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24-27 MARCH 2019
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Answering the carer's call in rural areas: making it better together

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Who is a carer?

There are an estimated 2.7 million carers in Australia who provide unpaid assistance to someone with a disability, chronic illness, dementia, mental illness, an alcohol or drug related problem, or frailty due to age.

Many people don't even realise they are carers, often seeing their caring role as part of being a parent, partner, family member or friend. These carers are sometimes referred to as 'hidden carers'. Due to their lack of awareness of their caring role, they do not seek support for themselves. Instead they may focus on the needs of the person they care for, whether these needs are for a short period, a long period, arise suddenly or appear gradually depending on their personal circumstances.

Carer Gateway provides practical information, support and services for carers who are an integral part of Australia's health system and support our aged, disability, mental health, palliative and community care systems.

Carer Gateway's call centre and website are currently managed by Healthdirect Australia on behalf of the Australian Government. Healthdirect Australia is a national, government-owned, not-for-profit organisation, delivering a range of innovative services to provide every Australian with access to trusted health information and advice, when and where they need it.

About Carer Gateway

In recognition of carers' contributions and support needs, the Australian Government commenced Carer Gateway in December 2015. Carer Gateway is comprised of a national phone service and a website providing carers with information on supports and services for carers. Carer Gateway can also assist carers to navigate the aged care, disability support, social security and the Australian health system on behalf of their loved ones.

In developing Carer Gateway the Department of Social Services consulted with over 1,300 carers, service provider organisations and representatives of peak bodies from the carer sector to ensure Carer Gateway was aligned to the needs of carers.

Since launch, Carer Gateway has been expanded and refined. A Carer Gateway Facebook page was launched in March 2017 to engage with the caring community. Search engine marketing and search

engine optimisation has helped increase the reach of the website. Healthdirect Australia has utilised its information partners to expand website content and provide trusted links to organisations.

Last year Carer Gateway exceeded over 1 million contacts since launch. A significant achievement considering the estimated 2.7 million carers in Australia.

Carer Gateway resonates with carers, scoring consistently high customer satisfaction scores from the contact centre exceeding 93% month on month. Feedback received via the website and contact centre provides valuable insights regarding carers key areas of concern which can then be addressed as the service evolves.

Future changes to Carer Gateway

In recognition of the need to better support carers, in March 2018 the Australian Government announced a range of new early-intervention services and supports for carers. Getting help early can make a big difference to a carer's life. These new services will help carers reduce stress, improve wellbeing and get the support they need before reaching crisis point.

These services are part on the Integrated Carer Support Service model.

At the national level, carers will have access to online services, including counselling, coaching, education resources, peer support and information on carer support services. These online services are currently in development.

They will enter public Beta testing in April 2019 and are planned to go live mid-2019.

At the regional and local levels, new Carer Gateway regional delivery partners will deliver a range of supports including needs assessment and planning; targeted financial support packages; in-person and/or telephone information and advice, coaching, counselling, and peer support; and emergency respite to assist carers in crisis.

These regional services will commence from September 2019.

Service providers, peak bodies and carers continue to be consulted as new services are implemented under the Integrated Care Support Service.

More information is available on the [Department of Social Services](#) website and [Carer Gateway](#).

Educational resources

In addition to the online services, Healthdirect Australia has been working on education resources with Carers Australia and the Department of Social Services.

Two of the planned six online education resources, *Dealing with stress* and *Effective communication techniques* are already available, with the remaining four modules scheduled to be available to carers during 2019.

In the module **Dealing with stress**, carers will gain a better understanding of stress, its causes and options for dealing with it; develop action plans to resolve or reduce main stressors; commit to putting plans into action; and understand that plans may need to be adjusted when circumstances change.

Positive feedback on this module has already been received from users including professionals working in the sector. The feedback has been positive with the resources seen as empowering carers.

In the module **Effective communication techniques**, carers will refresh communication skills to help manage the communication styles and behaviours of others to get the result needed; be exposed to some communication skills and techniques; gain confidence to plan and talk about difficult issues; develop a plan for the next difficult communication; and commit to putting the plan into action.

Helping rural and isolated carers

Carers may face difficulties depending on where they live, their age, race or sexual identity.

A report by the University of Canberra, *Carers in regional Australia: 2016 Regional Wellbeing Survey* (Shirmer, 2017), identified that carers living in remote regions and those aged 30-49 reported the greatest level of stress related to caring, including financial stress, isolation, and lack of access to support. Conversely, the findings showed that those living in larger regional towns and cities, and aged 65 and over, reported the most positive experiences of being a carer.

Carer Gateway can be accessed by phone and website and also has a Facebook presence. This has helped carers, regardless of their age or location, access information. No matter where they are in their caring journey, Carer Gateway can assist carers by providing information and alerting them to services and resources available.

The future commencement of online services will allow carers living in regional and remote areas to access services at a time suitable to them and in the privacy of their own home. While not every carer will want to use online services or may be unable to due to limited internet access or cost, online services do provide another option for carers.

For those wanting to access services in person, the future Carer Gateway regional delivery partners will be able to assist carers.

In addition to providing services directly to carers, Carer Gateway regional delivery partners will also provide assistance with navigating relevant local services available to carers through federal, state and local government and non-government providers. For example, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, My Aged Care and palliative care.

The ongoing development of this vital service is evidenced by the Australian Government's continuing commitment to meet the needs of carers in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Presenter

With a background in nursing, **Ann Nicholas** has spent over 20 years involved in the health industry. After her mother was diagnosed with dementia, Ann took two years out of the workforce to provide care for her. Ann's personal experience has created an awareness of the difficulties and rewards the role of a full-time carer present, that only first-hand experience can provide. She also has experience in dealing with persons with serious mental health issues. Her passion for caring for others has led to her working on education campaigns with Commonwealth Serum Laboratories and the NSW Cancer Council. Ann's career also includes medical risk management, specialising in national and international sporting, concert and entertainment events, such as the *Survivor* television series.