by a system that has failed to move with the times.

Australia’s aged care system requires an injection of funds, a radical rethink of regulatory functions and structures, innovative thinking on how we can best look after the elderly - and brave political leadership.

As one of the world’s most prosperous nations, Australia can and must do better.

Prime Minister, the time to act is now.

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UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church’s community services network in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people each year across urban, rural and remote communities.

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