

Opinion Piece

LEFT BEHIND

by Anglicare Australia Executive Director, Kasy Chambers

In Australia we seem to be increasingly comfortable with the idea that people can be left behind.

It is as if the nineteenth century notion of the deserving and the undeserving poor is being revived. Old aged pensioners, people with disability and their carers these days, undoubtedly are deserving. As, it seems, are some supporting parents now. But everyone else on the inadequate Newstart, asylum seekers, people living with alcohol or other drug issues, anyone who has been to prison, the homeless, the long-term unemployed and many Indigenous Australians are not.

The deserving poor dichotomy is reflected too in the growth in welfare conditionality, sending a signal to wider Australia that people have to earn support and that they can't be trusted. And goes some way to explaining why the critical shortage of secure housing for people on lowest incomes is not acknowledged as the significant national problem that it is.

This comfort with inequity is particularly problematic because of wider developments in the social service and care industries.

Much of Australia's social services is at arms-length from government – the billion dollars' worth delivered by the Anglicare network right across the country each year is evidence of that. But as all our managers and executives know well, government still wants to be certain that its investments are effective and the programs it funds are efficient, whether they are run by business or the not-for-profits. In today's tight fiscal and political climate, service purchasing will reward – not surprisingly – programs that focus on people who can be quickly rolled through to achieve their health, housing or employment outcomes. People living with hardship and poverty, who have high needs and who are hard to deal with, are at risk of permanent exclusion.

Another development in the care industries runs the same risk. The goals of consumer directed care, which we endorse, are to treat people with more respect and ensure they have more agency in how that support is delivered. However, in the new, highly contested and growing marketplace of disability and aged care, the most obvious business models are likely to privilege the privileged. While those with income, resources or capable family carers may do really well from this new more flexible approach, the poorest and least capable might not.

Well that's the business of business. Without a bigger vision or purpose factored into our community service operations (run for profit or not) people who are more complicated, demanding and distracting will seem to be just that. They won't look like a

business opportunity. After the recent election, Mr Abbott our new Prime Minister promised that no one would be left behind. But the 'undeserving' can as easily become the invisible, and people are left behind if they are not seen.

This is Anti-Poverty Week; when those who live in poverty, and those who work in the social service sector, raise questions about its extent, its causes and the responses that are needed. And each year at this time Anglicare Australia publishes our State of the Family report – a collection of essays from across the Anglicare network reflecting on what we know from our work with people on the margins of society. This year we wanted to explore how agencies respond in new ways to the needs of the people they work with – their customers and clients. In answering that question, the essayists wrote about the importance of their mission as the base of that relationship.

They framed their mission in a number of ways: by supporting people to find the fullness of life; as a Christian commitment to including the excluded; through recognition and investment in our common humanity; in being compelled by the Gospel to care for others; and in walking alongside those in need. What that can lead to, as the essays show, is the close connections and the unconditional support that for many people are the first steps to recovery or independence.

What it boils down to is a preparedness to take the time and to invest in people when there is no guarantee of any return on that investment. As it happens, evidence suggests that any number of people can find a purpose and health in their life if they get support when they need it. But many of the programs our writers describe, for fathers who are prisoners in gaol for example, or personal health plans for people living with drug issues or mental ill health, have no guarantee of success. The initiatives come into effect because the agencies that deliver them have a purpose, a commitment, rather than because these are people who 'deserve' it.

As CEO of Newcastle's Samaritans Foundation, Cec Shevels puts it in his essay, "human spirituality, the inner life, does need to be nurtured no matter who we are, no matter what stage of life we are at." He suggests that this is how we find meaning in our lives, whether we are human resource managers, social workers or the people they work with.

While human spirituality may be a bridge too far for many, sustaining a vision of a meaningful life for everyone should not be. Of course it's too slippery and all-encompassing an idea to structure into the funding contracts between government and a business or a community organisation, but it can be fundamental to the purpose of the organisation itself. It isn't necessary, or desirable, that all social services have a faith base, but we would all have more confidence, or faith, that no one will be left behind where the services value our common humanity above everything else.

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