

Right attitude and caring heart make for right recruits

By Sue White

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The not-for-profit sector may be going through difficult times right now but Maree Mullins of Sunnyhaven Disability Services says there were plenty of challenges well before the coronavirus outbreak – particularly since the introduction of the NDIS.

“It used to be more of a collaboration with the department; everyone tried to work together holistically,” Sunnyhaven's chief executive officer says.





Maree Mullins CEO of Sunnyhaven Disability Services

Sunnyhaven offers a range of accommodation, early intervention and day program options for people with a disability.

For more than 37 years, Mullins has worked in a variety of sectors including those that serve young and older people and those with disabilities. But her heart lies with disability services.

“You get a lot of satisfaction in seeing people grow and develop, and the client group is so accepting; they’ve taught me so much about myself. We all think we have a certain amount of resilience. I look at some of our families and they have one hundred times what I have,” she says.

Mullins believes the already poorly-funded disabilities sector has suffered under the introduction of the NDIS. Not only are compliance issues now beyond anything she’s seen in her decades in the not-for-profit environment, but Mullins says there are limited opportunities for discussion between government funders and service providers. There’s also a new "silo mentality" that she believes focuses more on money than the person.

“I find that quite difficult to work with,” she says.

The NDIS has also meant significant delays for clients and providers alike: this year Sunnyhaven waited 12 months to get its funding approved.

“How do they expect us to run without plans being approved? I find it crazy. We still have to pay staff and keep houses open,” Mullins says.

Shutting down in these types of situations is not an option.

“A lot of our participants have been living with us for 20 or 30 years plus,” Mullins says.

Like the aged care and childcare industries, wages in disability services are low, meaning that staff need to be in the sector for something more than money.

“There is a significant group of staff [in the industry] that are on a minimum wage, about \$22 an hour. If you work in accommodation you get a number of shift penalties and can be quite well paid, but it can be full on: sometimes there are complex clients and you can be hit, kicked or spat on,” Mullins says.

It makes her role in motivating staff even more important, particularly to ensure her “great” long-term staff stay.

"I say: 'Just think how you would like your family member to be looked after or cared for'."

Sunnyhaven chief Maree Mullins

“Sometimes it’s a daily or hourly challenge, encouraging and motivating people to do their best. I say: ‘Just think how you would like your family member to be looked after or cared for.’ I am open with my communication, and try to be there for everyone,” she says.

While Mullins says finding good people is difficult, there are plenty of success stories amongst the Sunnyhaven team.

“One 70-year-old has been working here for 20 years. She’s got a heart for participants; she cares about them and wants to see the best in them,” she says.

Over the years, Mullins has learnt how to recruit those with the right attitude.

“I ask people why they are drawn to work in disability support; if they start to talk about how they care about people, wanting to see the best in people and helping them develop their skills you can somehow pick out the people with heart,” she says.

An NDIS spokesman said the scheme was a world-first and had more than doubled funding for disability services. Access decisions were taking, on average, four days to complete.

"For the six months to December 31, 2020, the NDIS had committed more than \$11 billion in supports to participants and was providing funding for more than 340,000 Australians with disability – including 134,000 who have never before received supports," he said.

Tips from the top

"You need a big heart and an understanding that you are trying to support the family as well as the participant."

Course recommendation

"I love how Brené Brown teaches and I've done a number of her courses. The BA in Community Management has also been helpful, as have shorter courses which challenge me as a leader and make me think about the way people behave, and how to be authentic and vulnerable."