

Policy Brief: Private Phones in Aged Care

10 September 2020

Background

Most of us could not imagine being without our phones. They are how we connect with family and friends, how we find out what is happening in the outside world, and how we reach out for support. They have been an essential lifeline through the isolation, loneliness and fear that has touched us all this year. Everyone should have access to a phone, but some of the most vulnerable people in our community do not.

We estimate that 40% of the older people we work with in aged care homes have no access to a private phone. This is because if you live in aged care, you do not have a private phone in your room unless you can afford one. If you are already spending 85% of your pension on aged care fees alone, there is no money left over to get a phone connected. Older people then face an impossible choice – between something as fundamental as having a phone, which may be their only way to interact with the outside world, and other basic essentials of life such as pharmaceuticals, transport costs to medical appointments, or clothing, let alone any other outside activities.

This problem has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. There is more fear, more isolation, and also more additional pressure on staff in terms of their time. Older Tasmanians in aged care homes have already experienced lockdowns and this has taken a toll on their mental health, especially for those who could not contact loved ones or access external support services. To have to ask an already overworked carer to bring you a shared phone also creates an infection risk, as many staff and older people are using the same phone. We have also had industry staff reach out to us and tell us that the only phone that is often available is a nursing phone, which is supposed to be carried by the nurse in charge. This phone is meant for clinical purposes, not for social use, which is why older people often tell us it is not an appropriate phone to “tie up”. If there are further restrictions in Tasmania, older people may be entirely cut off from family and other supports. This is terrifying, and we need to do better.

Older Tasmanians have seen the terror that came to pass in Melbourne and Sydney’s aged care homes. They are incredibly worried about how they will contact their loved ones and people outside their facility. This is their home, yet for those who cannot afford to, they cannot keep connected with those that are important to them.

Older people must be able to communicate with their loved ones, access external social and health supports, be supported to have their say and have their fundamental rights respected. Having access

to an in-room phone is an essential lifeline, especially where there is no other way to have your voice heard.

Betty, Muriel, Joe, Bob and Grace are five of the estimated 2,000 older people in Tasmania who have been affected. Their stories, from working with our advocates recently, are at the end of this brief.

Residential Aged Care Residents' Mental Health

Research by Primary Health Tasmania has shown that older Tasmanians living in residential aged care homes are five times more likely to develop a mental illness than those living independently. Psychological distress, anxiety and depression are all highly prevalent in these environments, with 49% of people in aged care homes in 2019 being diagnosed with depression. It's hardly surprising, given that the transition to residential aged care often moves people away from their homes, family and friends. This results in a loss of independence and causes drastic changes to their lives. By failing to acknowledge and work to help negate the impact that this has on their mental health, older people become very vulnerable to the risk factors associated with mental illnesses. Now, these residents are experiencing extreme social isolation due to COVID-19 and have lost the connection to family and friends, something we all need to maintain our mental wellbeing. They have also lost their ability to communicate with key service providers that help to protect their rights and work to make their voices heard.

Advocacy Tasmania has been told of residents who have been expressly denied the ability to leave the aged care facility to visit family. Others have been told that children under the age of 16 cannot enter an aged care facility, meaning that many older Tasmanians are not able to see their grandchildren. Some facilities are imposing limits on the number of family members who can visit and limiting the days and hours that they can visit, such as not allowing visits after 4pm or on weekends, which means for the family and friends that work full time, there is simply no option for them to visit their loved ones. This response has been justified as a protective measure against infection, even now as restrictions ease and it has been weeks since the last recorded COVID-19 case. But all of this comes at an enormous cost to the mental wellbeing of an incredibly vulnerable group.

Policy Context

The Aged Care Royal Commission handed down its interim report in late 2019. The report was titled *Neglect*. It described an aged care system in need of a fundamental overhaul; where older people are left isolated and powerless in a hidden-from-view system. Our aged care system is fragmented, unsupported and underfunded. Far too often, it is also unsafe, seemingly uncaring, and in so many instances, it simply neglects the older people it exists to care for. All of this was known before the outbreak of COVID-19, which added another layer of isolation, disadvantage and vulnerability on top of what was already there.

The Royal Commission also found our aged care system focuses on funding, dependence and burden. It should be focusing on rights, contribution and the value of our older people.

Our current aged care system specifies the non-care services that must be provided to people that need them; these are services like bedding, cleaning, meals, social activities and utilities. These services do not include a phone. Access to a private phone is considered an additional service, alongside things like Foxtel, alcohol with meals, or premium toiletries. It is up to individual aged care

providers to offer and price these additional services, and for older people to pay for them if they can.

If you cannot pay for additional services, your only access to a phone might be through a central phone in the facility. Older people often need to depend on staff to use this shared phone, and there might only be one available, with one call possible at a time. These phones usually do not reach to private rooms or spaces. To use them, older people lose their privacy and independence, and there might be no access to central phones where there is an outbreak of COVID-19.

The Commonwealth Government has ultimate responsibility for Aged Care and has invested over \$1.5 billion into COVID-19 specific funding for aged care. This is funding that went to priorities such as training, personal protective equipment, testing and rapid response teams. In addition, part of the most recent package of \$563.3 million was identified as: 'Funding may also be used to address other COVID-19 related costs such as increased staffing costs, communications with families and managing visitation arrangements.' This of course does not provide for the cheaper, simpler and more appropriate option of providing an accessible phone. The Commonwealth Government has also funded a wide range of services to support older people and provide social support and address isolation. These services are in addition to independent support that existed before COVID-19, which has also been increased. However, as with many services, you connect with them by phone or online, especially when there are Public Health restrictions on visiting aged care in place.

Recommendations

1. The Commonwealth Government urgently amend the Quality Care Principles 2014, to include the provision of a private in-room phone as a minimum service that must be provided to all residents who need them.

2. The Commonwealth Government fully fund the transition of phones currently provided or available as an Additional Service to a Core Service in all rooms, including through funding connection fees, headset fees, and reasonable monthly fees.
3. This transition should be required at cost, rather than for profit, with providers required to demonstrate the connection fees, headset fees, and reasonable monthly fees are reasonable and represent value for money.
4. Where providers do not currently provide in-room phones as an Additional Services, provide a Capital Grant to enable compliance with the minimum standards, including through using accessible wireless or mobile headsets that do not require a phone line in each room.

Personal Stories

Five client stories told by Advocacy Tasmania Advocates

Betty

Advocate, Kate, worked with Betty:

'76 year old, Betty, asked me for help. She'd recently moved into residential aged care as she could no longer be supported at home. She told me she was really struggling with the change as she had been married for 56 years to her 'darling husband' and she missed him greatly. Betty said, "we're a team, well.. always have been until now, and we've lasted this long because we talk about everything."

She told me that she was feeling so down about moving away from her husband, home and friends. Betty asked me to help her get a phone in her room so she could hear her husband's voice and be able to talk to her friends rather than just watching "rubbish TV". She told me she felt bad having to ask staff to bring her a phone and she had stopped asking as she felt like this was a huge burden on them and she was upset when they'd tell her they didn't even have time to do all their daily jobs and provide care to others.

Betty's husband, 82 year old Tom, told me he too was incredibly lonely and felt so bad that his wife had to go into care as he could no longer cope even with the available community supports, and he missed her terribly. They both received the aged pension and there was no money left from Betty's pension for extras once all the care fees had been paid. He said he was also struggling making ends on the pension especially now Betty's pension all went on her care.

Sadly, I can't report a good outcome for Betty and Tom. They didn't have money for a phone and now they're suffering. The lack of in-room phones has such a huge impact on the frail and vulnerable in care homes and their loved ones and it just shouldn't be like this. How can having a phone to stay connected be considered an 'optional extra' and non-essential in this day and age? Surely older Tasmanians in care homes deserve to have a phone – even if it's only to be able to receive calls from their loved ones. It's just heartbreaking.'

Muriel

Advocate, Nita, worked with 81 year old, Muriel, who had lived in the same home for a little over 59 years. Up until a couple of years ago Muriel had regular contact and support from her two sons & their families until one son moved interstate and the other, to a different region. Muriel told us that she had wanted to remain at home until the end, as this was where her husband passed away. Her daughter returned from living overseas two and a half years ago and had moved in with Muriel bringing her 12 year old son with her.

Initially, this seemed like a good arrangement and Muriel was so pleased to have time with her daughter and grandson. However, over the 2 years that her daughter lived there she isolated Muriel from the rest of the family and her friends, including the church group that had been such a big part of her life and was so important to her. Muriel said that her daughter put a lot of pressure on her to sign enduring power of attorney and enduring guardianship documents appointing her to those roles. Muriel agreed, not fully understanding what powers she had given her.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions, Muriel's daughter placed her into aged care respite and, while there, her daughter made the arrangement permanent. Muriel was devastated to have been put into respite care and said she did not want to stay there under any circumstances.

Throughout the COVID-19 restrictions, Muriel didn't have contact from any of her family or friends as no one had been told that she was in there. Lockdown was very hard, and Muriel was incredibly distressed and became depressed. She didn't have access to an in-room phone, and the staff at her care home said that they couldn't help her to contact anyone who wasn't listed by her enduring guardian. So, Muriel had no way to contact anyone – in effect, she was being held against her wishes with no way to get help.

Finally, Muriel's youngest son tracked her down and visited her. While there, he helped his Mum to phone the Tasmanian Elder Abuse Helpline. Through being able to talk to someone on the Helpline, Muriel was then linked to our service and we provided her with information, talked through options, and then organised much needed legal support.

It has been extremely difficult to keep in contact with Muriel who doesn't want her daughter to find out that she is receiving help from anyone yet. Muriel doesn't have a phone in her room, and therefore has to wait until it is convenient for staff member to provide her with the portable phone so that she can call us. Muriel told us that she worries that the staff will get into trouble for helping her to use the phone if her daughter finds out. She has been incredibly fearful for herself and for those who have shown her kindness in the care home by allowing her to use the phone on occasions.

Muriel should have access to a phone in her own room so that she can receive calls and, at the very least, make calls to free-call numbers such as to us, the Tasmanian Elder Abuse Helpline or the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission. As the enduring power of attorney, Muriel's daughter controls her finances and she had decided not to provide Muriel with a phone. If an in-room phone was not an 'additional extra' that older people had to pay for, Muriel could have reached out for help.

It is the right of any person accessing aged care services to have support from an aged care advocate, yet it is so difficult in these situations for the older person to access independent advocacy support or any other support for that matter.

Muriel is determined to return to her own home and while we are actively supporting her to achieve this goal, it is taking so much longer due to the difficulties we have in contacting her.

Muriel told us that she saw the information about the free COVID-19 support line for senior Australians and would have liked to access that support to help her with her feelings of despair. But, of course, she didn't have an in-room phone. When this support line was announced, Minister Colbeck said, "I urge people to call this support line if they are feeling lonely or distressed, troubled or confused, or need to talk to someone about their concerns caring for a vulnerable person during the COVID-19 outbreak". The problem for so many in aged care homes like Muriel is that they don't have access to a private in-room phone so they simply can't access supports or contact anyone for help.

Joe

Advocate, Jim, explains how difficult it can be to talk to older Tasmanians in aged care homes and how the lack of access to an in-room phone is affecting their mental health and well-being.

‘I recently called Joe, a proud older gentleman in his early 80’s who has lived in an aged care home for 4 years. Joe’s family live interstate and he said that he doesn’t have too many friends that he’s been able to keep in touch with since being in residential care. He had been feeling pretty depressed and had wanted to know if there was anything that he could do to feel better.

It was really hard to reach Joe. I phoned the aged care home and the receptionist asked who I was. We work at the direction of our clients and I didn’t have Joe’s permission to tell anyone about his business, so I just said that Joe had asked me to call him and I asked if I could be put through. The receptionist said that it was surprising that I was calling Joe as he ‘didn’t ever get calls’ and she asked again if it was Joe that I wanted and if he was expecting my call. I replied, yes, to both questions. I was then put through to a carer who wasn’t able to put me through to Joe at that time as she was too busy, and I was asked to call back. After two more calls to Joe that day, I finally reached him.

The phone that the carer handed to him wouldn’t work in his room as there was no reception that far away from the portable phone’s base, so the call had to be taken in a communal area. Joe said he couldn’t talk because everyone could hear. I asked if he could go somewhere more private, but he said the carer had told him that the phone wouldn’t work anywhere else. Joe, said he didn’t want people knowing his business so not to worry, he’d be fine with things as they were. I told Joe I could phone again the next day and I would see if we could get more privacy, and he agreed.

After a lot of mucking around we managed to have a longer chat and Joe told me he felt his situation was hopeless. Due to COVID-19, the supports that are now in place for older people require a phone or the internet to be able get help, neither of which Joe had readily available. The phone was there for quick calls through the admin and carers, but it was so difficult to access, and Joe felt he couldn’t talk in private about his feelings and he didn’t want to make a fuss for the staff.

Residents tell me that it’s not easy being in an aged care home, feeling alone and like you’ve got no control over anything in your life. Older Tasmanians can’t even access the services that have been set up specifically for them just because they don’t have an in-room phone.

Bob

Older Tasmanians who have Power of Attorney or guardianship arrangements in place are especially disadvantaged through not having access to an in-room phone. A Power of Attorney is put in place to make property and financial decisions for another person.

Advocate, Jess, had this to say about a situation that she recently encountered:

‘I’ve supported Bob, who is 94 years old and has been in aged care for several years, on a range of issues that have worried him in recent times. At Advocacy Tas, we help people to have their say as it’s often very difficult for them to have their concerns addressed without independent support to do so.

Bob has a family member living interstate who is his Power of Attorney, but this doesn't mean that Bob doesn't get to have a say in what happens to his financial affairs. A Power of Attorney must consult, and take due consideration of the person's views, when making any financial decision. And, Bob is very sharp and wants to have a say in what happens to his property and finances.

Bob had a visitor who helped him call me. This is the only way that he can make a private call. He told me that he needed help to talk to his Power of Attorney as he wasn't being listened to and it felt like what he wanted to happen with his property and finances simply didn't matter. Then the lockdowns in aged care homes began. I couldn't reach Bob directly or privately as he didn't have an in-room phone. Bob's financial affairs are decided by his Power of Attorney and the provision of a phone was not something that was being paid for as an 'optional extra.'

Astonishingly, I discovered that the aged care home staff had contacted Bob's interstate Power of Attorney and advised that Bob was going to be meeting with an Advocate. Bob's relative even phoned our service to complain about me trying to provide Bob with independent support. Then, the aged care home staff told Bob that he could speak to me but that he would have to take my call at the nurse's station. Bob became so stressed and worried about talking to me and not being able to speak to me in private, that he decided not to access my support or raise his concerns about what was happening to his property and finances. I was unable to visit Bob due to the lockdowns, so I had to close the issue. I was devastated as Bob desperately needed support.'

Grace

Advocate, Brad, recently supported an older lady in her 90's, Grace. She was really depressed and felt she was at the stage where she needed to access counselling support, but this was hard to access inside her aged care home.

Grace didn't have an in-room phone and said that she had to rely on the communal cordless phone. This made it really difficult to contact her as the available phone was in high demand from other residents. When I was able to reach Grace, the cordless phone's reception was extremely unreliable and made meaningful conversations almost impossible. Grace could not hear very well so this added to the difficulties in communication.

After I was able to arrange an appointment with a counselling service for Grace, the mental health service provider told me that she had experienced similar difficulties when trying to provide support. Phone sessions were Grace's only option to access this much needed support, as face-to-face sessions were impossible due to COVID-19 restrictions, and video conferencing technology was not available in her aged care home.

Grace told me that she felt terrible about needing to get this support and she didn't want anybody knowing about her counselling sessions, including her aged care home staff. Trying to keep her sessions private was almost impossible as she had no option but to use an unreliable, communal phone that had to be first answered by reception staff, another staff member taking the phone to her room, and someone else collecting it when she had finished so that other residents could use it. Grace felt the stigma of seeking help for her mental health issues and it really weighed heavily on her mind.

I know for certain that with something as simple as a reliable, private and readily accessible phone in her room, Grace would have been able to easily access and engage with this essential support. She

could have so easily avoided all the additional trauma caused by this lack of privacy and could have retained her independence and dignity. It's great that phone supports are available to older Tasmanians, but if they don't have an easy and private way to access a phone it's pretty pointless.'