



28th April 2009

The Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Radcliffe

RE: PUBLIC PASSENGER TRANSPORT INQUIRY

Please find attached the Community Transport Organisation's submission in relation to the current inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport into Commonwealth and State investment of funds in public and passenger transport infrastructure and services.

The Community Transport Organisation would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission with members of the Senate Committee and the Community Transport Organisation has no objection to its submission being made publicly available on the Senate Committee's website or through other means.

Should you or any of your colleagues require any further information or clarification in regard to this letter or our submission please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 9635-8980.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter McLeod', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Peter McLeod
Executive Officer

1. Overview – the Community Transport Organisation

The Community Transport Organisation is the voice of Community Transport in New South Wales and is playing an active role in the establishment of a national representative organisation for Community Transport in Australia.

Community Transport provides transport services to the frail, aged and younger people with disabilities, and their carers, in a manner that puts the genuine needs of often vulnerable individual people, not profit, first. As specialist public transport providers, manned overwhelmingly by a growing army of motivated volunteers, we are the only public transport network in Australia that can likely afford to meet the anticipated rapid escalation of demand for such services as a result of the ageing population and the increasing problem of transport isolation.

The Community Transport Organisation is the current leader in best practice for the provision of public transport services for special needs passengers and was recently commissioned by the NSW Ministry of Transport with support from the Taxi Industry to provide a training film for taxi drivers wishing to augment their normal work with significantly more specialised Community Transport assignments. Where and when it is not practical or possible for particular jobs to be completed via less costly shared Community Transport mini buses or cars (typically staffed by volunteers) our booking centres regularly assign pick-ups and drop-offs to authorised local taxi drivers.

Through our Community Transport initiated Travel Training Program, we also assist isolated, frail, aged and disabled clients to make use of conventional public transport, such as buses, trains and taxis, where ever possible. This initiative helps avoid premature exclusive dependency on Community Transport services.

We gratefully acknowledge and thank the Commonwealth and the NSW State Government for current and future funding support without which the primary transport management and delivery mechanism by which hundreds of thousands of frail, aged and disabled people are daily able to leave and return to their homes in safety and with confidence in order to maintain relative independence, would simply not exist.

We also gratefully acknowledge and applaud the slowly swelling ranks of outstanding Australian volunteers who give up substantial amounts of their time, talent and professional know-how to interact in a courteous and caring manner with our Community Transport clients. We know that the positive example of volunteerism and the regular friendly contact between our staff and clients helps enrich and enable the lives of people and communities in which we are present.

We are also a proven model for the financially affordable management and delivery of high growth and high needs services since the public purse alone cannot afford to meet the existing and future challenges for special needs transport alone. Government and the nation is fortunate that Australians are prepared to help themselves, however we must continue to be empowered and encouraged by government to do so. We also believe the private sector, corporate and business donors and sponsors have a healthy supportive role to play in assisting with the development and reach of Community Transport and we are actively working towards achieving this through our establishment of the Community Transport Foundation of Australia.

Community Transport is currently strongest in New South Wales; however, supported at a national organisational level we see excellent prospects for harmonising the supply of Community Transport across all States and Territories on a collaborative and consultative basis. We look to the Senators and Members of the Commonwealth Government of Australia for increased recognition, encouragement and incremental funding support. Our reciprocal commitment is to further develop, manage and deliver excellence in special needs Community Transport augmented by the full and rich support of Australian volunteers and the practical assistance and goodwill of the private sector.

2. Community Transport Providers

There are approximately 130 Community Transport providers most of who are members of the Community Transport Organisation in New South Wales. These specialist Community transport providers are spread across outback, rural, regional and metropolitan areas. The location, structure and resources of each Community Transport hub typically reflect the make-up and cross-section of needs to be found in and around that community and this is ideal. Some Community Transport networks are facilitated and auspiced by local town or shire councils; others by not for profit companies established for the purpose of specialist transport delivery for the frail, aged and disabled or transport isolated communities.

Vehicle type and fleet sizes vary according with access to resources, funding and need. It is not uncommon for an individual Community Transport provider to have one or more small buses capable of seating up to 24 passengers; one or more smaller mini-buses capable of seating half a dozen or more passengers or a fewer number of wheel chair users. Most Community Transport providers also have one or more passenger sedans or wagons capable of seating up to 3 passengers each. Of 4,000 Community Transport drivers in NSW, over 3000 are volunteers who offer their time free of charge. It is worth noting that of these 3000 volunteers drivers, approximately 2000 also regularly contribute the use of their own private vehicles to deliver these vital services. However, Community Transport regularly significantly depends on over 500 paid drivers. Each of these is a highly trained specialist and Community Transport depends upon these highly skilled professionals to look after the needs of our most vulnerable and high needs passengers.

Clients in NSW who are assessed and approved for use of Community Transport services make themselves known to the local Community Transport provider and typically phone in a booking for collection from home and delivery to a designated address such as a local hospital or medical centre, for example. Basic needs shopping excursions and social outings are also provided. Arrangement will also be made for collection and return to home.

An operator (in some cases a volunteer) will enter all the trip data into running sheets which are organised into the most logical time and distance effective manner possible on any given day. Where possible buses, mini-buses and cars collect and return clients in succession. This not only has the obvious enormous benefit of saving on cost, time, fuel consumption, vehicle wear and environmental pollution; but also the opportunity for otherwise often isolated or lonely frail aged or disabled people living in their own homes to spend periods of time with others of a similar age or situation. This opportunity for positive social contact, augmented by friendly relations with regular Community Transport office staff and drivers has a clearly beneficial effect on the health and wellbeing of most Community Transport clients, thus helping enable our most vulnerable citizens to maintain and sustain their independence, at home, for longer.

3. Current and historic levels of public investment

Home and Community Care (HACC)

The Home and Community Care (HACC) Community Transport Sub-program provides community care services to the frail, aged and younger people with disabilities, and their carers. The aim of the program is to enhance the independence of people in these groups and avoid their premature or inappropriate admission to long-term residential care. HACC is a national program with the costs for services in New South Wales shared between the Commonwealth Government (60%) and the State Government (40%). Unpaid volunteers facilitate much of the delivery of these transport services, thus making government funds go a lot further.

In NSW, the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) undertakes the planning and policy development of transport services provided through the HACC Community Transport sub-program. The Ministry of Transport administers the bulk of the Community Transport component of the HACC program and works directly with Community Transport service providers on a day to day basis. The Ministry of Transport distributes the funds and administers the Community Transport sub-program services.

Target groups eligible to receive HACC services are frail older people, people with disabilities (including children and their carers). Within the HACC target population there are a number of special needs groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with dementia, financially disadvantaged persons, people living in rural and remote areas. A range of strategies attempt to improve access to special needs groups. Following assessment, people most in need are given priority access to services.

DADHC selects providers of HACC funded Community Transport Services. Organisations eligible to apply for and provide HACC Program services include local governments, community organisations, religious and charitable bodies, State Government agencies, health agencies and private (for profit) organisations.

Funds are generally allocated through a tender process managed by DADHC. However, existing funded services generally continue to receive funding so long as the need for the services continues and accountability requirements are met. These include return of annual projected operating budgets and audited financial statements, participation in monitoring and review processes, return of Minimum Data Set (MDS) data on a quarterly basis.

Organisations that are funded to provide HACC services are required to implement the HACC fees policy. This requires providers to seek a contribution from clients. However clients receive services regardless of their capacity to pay. Organisations are required to provide additional service with the client fees collected.

The Taxi Industry and HACC funding

The Australian Taxi Industry Association (ATIA) representing commercial taxi drivers has proposed that HACC funding for the transport of frail, aged and disabled passengers and their carers be spent directly through its membership in preference to specialised Community Transport operators.

In the opinion of taxi drivers, represented by the ATIA (in its submission to the Senate inquiry into Commonwealth and State investment in public transport services and infrastructure), HACC administrators could achieve better value for money by looking to local taxi drivers as the benchmark solution for delivery of cost-efficient, professional transport services.

Despite the enormous size and profitability of the taxi industry, the ATIA asserts that in some regions the presence of specialised, typically not-for-profit, Community Transport providers is causing harm to the profitability of their membership. In fact, Community Transport providers, where practicable, are making sensible and equitable subsidised use of local taxi services where a taxi is the cheapest available solution and where the driver assigned the job has undergone specialised Community Transport driver training.

Due to the vast distances involved with many rural and remote areas and the efficiency driven preference in Community Transport for group travel, taxi services are not affordable or practical in many remote regional and rural areas.

In light of the ATIA having claimed superior quality of service and taxi driver professionalism it is worth noting that the Ministry for Transport in NSW recently funded the Community Transport Organisation to supply a detailed explanatory training film to the Taxi Industry Association for the training of taxi drivers wishing to access Community Transport assignments, and that this film is now the training benchmark for NSW taxi drivers undertaking Community Transport work.

For comparative purposes, it is also worth considering some of the key differences between conventional taxi travel and Community Transport from a client perspective.

- An eligible Community Transport client is known to the Community Transport operational team and their individual situation and needs are understood via the extensive client assessment process. If there is any mobility or health change or issue, a solution can be brokered efficiently and with mutual confidence. All drivers have good communication and interpersonal skills.

Taxi networks and their drivers generally have no relationship and no intrinsic interest in the individual situation and needs of a passenger except that sent electronically via the job despatch system. Individual drivers may or may not empathise with their passenger; they may or may not have good communication and interpersonal skills. Whether the precise travel and assistance requirements of an aged and frail passenger are met is most often, therefore, a lottery.

- Community Transport drivers take care to assist clients and their mobility aids and bags from their homes to the vehicle and revisit this often slow process in reverse upon arrival at a destination. Drivers understand the client's vulnerability, especially to falls and serious injury. They are motivated by providing a caring service; not time, effort and commercial profits. Importantly they are offered specialised training, including client handling and manual handling, first aid, low-risk driving, wheelchair lift operations and dementia training.

Taxi drivers are generally not as reliable (especially at peak and shift change-over times) and upon arrival typically pull up at the kerbside and honk their car horn. Unless specifically reminded to do so, very few taxi drivers will get out of the car and provide necessary, ample assistance, door through door. If the client (often anxious, frail and very slow) does not appear within a few minutes the driver is prone to driving off in search of another job. In their haste, frail and immobile clients are at heightened risk of suffering a fall and potentially life-threatening injury resulting in (costly) hospitalisation;

- Community Transport drivers that deliver a frail, aged or disabled passenger to a particular location are often the same person assigned to later collect them. Even if it's a different driver, clear and certain understanding can quickly be reached about details for the return journey by message relay from the vehicle to base. Often the staff at base will be in touch with the medical centre or professional office being visited for an update on the client's progress.

Typically it is unlikely and at best uncertain whether the same taxi driver will be available for the return journey. Taxi network booking centres are extremely busy and focussed on capturing and despatching basic information in the shortest available time. Except in small towns, the person processing or modifying a booking is unlikely to have any relationship with or intrinsic interest in the individual profile and needs of a passenger thereby limiting what the dispatched driver knows and can expect to find.

- Community Transport drivers are there to provide a service, not to make money. A safe, secure, friendly and courteous solution is always provided irrespective of whether a frail, aged or disabled person or their carer pays or not.

Whilst mindful of fulfilling the obligations of their increasingly rigorous training, taxi drivers are necessarily focussed on being paid the due amount shown on their vehicle's electronic meter. Aged, frail and disabled passengers who are travelling without a carer, and who may have an intellectual or memory related disability or illness may be, or feel, especially vulnerable if payment is demanded.

- Long Community Transport journeys are where possible completed as group travel, enabled by volunteers and therefore more efficient and cheaper than taxi travel. A lot of Community Transport work involves very short trips; in some cases, quite literally around a street corner to the local GP or shops.

Taxi drivers may bargain a special rate for long-distance journeys, but even these rates are typically unaffordable in all but emergencies. In many rural and remote areas there are no taxis and if there is a taxi it may not be available when needed. It is uncommercial for taxi drivers to turn up for very short journeys and unsustainable for them to be paid more than a journey is worth. Brokering and managing these solutions with multiple taxi networks and individual taxi drivers can be onerous and problematic.

Whether as a result of perceived commercial self interest or a lack of informed awareness about the realities of modern and highly efficient Community Transport operations, sections of the taxi industry appear to wish themselves in competition with Community Transport. The current dynamics can be summarised as follows:

- Community Transport operators, their staff and volunteers, whilst imperfect, derive intrinsic satisfaction, reward and self respect from providing individually focussed transport solutions to frail, aged and disabled people and their carers in their local communities. They are good at what they do and strive to be better. They endeavour to build positive and collaborative relationships in the transport sector, especially in the taxi industry.

The ATIA (representing taxi drivers) is dismissive of Community Transport describing it as "ad hoc", servicing "communities of interest" utilising "untrained and unprofessional drivers" and as "a poor substitute for a proper taxi." The ATIA has formally proposed that HACC use taxis as the default option for delivery of passenger transport services.

It should also be acknowledged that specialist Community Transport operations catering specifically and exclusively to the needs of the frail, aged and disabled and their carers came into existence in large part because of a notable incapacity and unwillingness of mainstream public transport operators - especially taxi drivers - to consistently empathise with and meet the higher care needs of vulnerable passengers.

Whilst taxi networks have increasing numbers of wheelchair accessible taxis (WATS), comparatively few taxi drivers specialise in this work and consequently lack the experience, sensitivity and intrinsic motivation to consistently provide the additional assistance required of a genuine 'door through door' service.

Whilst to its credit the taxi industry is addressing these gaps through improved WATS and Community Transport driver training, in the opinion of the Community Transport Organisation the wellbeing and safety of our most frail and aged clients would be put at serious risk if left in the hands of the average taxi driver. Should more information on this important matter be required the Community Transport Organisation is able to provide it.

However, there is an important existing and growing role for taxi drivers to play in Community Transport of the frail, aged and disabled within the client management framework of Community Transport agencies. Community Transport operators do, and will continue to, work in partnership with taxi networks and their drivers enabling them to assist with the efficient and safe delivery of Community Transport services for the frail, aged and disabled, complemented by appropriate performance monitoring.

Community Transport Program (CTP)

The Community Transport Program (CTP) in NSW is funded by the State Government and aims to address transport disadvantage at the local level primarily by promoting efficient use of transport services within that community. Transport disadvantage is defined as a circumstance or set of circumstances that leaves those that are affected by it in a situation where they have limited or no access to private transport and they have difficulty in gaining access to conventional transport systems.

Services provided under the CTP are either individual (generally by passenger car) or group transport (by bus) and utilise Community Transport provider fleet vehicles or for profit taxi or bus services brokered and subsidised by the Community Transport provider.

The CTP targets people whose access to mainstream transport services is limited by physical, social or geographical factors. The following criteria are used in determining eligibility for services:

- People whose physical health status renders them with a permanent or temporary mobility disability that leaves them unable to use conventional transport systems;
- People who live in villages of less than 500 people who do not have access to conventional transport systems;
- People who need to access community facilities and resources which are not available within the hours when conventional public transport operates;
- People who meet eligibility criteria and are also eligible for HACC services may be provided with assistance through the CTP if the HACC Program is unable to meet their needs.

The intrinsic value of the CTP is that it enables transport isolated people of all ages and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to more readily function and interact with their local and regional communities. While the CTP provides a great deal of practical assistance to older people who may not readily qualify for HACC assistance and who would otherwise struggle to access essential and community facilities, the CTP also assists transport isolated young people. For example, the CTP is providing a ready means by which young people in remote communities are able to regularly overcome physical isolation thereby reducing the risk substance abuse, crime and suicide.

CTP funding has been allocated using an expression of interest process that has not kept pace with demand. Other than basic CPI, there has been no growth in funds allocated to the CTP in the last 10 years and the resulting incapacity of the CTP to keep pace with burgeoning demand has resulted in many people whose access to mainstream transport services is limited by physical, social or geographical factors missing out on assistance through the CTP.

Current CTP funding for transport isolated people in NSW is a woeful \$3 million per annum and over half of this is issued to the Sydney metropolitan area. Inexplicably many truly isolated regional and rural areas with program target populations currently miss out.

Should CTP funding be increased to just \$10 million per annum it would be possible for significantly increased numbers of people, across the length and breadth of NSW, to maintain independence in their own homes and communities for longer and to avoid premature or inappropriate admission to long-term residential or institutional care and hospitalisation - thus delivering a significant net saving to the public purse.

The positive experience of the CTP in New South Wales has shown that if annual funding were lifted to just \$10 million per annum, a great deal of good can be achieved and a much greater level of cost can be avoided over successive health and aged care budgets.

4. Measures by which the Commonwealth could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure

1. Establishment of a national Community Transport Program (CTP)

Notwithstanding the need for increased funding, in design the Community Transport program (CTP) operated by the NSW government is an excellent program that brings disproportionately large benefit to the transport isolated communities along with frail, aged and disabled clients relative to its current and projected cost. This is due to a number of compelling factors unique to Community Transport:

- Community Transport is an individual needs focussed door to door service;
- Drivers are trained to provide additional assistance when required;
- Buses and mini-buses are mostly wheelchair accessible with extra rails and steps when needed;
- Individual car service is available if needed;
- A significant part of the true cost of service provision is borne by volunteers;
- Provided supplementary funding increases occur, volunteer numbers can grow;
- Wherever possible journeys are organised as efficient group travel;
- Significant savings in fuel, vehicle wear and tear and CO₂ emissions;

- Clients benefit from increased safety, security and confidence in their own mobility;
- Vulnerable and isolated individuals who may live alone benefit from group contact;
- Each Community Transport operation is tailored to exactly meet local demand;
- All Community Transport staff are motivated primarily by service to people, not profit;
- Community Transport helps clients utilise mainstream transport wherever possible;
- A subsidised taxi service using specially trained drivers is available as a fall-back.

For the reasons listed above, the Community Transport Organisation believes that a Community Transport Program should be funded nationally by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments so that all eligible transport isolated, frail, aged and younger people with disabilities can maintain independence in their own homes and communities for longer - thus avoiding premature or inappropriate admission to long-term residential or institutional care, including hospitalisation and the inevitable far greater cost to tax payers and in some cases clients themselves.

Based on its preliminary assessment of various Community Transport initiatives in other States, the Community Transport Organisation believes that an annual investment of \$60 million per annum in a national Community Transport Program, indexed to population and CPI increases, would be sufficient to augment current Community Transport resources delivered under HACC funding and expand its effectiveness to encompass youth in isolated communities.

The immediate to long term value of a mostly federally funded CTP would be to anticipate and manage the unavoidable specialist public transport needs that are beginning to emerge nationally as a direct consequence of the currently rapidly ageing Australian population, the centralisation of health care services, and the impossible demands that will be placed on aged care and hospital facilities if vulnerable Australians opt out of living at home sooner than absolutely necessary.

Due to the high component of volunteerism and maintenance of safe and secure mobility between a person's home and services and amenities in their local community, no other public transport solution can be as effective or as affordable in overcoming issues of transport isolation, especially in rural and remote areas and in also helping meet the 'tsunami' of aged, frail and disabled people increasingly in need of specialist transport services. It will also help encourage people of all ages to remain in remote and rural communities, thus avoiding population decline in rural and remote towns.

Successive research projects and studies have shown repeatedly that people generally remain happier and healthier for longer if they are able to remain at home as functional members of their own communities. Increased positive awareness of the added security and peace-of-mind provided by an effective national CTP will help remove pressure and moderate expectations of recourse to more immediate need and use of institutional care facilities; thus avoiding some significant demand for higher levels of costly care.

In our view there is no doubt that it is time for the Commonwealth to build upon this worthy and deserving common sense, volunteer-driven CTP program by taking it national.

Full Accreditation of Community Transport within Passenger Transport Acts

It is time for the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to more formally recognise the significant and increasingly indispensable role of Community Transport and the dedication and professionalism of trained volunteers engaged in the daily delivery of excellence in specialist public transport for the frail, aged, the disabled and their carers.

Such senior and vulnerable Australians deserve the highest possible levels of protection afforded by reasonable and appropriate training and adherence to appropriate standards of performance and care. For the most part this is occurring and is, in fact, significantly more advanced than the Taxi industry which has recently called upon the NSW Community Transport Organisation to assist taxi drivers in NSW with training in how to adapt their customary 'arrive and honk' service offering to meet the significantly more demanding Community Transport requirement for a genuinely caring, 'door to door' and 'door through door' passenger service.

The Community Transport sector advocates standardised training and regulation through accreditation of all Community Transport operators and drivers including volunteers.

Key benefits include:

- Increased utilisation of our greatest untapped resource - volunteers;
- Overdue, formal recognition of both paid and volunteer drivers;
- Better, safer more confident Community Transport volunteer drivers;
- More relaxed, safer and healthier Community Transport clients;
- A versatile public transport solution for the frail aged and disabled in remote areas;
- Increased capacity to provide 'out-of-hours' transport services;
- Less demand for early recourse to permanent or long stay aged care and hospitals;
- A practical 'community based solution' for a community based need;
- Reduced cost and dependency upon government;
- Increased training and skills development that may improve employment potential;
- A continued role for Community Transport trained taxi drivers and commercial bus company drivers to do subsidised jobs where practicable.

Volunteer drivers, especially those in remote areas, are often not reliant on a fulltime income. This reflects the reality of Community Transport service delivery in many remote areas where demand can be acute, but unpredictable in timing. Many small towns have no taxi, no bus nor any CTP funding. Having standby, trained and accredited volunteer drivers with CTP funding and an accredited regional booking hub for eligible transport isolated and frail aged and disabled passengers and their carers would be incredibly cost effective.

Rather than dependency upon a single taxi in remote areas which may be idle for long periods and still not available when required, utilisation of accredited Community Transport drivers would utilise existing drivers and vehicles in the community - thus providing a better and more comprehensive service for less cost.

The availability of multiple drivers and vehicles will be of great benefit in small regional centres - especially during festive weekend events and major social and cultural events (as per 5.6.1 in the regional Cities Victoria submission to the Sustainable Cities report.

Increased recruitment, training and accreditation of Community Transport Drivers will result in greater numbers of gainfully occupied and employable Australians, particularly those who may be of older age, unemployed or under employed. This commonsense initiative may also result in greater numbers of trained drivers who go on to drive taxis and buses having specialist experience and empathy for meeting the particular 'door to door' transport needs of Australia's most needy public transport passengers. Delivery and management of training and accreditation can be managed within Community Transport in collaboration with State and Territory Ministries for Transport and related agencies.

Commonwealth grant for the establishment of Community Transport Australia

The growing Community Transport sector, government and clients will benefit from the formation of a national consultative and representational body to help streamline, coordinate and acknowledge excellence in best practise delivery of public transport services for the transport isolated and frail, aged and disabled.

Next year it is planned to hold the first national conference of Community Transport providers to share experiences and best practise to form a commonly shared view of the most appropriate way forward.

This specialised form of public transport service delivery richly deserves its own forum through which to help foster quality assurance, uniformity of service delivery, responsiveness to government and the community as well as an equal constructive representational advocacy for both metropolitan, rural and remote communities and community transport providers.

The Community Transport Organisation of NSW proposes a Commonwealth Government grant of \$300,000, from the Commonwealth (plus lesser recurrent funding) with possible additional contributions from the States and Territories be made to further secure the establishment of the not-for-profit organisation Community Transport Australia, as a matter of priority.

The role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport

The Community Transport Organisation believes that Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments should build upon the significant successes of volunteer enabled Community Transport by rolling out a national Community Transport Program (CTP) that will augment targeted transport assistance currently funded through the Home and Community Care (HACC) scheme to more effectively meet the needs of transport isolated populations and communities.

This highly affordable policy would not only result in direct savings resulting from avoidance of premature or unnecessary admissions to aged care or hospital facilities by enabling the transport disadvantaged, the frail, aged and disabled in our communities across the length and breadth of Australia to remain functioning members of their families and communities by remaining in their own homes and accessing their local community facilities. It will also help

deal with the very real problem of our transport isolated young people living in remote rural towns and isolated communities.

The policy initiative would recognise the reciprocal health benefits (givers feel better and are healthier) of volunteers helping meet the transport needs of isolated, vulnerable and needy people in their communities. The net result will be greater positive interaction and social cohesion.

From a resources and infrastructure perspective such an initiative would capitalise upon the fact that there are already significant numbers of wheel chair accessible buses and vans as well as passenger vehicles held by a wide array of community groups and organisations. Development of a uniform national Community Transport Program policy would result in more efficient and harmonised use of Community Transport resources, including volunteer drivers who would be trained to appropriate levels of proficiency and accredited accordingly.

A broadening of the Community Transport Program initiative would provide practical, common sense solutions in Australia's many small and remote communities where there are no taxis, buses or trains. Part time volunteer drivers would be recruited, trained and accredited by Community Transport (and the relevant State authority or agency) and made available through a regional Community Transport Network hub to isolated, frail, aged and disabled people and their carers, as required. Volunteer drivers may be awarded concessions or incentives linked to their performance.

Where towns do have a local taxi, and the driver is appropriately trained, subsidised Community Transport jobs could be booked through the Community Transport Network and then delegated to that taxi driver, if available.

Not all transport isolation occurs in remote and rural regions. Increasing populations of people, many of whom are reaching their senior years, have made homes at the distant outer fringes of Australia's largest cities where land and housing is affordable. On occasions when travel into the city is required to access medical and other services, isolation for the frail, aged and disabled in these so-called 'dormitory suburbs' can be a real problem. For those without friends or family to call upon, conventional taxi bookings are prohibitively expensive and logistically daunting, and whilst comparatively cheap, normal passenger trains and buses (if available at all) are not able to provide a patient with mobility restrictions, door to door service.

The Commonwealth and State government's embrace of a national Community Transport Program will ensure that volunteer enabled Community Transport solutions are fostered to meet the cross-section of need in and around each of these far-flung residential centres at the outer fringes of our high population centres.

This is an affordable way of delivering sustainable, locally tailored, specialised public transport to remote and large and small city fringe communities.

Again, where practicable and appropriate, subsidised taxi travel supplied by Community Transport ready drivers may continue to be used, thus assisting the commercial taxi industry.

Conclusion

The proportion of aged people in Australia's population is growing and set to rise sharply. Like all Australians, aged, frail and disabled people (and their carers) are dependent upon transport to maintain functional lives in their own homes. Without transport, isolation is a severe problem.

It is very much in the public financial interest that this rapidly expanding mass of Australians, spread across the length and breadth of the nation, are enabled to live in their homes and not be compelled into premature residency in nursing homes, aged care facilities and hospitals as a result of immobility and transport isolation.

These are profound issues which active age Australians, with a smorgasbord of public and private transport options at their fingertips, are rarely exposed to. Many older Australians live alone, or as an aged couple. Many live at the isolated fringes of our cities and towns or remote and rural areas where housing is most affordable.

Many may not live far from a bus stop; most have phones they could use to call a taxi. However in old age conventional public transport is eventually threatening, inaccessible, even dangerous. For hundreds of thousands of frail, aged and disabled Australians surviving on a pension, a taxi is an occasional extravagance.

If they cannot readily physically access normal community services and amenities upon which they are reliant, vulnerable people, including isolated youth, can very quickly suffer mental and physical decline raising the immediate spectre of institutional health care.

Building upon a time-honoured ethic of people within communities looking out for one-another, Community Transport operations have come into being and have evolved into highly successful public transport solutions tailored to specifically meet the needs of eligible isolated, frail, aged and disabled people and their carers. Comparatively low operating costs are made possible as a result of shared journeys via specially equipped vehicles of up to 24 seats and use of trained volunteer staff and drivers wherever possible.

The Commonwealth provides funding to Community Transport via the Home and Community Care (HACC) program and this funding is topped up by recipient States and Territories on a 60:40 basis. This investment has resulted in the establishment of a significant and growing fleet of wheel chair accessible and other appropriate vehicles, plus a very efficient infrastructure of Community Transport management and service delivery richly supported by unpaid, trained volunteers.

Despite the best intentions of past and present governments, there are presently inexplicable Community Transport funding black-spots in Australia meaning there are areas not served, or adequately served, by a local or regional Community Transport hub tasked with delivering appropriate public transport solutions to eligible frail, aged and disabled people, when and as required.

By building upon and giving support to the Community Transport Program (currently a paltry \$3m in NSW) the Commonwealth, in partnership with the States and Territories, should establish a national Community Transport Program at an estimated projected annual cost of some \$60m.

This new national CTP would encompass existing Community Transport operators and agencies and foster the establishment of new or expanded operations, including designation of volunteer drivers who already own their own vehicles in small outlying and remote areas. In the interests of minimising costs and maximising access to service wherever practicable Community Transport would make use of volunteers and existing shared vehicles.

To assist government, agencies and community groups with representation and advocacy for best practise in Community Transport, we support the establishment of Community Transport Australia, a not-for-profit organisation, and propose a foundation grant of \$300,000 (plus lesser recurrent funding), from the Commonwealth with possible additional contributions from the States and Territories.

We also propose developing an appropriate grant application in support of the consultative creation of an appropriate uniform Community Transport Volunteer Driver Training and Accreditation program in consort with recognition of Community Transport under Australia's various passenger transport Acts.

The Community Transport Organisation and the Australian Community Transport sector is ready to work enthusiastically and collaboratively with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to further develop and ultimately implement these compelling proposed solutions.