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Welcome to my first update for 2020. I hope you were able to spend time with your loved ones over the break.

It's certainly been tragic start to the year, with bushfires and difficult weather conditions impacting many communities across the country. We are aware of participants and staff who have lost property in the fires and we are proactively supporting people impacted. Our best wishes and thoughts go to everyone impacted as they begin a long recovery process.

Bushfire response

We monitored the bushfire situation and its impact on participants, providers, staff and partners. When it was safe to do so, we joined with our Services Australia colleagues to provide on the ground support in affected areas.

This outreach approach has allowed us to talk directly with participants to ensure they had access to additional supports, continuation of services and were able to get any urgent equipment repairs they needed.

As a result of our recent experience, we have initiated new processes to ensure participants impacted by emergency or crisis are prioritised, meaning they will get access to the supports they need as quickly as possible.

I'm proud of the Agency's response in the wake of these serious events. We have demonstrated our agility and, more importantly, our commitment to participants.

Tune Review

Recently, the Hon Stuart Robert MP, the Minister for the NDIS, released the results of the independent review of the NDIS legislation undertaken by Mr David Tune AO PSM. Mr Tune

consulted with participants, their families and carers, providers, state and territory Governments, as well as the NDIA and the Department of Social Services (DSS). The report recommends a range of changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act, NDIS Rules, Operational Guidelines and the way we deliver the NDIS.

The Agency is working with DSS to develop the Government's response to the report. I will update you soon on the response and our plans to make service delivery improvements, including the proposed introduction of the Participant Service Guarantee from mid-year.

The review, along with the Minister's plan, announced in his speech to the National Press Club late last year, provide us with a solid roadmap for 2020 and will guide us as we deliver the Scheme to almost another 100,000 participants. I'll be communicating further in the future on how all our initiatives fit together.

Transport costs

The Minister also announced earlier this week that from March 2020 it will be easier for providers to claim non-labour costs when transporting participants to and from NDIS funded activities in the community. The NDIS Price Guide and Support Catalogue are being updated so providers can claim for the transport costs they incur when helping participants get to and from community activities funded in their NDIS plan. These changes have been introduced in response to feedback from participants, providers and other stakeholders about a fair and consistent solution to claiming non-labour transport costs as we continually look at ways to implement a more flexible and user-friendly Scheme.

Annual Pricing Review

The NDIS Annual Price Review is well underway. Submissions on our Annual Price Review 2020-21 Issue Paper closed on 2 February 2020. Thank you to all of you who contributed, we need your input to ensure pricing updates reflect the challenges participants and providers are facing.

As the Minister stated last year, we are working to ensure we publish updates to the Price Guide early enough for providers and participants to adjust service agreements and service bookings. The next Price Guide update, with new transport items will be published shortly.

The Expressions of Interest process to fill two vacant positions on the Pricing Reference Group has recently closed. It is vital the Agency has a diverse and expert group to support pricing and market decisions. We hope to announce the new members of the reference group shortly.

Provider payments

The Agency is committed to paying providers as quickly as possible. Approximately 95 per cent of payment requests made via the myplace portal are successful – however I know a small proportion of payment claims have been delayed as a result of the need for manual Agency investigation and resolution.

We've made renewed efforts to process manual claims more quickly. These efforts include implementing process and system improvements, and increasing staff working on payments. I will keep you updated on our progress over the coming months.

I want to make sure payments are made in a timely manner so providers can continue with their core business of delivering services to participants.

NDIA organisation structure

In my first three months with the Agency, I have observed and consulted extensively. I am now working with my Executive Leadership Team to implement a number of changes designed to improve the participant experience. A key focus is removing barriers that cause delays in our decision-making processes.

We are looking to structure ourselves for greater efficiency with an increased focus on supporting our service delivery staff to provide a better experience to our participants. We will publish an updated organisational chart on our website in the coming month.

Recent media

Before I sign off, I'm keen to clarify some media reporting on the number of communications staff employed by the Agency. An Australian National Audit Office report on the Department of Defence, which included data on our staffing numbers, has been misinterpreted by some media outlets.

For clarity, the figures, supplied to the Australian Public Service Commission in December 2018, include stakeholder engagement staff who play a vital role in delivering face-to-face information and support to participants, families, carers and providers.

Of the 152 staff in the communications and marketing category referenced in the report, the vast majority (89 per cent) are stakeholder engagement staff, delivering this important function.

I am committed to ensuring the Agency operates as efficiently as possible, which includes staffing numbers appropriate for delivering our significant social reform. Having staff engage with people with disability and the broader community is essential to us being able to deliver the Scheme to those who require supports and our work to build a more inclusive Australia.

Honours

I was pleased to see a number of people across the disability sector recognised with Australian Day honours. I'm sure there were familiar names in the honours list for many of you, and I wanted to specifically mention just a few.

Disability advocate, Sue Salthouse, is the ACT Senior Australian of the Year and is a member of the NDIS Independent Advisory Council. Sue has worked closely with the Agency over a number of years, even hosting some of our early webinars.

Helen McDevitt from the Department of Social Services, along with Janine Toomey and Helen Ferguson from the Victorian and Queensland governments respectively were recognised for their contribution to the public service, including their work in relation to the NDIS.

John Simpson, President of Blind Citizens Australia, was recognised for his significant service to people who are blind or have low vision.

I would like to pass on my congratulations to these and other honours recipients and add my own acknowledgement of their contribution to the Scheme and the disability sector more generally.

Closing

As I have indicated throughout this update, I am focused on improving the way the NDIS operates – for participants, providers, planners and partners. This will include implementing recommendations from the Tune Review, progressing the Minister's Plan for the NDIS and looking at long standing challenges such as Supported Independent Living, payments processes and plan flexibility to name a few.

We have a big year ahead of us – I look forward to updating you regularly throughout the year as we continue to work together to build a world-leading Scheme.

Regards
Martin

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