

Perth church agency faces staffing crisis

Disability services provider, along with other similar bodies, finds staff retention tough going because of funding shortfalls

■ By Anthony Barich

Perth's biggest archdiocesan welfare agency, disability service provider *i.d.entity.wa*, is facing chronic recruitment and staff retention problems along with the disability sector throughout the State.

i.d.entity.wa is also considering the merits of moving its status to that of a "private" Catholic organisation, so its board has increased decision-making authority. This would mean Archbishop Barry Hickey relinquishing some, possibly most of his decision-making responsibilities for the organisation.

Carlo Calogero, WA state manager of ACROD (originally the Australian Council of Rehabilitation for the Disabled, now otherwise known as the National Industry Association

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Hope for disability sector

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for Disability Services), says the retention and recruitment problems are mainly due to what ACROD estimates to be a \$60 shortfall in direct care staff weekly wages compared to other human services like child, aged and health care.

He says Federal and State Governments need to seriously assess their budget expenditure towards such services otherwise the "wheels will fall off".

"Agencies get a lot of good will and we hope that continues, but the State and Federal Governments really do need to look at their surpluses and realise they have a responsibility," Mr Calogero said.

i.d.entity.wa chairman David Rowell said the turnover of senior staff has been "too high for there not to be some fallout in terms of continuity in client management and staff morale".

i.d.entity.wa has suffered with recruiting and staff retention of management and professional and support staff, plus direct care staff.

Three key management and professional/support staff positions became available in the 2005-06 financial year.

After 15 years as *i.d.entity.wa* executive general manager of operations, Robert Watson resigned to be moderator of the Uniting Church in WA. After months of searching, a replacement was recruited in February 2006, who then resigned barely five months later in July.

Towards the end of 2006 the policy development and research officer and the human resource administrator resigned.

"The sector doesn't have the capacity to pay competitive wages, and it is very difficult to attract



Maureen Jewell

suitably qualified and skilled staff, and to keep them," said *i.d.entity.wa* executive director Maureen Jewell.

Mr Calogero says direct care workers across WA are opting to leave the human services sector and work where they'll find less demanding work but higher pay.

"It's quite broad across the disability sector and we believe there are a number of problems that are leading to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining, a major one we believe is the poor pay," he said.

"Overall in WA there is a labor shortage, but it says something about our values as a community, where providing services to help people is valued less than working in a liquor store or in the mining industry.

"We are lucky we have people who work in this area who aren't doing it for the pay, but that goodwill only goes so far, so we're seeing the wheels fall off in the number of services and the number of people who are prepared to do this at lower pay.

"Ultimately the people who suf-

fer out of this are the thousands of West Australians who need care and are part of our community who aren't being helped at all, which could lead to pretty serious situations."

However, there is hope for the industry.

A survey done in 2005, commissioned by ACROD and launched at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry last year, indicated people are very committed to disability services.

Ms Jewell said staff come into the field for a couple of years, but find it's just not financially viable for them to support a family on it, "and it's the fact that there's so much choice at the moment for people".

"We used to have a number of university students in our Respite Through Recreation program, which gives families a break from looking after their child, but now we're finding it very difficult to recruit students or anyone to those positions at the moment, as it's six to 10 hours a week," she said.

"Medicine and occupational therapy students used to find it attractive because of the hands-on experience it gives them, but now there are too many other options."

Volunteers continue to be the lifeblood of the recreation service. In 2006, 33 volunteers contributed 2999 hours.

There is much hope in the disability sector that State Government funding will go up, as a working group has been established following the results of the ACROD study.

Industry insiders remain hopeful that the working group's recommendations will arrive in time for the next State budget, submissions which must be in by next month.