Address by former Public Advocate Julian Gardner
Community Visitors AGM
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Although I believe that an ex CEO should keep out of the way I did ask if I could speak briefly today because I wanted the opportunity for not so much a formal but a personal farewell. I want to acknowledge how highly I value the work that Community Visitors do.

Because I am conscious of and sensitive about the role of an ex CEO – particularly such a recent one – it is not my place today to make life difficult for my successor by setting out a plan for the future or by describing all the problems facing us and the challenges. And, let's face it, there always are problems and challenges to be met.

Therefore, I will take the opportunity to be a little more reflective. I commenced a little over 7 years ago very conscious of my limitations. In terms of my knowledge of the service systems, I knew the psychiatric system well having been in all of the facilities in the State. This was not the case with Supported Residential Services (SRSs). A Regional Convenor took me on a tour of SRSs. It was quite a shock to me to discover what the word 'supported' in 'SRS' *didn't* mean.

In the Disability Services stream, I was very conscious that some Community Visitors had been visiting Kew and other facilities for 10 or more years – I was very much a Johnny-come-lately. It was not easy speaking to community groups when you are speaking to parents who have battled for 20 years with the system and with the day-to-day challenges of bringing up a child with a disability. Despite my newness, there was an expectation that I would have something constructive to say.

Internally, Community Visitors were seven years ago disgruntled because a review of the program that had been undertaken some two years before had produced no response from the government. Doubts abounded about what this delay meant. Did it mean that the program itself was in question? Certainly, the delay was holding up much-needed change.

Since then, there has been significant change in the Community Visitors Program as a result of the things that came out of that review. For example, there has been a major change in training, which has been greatly increased in quantity and quality.

Since that time, much has been achieved by you. The displays at this conference chronicle a number of achievements in the last year, in the last five years, and in the last 20 years. Some of the major systemic changes that have occurred - like the closure of Kew - have been as a result of your work. They are a measure of your success.

There were times when you expressed your frustration about the pace of change, or rather, the lack of change. That I understand. But systemic change requires enormous patience, which can be very difficult when you're visiting the same places every day, every month, every year and you feel like nothing's happening. It is critically important to realise progress such as that which is chronicled in the displays is not the only way to measure success. It is not the only way to measure value of your work and your contribution.

Twenty years ago, there were those in Victoria who lived in a hidden world. This is no longer so. Abuses that once occurred cannot any longer be shut away within a conspiracy of silence.

Twenty years ago, people lived in large institutions where abuse occurred partly because they were obscure; they weren't open to scrutiny. But that's no longer the case. The fact that your visits take place at all has a salutary effect: the fact that the people running these places know you will visit means they are conscious of what they need to do. The visits are in themselves a way of bringing about a consciousness of the need to respond to outside scrutiny and to seek improvement that benefits those with a disability. There have been a number of instances of publicity within the last year – or years – about problems in Commonwealth-funded aged care facilities. In contrast, we have not had in the facilities that you visit the equivalent of problems such as the kerosene bath incident.

I don't want to say it's solely because of your work, *but maybe it is.* Maybe there is a difference in those facilities that know they're going to be looked at, know you'll do something about it, know that you have the power. I think that's really important.

A couple of weeks ago, I was interviewed on Jon Faine's Conversation Hour and he asked me about the low lights of my work as Public Advocate. I reflected that I had found it very difficult emotionally to be brought into contact with people who had no friends, no family, and no connections. They don't just experience financial poverty, but a poverty that's been described as a lack of 'social capital'. Assets are not just money, they're not just bricks and mortar. Assets include other intangibles such as connections that enable us to call upon people to help us, people with whom we share our triumphs, with whom we can share our failures and our worries. And at the extreme, there are those to whom you can turn in a crisis, not just a major one - maybe you need the cat fed while you're overnight in hospital – but any situation in which you need to rely upon another to respond and to help.

One of my low lights was coming across people for whom that was not the case. They have no-one.

I once attended a funeral in which the mourners consisted of a former case manager of the deceased, a student social worker on placement with him, and me. I didn't know the deceased well. I hardly knew him at all. But, what was overwhelmingly sad to me was that those three people were the sum total of the community that was there for him at the end.

Jon asked me how I would solve that. What I said – and I cannot be sure that it is the right answer and wonder what yours would be – was that volunteers in our community - people who step out of their neat, or even not so neat, homes and get involved in the community and by doing so make it a community rather than a common geographical area, make a huge difference. There are those who serve in soup kitchens, in church groups, who read books, help refugees – in so many ways – and, of course, I talked about the Community Visitors of whom I am so proud. Not just about the major changes you've brought about but about the importance you may have had on the lives of so many individuals.

Think for moment about one of your achievements in visiting. Think about the importance that you may have in the life of an individual who may have no friends or family or may have no-one of influence on whom they can call. For some, you may be the most important part of their social capital and that – without anything more – is an achievement that is worth celebrating.

I have only been here for seven of your 20 years but it has been a privilege and a pleasure.

It was why I asked to be allowed to come here today – to have this opportunity to say well done and to say thank you.

Your achievements are many - your importance is ongoing.

Thank you.