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Radio National interview with Vicki Rundle, Deputy CEO, Government, Communications, People and Stakeholder Engagement Group; National Disability Insurance Agency

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E&OE

HAMISH MACDONALD: The National Disability Insurance Scheme is facing fresh complaints from users as its bumpy rollout continues in the New Year. The South Australian State Disability Minister Katrine Hildeyard has called on the Federal Government to lift its game; deal with payment issues faced by service providers and uncap the level of staff working on the rollout. There are reports this week that a small number of people have been stranded in hospitals because of a lack of disability housing alternatives.

Vicki Rundle is the Deputy Chief Executive of the National Disability Insurance Agency. That's the agency responsible for implementing the NDIS. Good morning and welcome to Breakfast.

VICKI RUNDLE: Good morning, Hamish.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Your agency is supposed to make sure the NDIS has a smooth rollout. There have been reports in *The Australian* this week about a woman who's been stranded in a hospital since October last year when she became a quadriplegic. Something must be going wrong with your rollout if situations like that are occurring.

VICKI RUNDLE: I don't think that's a fair characterisation of the rollout of the scheme, Hamish. I'd make a couple of points here. The first thing is that before we get to that particular case - and I won't comment on the particular specifics of it and I know you'd understand that. The National Disability Insurance Agency and the scheme itself is the biggest national reform that's ever, ever, occurred in Australia since the introduction of Medicare. No one's ever done this in the world before. It's huge. I mean when you think about bringing in people from a state and territory system into a national system and changing the way that they receive plans and packages associated with those plans to be able to help them live a better life and have better outcomes, it’s something that's never been done. And we've really got to focus on that and the overall objectives in the aim of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

And knowing that there'll be cases like the one that you've just cited where they're quite complex and we really do need to work very closely with the states and territories - because we're transitioning from the state and territory scheme - to be able to make sure that those individuals can have a seamless transition into the scheme.

HAMISH MACDONALD: So that case that we're talking about, does that represent an aberration, this is unusual, this is uncommon?

VICKI RUNDLE: Yes, I would say. If you look at our satisfaction results at the moment, our satisfaction results in the agency I think for the last September quarter were 84 per cent satisfaction. People rated our services very good. Now I'd add to that ...

HAMISH MACDONALD: [Interrupts] But for those individuals that find themselves any other corner of that ledger, I mean these are significant things and potentially very difficult scenarios to get themselves into. There are failures it would seem.

VICKI RUNDLE: I would absolutely acknowledge - and I was just about to add that - the 84 per cent of course isn't good enough and that indicates to us - and we already know this because of the consultations we have been doing with participants and providers and others - that some of the experiences for some participants isn't like that, it's variable and we definitely don't want that. And I absolutely agree with you, we all would. Any experience that a person has that is not a good experience coming into the National Disability Scheme is not good enough. And we are currently working with the New South Wales Government on that particular case, but we do with all of them. There are always going to be a small number - and many of them as you know, reach the media in one way or the other - that we have to work very closely with, because they don't just have a disability, many, many people have a range of needs that need a range of other services to be brought to bear to be able to get them the sort of lives that they need to lead.

HAMISH MACDONALD: I note that the South Australian Government is calling for the number of staff working for the NDIS to be uncapped, the suggestion therefore being that the Agency's understaffed. At the same time we're being told that your own figures show us that $30 million was spent on external consultancy fees. Have you got the collaboration right, is the money being spent in the right places?

VICKI RUNDLE: It's a good question and we have answered this in a number of places before. I'll explain now that the thing about the National Disability Insurance Scheme is that we have a three year transition period and during that period we've got a really large job to do that requires a different skillset than we may need at the end of the Scheme when everybody is into the National Disability Insurance Scheme. And of course some people will, some skillsets will be ongoing, but to do that, what you need is a flexible workforce that allows us to have both our own staff, the local area coordinators, the early childhood people that work with us, contractors, some consultants; a range of people that will have experiences in different areas, different sectors, that we'll need to help us manage something that's more complex than anyone has ever done before.

HAMISH MACDONALD: But $30 million on external consultancy fees seems an extraordinary amount of money.

VICKI RUNDLE: When you consider the overall investment and the expenditure of the scheme, Hamish, and I think it's important to say that participants don't deserve anything less than the

best - and if we believe that the best mix of people are some consultants and some contractors and LACs and early childhood experts and others, to be able to help us do this great big complex task, I think they would expect nothing less.

HAMISH MACDONALD: But a report by the peak body for non-profit disability service providers in December found as many as one-in-ten companies are considering closing their doors, it found one-in-four are operating at a loss. That doesn't speak well of the financial calibration of this whole scheme, does it?

VICKI RUNDLE: Again, I'd just like to cast a different light on that. I know the report you're talking about and it's fair to say that some providers will say they have had great difficulty in transitioning into the new arrangements because they were once block funded and they have to move to a different arrangement with individual payments from participants and we've been assisting providers to make that transition. I mean I'm not sure that- just to remind people that from July 2016 up until September of last year, we more than doubled the number of providers that came into the scheme from 3,500 to 10,500; which is an enormous increase in scale. Many of those providers are operating really, really well. I would add though that some of the issues they've raised have been focused on by the board and by management. We've talked before about our participant pathway work and our provider pathway work and we're currently doing a lot of work on improving the provider experience. As well as that, the Agency and the Board …

HAMISH MACDONALD: [Talks over] Vicki Rundle, we'll have to cut you off there because we've got to get to the news at 8 o'clock. We appreciate your time this morning and helping us understand a pretty complex issue. Vicki Rundle is the Deputy Chief Executive of the National Disability Insurance Agency.

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