

# ADVANCING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH - IMPACT CASE STUDY LESLEY CHENOWETH

**Researcher and Institution**  
Emeritus Professor Lesley Chenoweth,  
Griffith University.

**Other members of research team**  
Professor Daniela Stehlik (Adjunct, ANU and  
Griffith University).

## Title of Case Study:

## IMPACT OF LOCAL AREA COORDINATION PROGRAMS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

### 1. CONTEXT

Efforts to improve responsiveness to the needs of people with disabilities through local coordination of service delivery, particularly in rural areas, emerged in policy and program development in Australia around 2000. The evaluations of Local Area Coordination (LAC) in Qld and NSW conducted by Chenoweth & Stehlik (2002; 2004) indicated that LACs provided a cost-effective model to deliver disability services across rural and regional areas. This work was a catalyst for further research by the team to examine service provision and workforce development in rural areas.

### 2. SUMMARY OF IMPACT

*Impact on service delivery:* The LAC evaluations raised government and community awareness of the needs of people with disability in rural areas, and the benefits of greater service coordination. Along with other research, it provided impetus for government to expand and embed the LAC model in Queensland, and influenced the implementation of the LAC model elsewhere across Australia, in the UK, and New Zealand. The contributions by Chenoweth and Stehlik to the adoption of the LAC model pertain particularly to rural workforce needs, service delivery issues, and community capacity building. Their work has informed ongoing research, policy, and advocacy on effective approaches to rural community service provision, the use of information technology, and support for rural practitioners.

### 3. RESEARCH UNDERPINNING IMPACT

*The three research projects underpinning the program of research are as follows:*

**Study 1. LAC evaluation Qld 2000-2002.** As a service brokerage model, LAC provides assessment and coordination of services to people with a disability, their families and carers. It was established as a response to Australia's "tyranny of distance" as a useful model to support rural/remote practice. The researchers worked alongside practitioners in 8 pilot sites across Queensland to evaluate the model for Disability Services Qld (DSQ). Data collection included participant observation, a survey of individuals and families registered with the LACs, and a survey of community organisations in contact with LACs. In-depth interviews were carried out with 39 individuals and families and social network maps drawn up. Interim and final reports were provided in 2002 and 2003 to inform the further roll-out of LACs. They found that the model was cost-effective for rural areas and had potential to foster inclusion, build social capital, and encourage the use of technology in rural practice. Positive features of LAC in Queensland, reported in their study, included:

- A commitment to put positive values and principles into practice for people with disabilities and their families.
- A model of training, supervision and support for staff in rural areas.
- The capacity to deliver early intervention for families across large areas.
- The potential for leadership development for people with disabilities and family members.

*The main challenges facing the LAC program in Queensland were identified as:*

- Safeguarding the integrity of the program in a large bureaucracy.
- Scaling up LAC to other areas while maintaining program flexibility and high quality practice.
- Supporting and sustaining staff.

**Study 2. LAC evaluation NSW 2002-03.** Using a similar methodology to the Qld evaluation, Chenoweth & Stehlik worked alongside practitioners in 5 pilot sites in rural NSW and 1 metropolitan site. A final report was provided in

2002 to the NSW Dept of Ageing, Disability & Home Care. The Department's Annual report 2002/03, (p.14) stated that a review of the Local Support Coordination initiative identified that it was effective in strengthening the connections between people with a disability, their families, and local communities, particularly in rural and regional areas. In NSW, the rollout of 20 additional coordinators was initiated in 2002-03, as was work to develop a model to apply in metropolitan areas.

**Study 3. Families Capacity Building Project 2015-16.** This project was commissioned by Family Advocacy NSW and funded by the NSW government to evaluate a statewide family capacity building program. This program was developed in response to the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and sought to support families of people with a disability to develop their knowledge, skills, and confidence to imagine a better life, to exercise more choice and control about supports, and to strengthen their networks and community engagement. It explored changes in families' intentions and actions in building a better life for their loved one with a disability as well as perceived changes in the life of the person with a disability. The research adopted a reflective and participatory approach to evaluation whereby the researchers were participant observers in the process. This involved observing six workshops with families across the state and interviewing 26 family members attending the workshops. The research report provided to Family Advocacy was forwarded to the government and the work has been presented at several conferences. FA includes this research into their workshops, and subsequently funded the publication of workbook for people with disability and families.

### 4. DETAILS OF IMPACT

*Approach to impact:* Prof Chenoweth stated that the researchers planned for impact as they established a developmental and participatory research process in which the funding department, practitioners, people with disabilities, their families and carers, all reflected and learned together through the evaluation. This meant that learnings could be applied in practice as the evaluation was unfolding. As the issues regarding service access for people with disability in rural areas are as pertinent today in the new NDIS arrangements, as they were over a decade ago when the research was conducted, findings remain relevant to policy and practice.

*Impact on service delivery:* The LAC evaluation affirmed the benefits of the model and in doing so provided impetus for the expansion of LACs in Qld and NSW. DSQ applied the findings of the evaluation reports in expanding the program from 8 to 17, then 23 locations (Commonwealth-State Disability Agreement, Annual Report 2003-04). In NSW, the rollout of 20 additional coordinators was initiated in 2002-03 alongside development of a model to apply in metropolitan areas.

In relation to workforce development, the LAC research identified the pressures on individual practitioners who are distant from the policy making environment and the difficulties in attracting, retaining and training rural staff. The local area coordinators experienced a range of dilemmas in using information technologies in their work —such as intrusiveness and confidentiality, reliability, equity of access, and training. These findings were reported to DSQ; reported in publications and raised at numerous conferences, thereby sparking debate and building knowledge of how IT could be used most effectively to support rural practitioners and families. The findings prompted Prof Chenoweth to develop: (1) a structure to support isolated practitioners, and (2) teaching and research at Griffith University to foster an integrative education model for rural practice. DSQ responded to the workforce and other challenges that arose in the evaluation by providing more training and support to LAC coordinators.

*Improved community awareness of a problem, based on research:* The researchers presented the findings at numerous conferences and forums. These activities promoted community awareness of LACs; they built confidence in the LAC model, they drew public attention and action to the difficulties facing rural

families in need, and about workforce issues for rural practitioners. LAC-type processes were credited with heightened public awareness of disability issues; leadership development amongst individuals living with disability, their families and allies; and economic development.

*Impact on policy:* This early development and evaluation of the LACs also influenced the design and implementation of LACs in NZ, Ireland, and Scotland. The Irish National Disability Authority (2015, p.16) cited Chenoweth & Stehlik noting that: "In Queensland ... community development was core business for each LAC from the foundation of the program", which made it a uniquely Queensland approach. Stalker et al., (2007) in an evaluation commissioned by the Scottish Executive referenced Chenoweth & Stehlik extensively referring to their work as ... "Another substantial Australian study worth considering is an evaluation of the LAC programme in Queensland." In their recommendations, they detailed the potential for positive outcomes from community capacity building, noting that the Scottish LACs spent relatively little time on community capacity building.

*Submissions to impact on policy and legislative reform*

Prof. Chenoweth has contributed to public inquiries to influence disability policy, services and funding. Recent examples include:

- 2012 Statement to Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry.
- 2011 The Productivity Commission Report on the Inquiry into *Disability Care and Support*.

*Impact on community well-being:* The research method enabled all stakeholders to express their views on their needs and how the LAC model could (or could not) meet those needs, especially people with disabilities and their parents/carers. Disability advocacy services, such as Capricornia Community Development Association and the Community Resource Unit welcomed the focus on the needs of families and people with disabilities in rural areas. Advocate, John Homan, reported that the research promoted the LAC coordinator role as a "co-driver" while assisting and supporting the clients and their families to move forward themselves (Capricornia Community Development Association Inc. Submission to the Productivity Commission inquiry into NDIS Costs, 2017).

## 5. ENGAGEMENT

The research was directly supported and funded by government agencies - Disability Services Queensland and the NSW government. It featured engagement with practitioners, government, and NGOs in regional and urban areas at all stages. This approach enabled all stakeholders to exchange views and knowledge to inform the development of the most effective LAC model. Disability advocacy groups were very supportive of the research and helped to shape the LAC model. Prof Chenoweth was invited to be a Board member and Chair of the Community Resource Unit, due largely to the high regard in which the research was held by disability advocates and practitioners.

*Significant industry appointments, memberships and awards* Appointments to reference and advisory groups recognise the expertise of Prof Chenoweth in disability research and provide opportunities to use research findings to influence policy and practice.

Prof Chenoweth is a recognised leader in the field of social work and disability in Australia. In 2015 she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for her distinguished service to higher education, particularly in the area of social work, as an academic and administrator, and as a supporter of people living with disabilities <https://app.secure.griffith.edu.au/news/2015/06/08/queens-birthday-honour-for-leading-social-work-academic/>. Jim Chalmers MP recognised Prof Chenoweth's leadership publicly in a speech in Federal Parliament <https://www.jimchalmers.org/media/speeches/lesley-chenoweth-ao-an-inspired-choice-and-an-inspirational-person/> and Bert van Manen MP recognised her contributions in education and social work [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Hansard/Hansard\\_Display?bid=chamber/hansardr/5450bb89-40c1-40d0-b9d7-ce7194184e98/&sid=0053](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansardr/5450bb89-40c1-40d0-b9d7-ce7194184e98/&sid=0053)

Appointments to high level government and industry bodies recognise her expertise in disability research:

- Deputy Chair, Social Cohesion Implementation Committee Queensland Government 2016-current
- Member, Queensland Family and Child Commission Advisory Council 2016-2017 <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/advisory-council>

- Member, Social Work Advisory Committee, Centrelink. Australian Government, 2008- 2010
- Member Child Safety Innovators Group, Queensland Government. 2008 - 2009
- Member, Reference Group, Office of the Public Advocate Qld. 2001-2009
- Convenor, International Social Work Committee Australian Association of Social Workers, 2007- 2011
- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Foundation Fellow

*Reports for industry*

Industry research reports enhance access to research for policy makers and practitioners:

- Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. (2001) *Interim Report #2 Evaluation of Local Area Coordination Pilot Program*. Prepared for Disability Services Queensland.
- Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. (2001) *Interim Report #1 Evaluation of Local Area Coordination Pilot Program*. Prepared for Disability Services Queensland.
- Stehlik, D. & Chenoweth, L. (2003) *An Evaluation of the Implementation of Local Support Coordination in 8 locations in New South Wales*. Report to the NSW Dept Ageing, Disability & Home Care, Sydney.
- Chenoweth, L. and Clements, N. (2009). *Funding and Service Options for People with Disabilities, Final Report*, June, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, Queensland.

*Professional development and training*

The research was grounded in a framework of values and knowledge that ensured direct engagement with service users and practitioners as a priority. Examples of recent engagement include:

- AASW NDIS Forum (2016) Victoria <https://www.aasw.asn.au/events/event/the-ndis-and-social-work-a-discussion-of-opportunities-challenges-and-potential-pitfalls-with-professor-lesley-chenoweth-ao-and-professor-christine-bigby>
- PeakCare research forum (2016) <http://peakcare.com.au/news/peakcare-research-group-kicks-off-for-2016/>
- NDIS Symposia (2015) Real Jobs for Real Pay <http://www.qsss.com.au/overhere/wp-content/uploads/NDIS-Symposium-August-Program.pdf>
- Preparation for NDIS (2015). Chair of Forums. <http://embracekindy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/NDIS-Symposium-November-Flyer-Program-Speaker-Bios.pdf>

## 6. RESEARCH INCOME

The program of research was funded predominantly through government-commissioned research and evaluation projects.

### Category 2 (government)

1. Chenoweth, L. & Ellem, K. Evaluation of the Resourcing Families Capacity Building Project—Family Advocacy NSW, 2015/16. NSW Government \$65,000.
2. Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. Evaluation of Local Support Coordination, 2002/03. NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) \$65,000.
3. Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. A Formative Evaluation of Local Area Coordination in Queensland, 2000/02. Queensland Department of Family, Youth and Community Care. Disability Services Queensland \$80,000.

## 7. RESEARCH OUTPUTS

Selected academic publications

1. Ellem, K, Chenoweth, L & Edwards, R (2018). Choosing the harder road: Naming the challenges for families in person-centred planning. *Journal of Intellectual Disability* doi: 10.1177/1744629518784154
2. Chenoweth, L. (2013). Ethical dilemmas of everyday rural life: How do professionals balance living and working in rural and remote Australia? *Ethics of everyday life. Interdisciplinary Net 3rd Global Conference, Prague*, 19–20 June 2013.
3. Chenoweth, L., & Clements, N. (2011). A snapshot of service user participation in disability services in Australia. *Journal of Policy & Practice in Intellectual Disability* 8(3), 173–183.
4. Chenoweth, L. (2006). Working with people with disabilities and their families. In Chui, E and Wilson, J Eds. *Best practice in fields of social work and human services*. Federation Press.
5. Wills, R., & Chenoweth, L. (2005). Support to Compliance. In O'Brien, P & Sullivan, M. Eds. *Allies in Emancipation: Shifting from "giving service to providing support"*, Palmerston NZ: Thomson Dunmore Press.
6. Chenoweth, L., & Stehlik, D. (2004). The implications of social capital for the inclusion of people with disabilities and families in community life. *International Journal on Inclusive Education*, 8 (1), 59–72.
7. Chenoweth, L., & Stehlik, D. (2002). Using technology in rural practice – Local Area Coordination in rural Australia, *Rural Social Work*, 7(1), 14–21.
8. Chenoweth, L. & Stehlik, D. (2001). Building resilient communities: Social work practice in rural Queensland. *Australian Social Work*. 54(2), 47–54.

