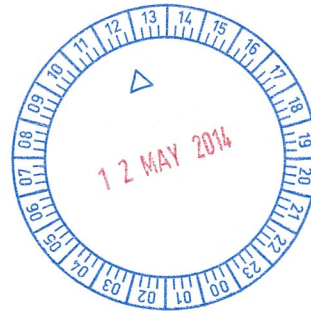




Our ref: 68000233-2
Enquiries: Ron Chalmers
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Hon Liz Behjat MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Public Administration
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

Dear Ms Behjat

Inquiry into the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme

Thank you for your letter dated 14 March 2014 regarding the above and for the opportunity to provide comment on the Standing Committee on Public Administration's Inquiry into the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS).

The Disability Services Commission (the Commission) has residents throughout Western Australia, many living in rural and remote areas. Therefore PATS is vital in ensuring people with disability receive necessary and important supports and services.

People with disability are particularly vulnerable to poor health outcomes and experience difficulties in accessing health services appropriate to their needs, especially those living in rural and remote areas. People with disability and their families incur many additional costs and face barriers to employment and opportunities for a reasonable income; it is therefore imperative for their wellbeing that schemes such as PATS remunerate families and individuals appropriately.

The Commission is pleased to provide the attached submission, addressing the terms of reference of the inquiry.

For further information regarding the Commission's submission, please contact Ms Sarah Jarman, Senior Policy Officer, on 9426 9316, or email sarah.jarman@dsc.wa.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Sam Ciminata
A/Director General
Disability Services Commission

Att.

9 May 2014

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Disability Services Commission Submission for the Inquiry to the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)

The Committee will inquire into:

- 1) How adequately PATS delivers assistance to regional people accessing specialist medical care, including:**
 - a) Level of Funding Applied to the Transport and Accommodation Subsidies Provided**
 - PATS has not kept up with the real costs of living and therefore does not provide an adequate level of reimbursement for travel and accommodation costs, leaving people significantly out of pocket.
 - PATS requires prior bookings and payment is not made to the individual until after the visit. For some individuals the initial outlay for petrol, accommodation, food costs and parking is too great and specialist appointments are often postponed or cancelled due to the unavailability of funds.
 - Accommodation is remunerated at a level that pays for basic accommodation which is very unlikely to be wheelchair accessible and some do not have the capacity for food preparation, which is important for those with special dietary requirements. Therefore, this not only incurs additional costs to the individual but also creates difficulty with accessing facilities like bathrooms and when special diets and feeding procedures are required.
 - b) Eligibility for PATS Funding**
 - Individuals are only able to have one carer ('escort') travel with them. For some people with disability two carers may be required to meet the individual's needs and ensure safety to both the client and carer.
 - There is great inconsistency when inquiries are made regarding eligibility and for which services the PATS can be accessed. Experience of some clients is that it depends on who you speak to as to whether you are eligible. There needs to be a more consistent and accurate message.
 - Disability can be the outcome of complex conditions, which is not always well understood. Seeking a second opinion and the need for follow-up appointments are well-established practices and important to ensure key contributing factors are recognised and appropriate intervention strategies identified. Currently PATS will not cover seeking a second opinion and in most cases follow-up appointments.
 - PATS is not available if there is a specialist locally based which disadvantages many people with disability. For example, in Albany there is a part-time paediatrician that works one day a week and has a waitlist of 9-12 months. There are no private paediatricians. For parents with a child with suspected Autism this can mean a substantial delay in accessing therapy, where it has been proven that early intervention is key to long-term beneficial results. There is also no choice given to the parent in accessing a paediatrician that has expertise in Autism. PATS will give consideration on a case-by-case basis but this is reportedly rare.
 - Allied health services have a major role to play in the health, development, and inclusion in community life of people with disability. While the focus in Western Australia has been on developing and training local allied health services, there are times when immediate access to a specialist clinician results in a better outcome for the individual. Therefore, access to allied health professionals, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology is important in ensuring the well-being of the individual.
 - PATS is not available for dental appointments which has an impact on some people who need to travel to access the Special Needs Dental Clinic in Perth.

c) Administration Process

- For many individuals accessing PATS it is a cumbersome and long winded process. For example, a specific visit to a General Practitioner needs to occur for completion of the form, which needs to be submitted prior to the appointment. This appointment is solely for the purpose of accessing PATS.
- It is difficult to gain information about PATS from local hospitals and in particular where there are fly-in fly-out doctors that are unaware of the PATS. There is often conflicting information about distance; this has particularly been the case for people living in York and surrounding areas. All information needs to be clearer, more concise, accessible, advertised regularly and available at GP clinics.
- One mother experiences constant issues with PATS not providing the required information to the airline, despite the mother giving precise information and a considerable amount of time prior to the booking. There is often something wrong with the booking; for example the airline not advised there will be a wheelchair; the mother and child seated separately (the child has extensive needs); the wheelchair insert not allowed on the plane because the airline was not notified. This is then complicated when Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) advise of a change of itinerary a day or so before travel.
- A Martu man, from the Newman area, travelled to Perth to commence dialysis, his daughter travelled with him in order to assist him as he has paralysis on one side. On arriving at their accommodation booked by PATS, they discovered the room only had a double bed. As a result, they needed to find their own accommodation at very short notice and had to stay approximately 55 kilometres from the hospital where he was being treated, which required daily additional travel and expense to the individual.
- A Martu man, from the Newman area, was flown by the Royal Flying Doctor Service out of Jigalong (a remote community approximately 80 kilometres / two hours outside Newman) to Perth with double pneumonia. On his return, PATS had made no arrangements from Newman to Jigalong and he was left to make his own way. This was further detrimental to his health as it was the weekend and there were no services available to assist him until the Monday. All of this occurred despite the Commission's Local Area Coordinator advocating to PATS prior to discharge.
- There are many instances where people come to Perth for several appointments, which fall over a couple of days. If there is a two or three day gap between appointments, then PATS will not pay for accommodation for the nights where there is no appointment. This predicament is of no fault to the individual but does add additional expense to them.
- From locations such as Albany, PATS is only approved for plane fares in exceptional circumstances. Therefore, a trip that could be taken care of in one day could be three days (one day for travel, one day of appointments, one day return). This also causes additional issues such as where there are no accessible toilet facilities in roadhouses or community toilets on the journey, so in some circumstances the only option is to change a person on the floor.

d) Whether there is consideration of exceptional circumstances

- Nothing to add.

2) Any incidental matter

- Nothing to add.