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Family carers 'stretched to breaking point'

By Dewi Cooke

Submissions to a State Government review of supported accommodation services have revealed stories of desperation as families struggle to cope with caring for people with a disability or mental illness.

The Office of the Public Advocate, representing the needs of Victorians with a disability, said in its submission that the system did not support families to care sustainably.

"Instead families are often stretched to breaking point with their health and wellbeing negatively affected," it said.

MacKillop Family Services described instances of parents reaching "crisis point" and relinquishing their children, while Yooralla said there had been a prolonged lack of investment in supported accommodation, which would lead to a rise in "urgent" unmet need.

Melbourne couple Frank and Anita Lynch said they felt almost hopeless after years fighting to improve their 30-year-old daughter Miranda's care.

Miranda has cerebral palsy and cannot walk, talk, read or write. She requires constant care, a task that has fallen mostly to her parents who, despite having been allocated 24 hours in Government-funded care a week, said they were often unable to secure carers for their daughter due to staff shortages.

A spokesman for the Department of Human Services said the Lynches were being helped through at-home care for their daughter as well as funding to attend a day program. But the Lynches say they have been trying to secure supported housing for Miranda who is aware of her surroundings and able to understand conversations since she was 16.

"She's a very independently minded person," Mr Lynch said. "She tells us almost every day through picture graphs that she wants her own house."

She is not alone: there are 1247 people officially waiting for supported accommodation on the Disability Support Register.

Mr and Mrs Lynch, approaching retirement, said the waiting list was more like a "death list" one where people get housed only when their parents or carers die.

Opposition community services spokeswoman Mary Wooldridge said the system was failing Victorians.

"Some of the people we heard from (in the review) I use the language 'too afraid to die', but that really is it," she said. "They don't know what will happen to their kids when they're gone."

In a statement, Community Services Minister Lisa Neville said she could not comment on individual submissions until the review was completed, but the Government had increased spending on disability services in the last budget.

She said that, for the first time, the number of people waiting for services on the Disability Support Register was "trending down".

More than 100 submissions have been lodged during the inquiry, which is due to report in December.