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EXCLUSIVE POLITICS FEDERAL **AGED CARE ROYAL COMMISSION**

'Pretty confronting': Up to a third of aged care services may be substandard

By **Judith Ireland**

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Aged Care Services Minister Richard Colbeck has revealed up to a third of aged care services may not be "up to scratch" as he warned government spending alone won't fix the quality issues plaguing the sector.

With the aged care royal commission planning to confirm the level of substandard aged care in its final report next year, Senator Colbeck said initial indications from commissioner Lynelle Briggs were that at least 12 to 15 per cent of services were below par and the figure could be as high as 20 to 30 per cent.



Minister for Aged Care Richard Colbeck says there needs to be "attitudinal and cultural change" in the aged care industry. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

"That's going to be pretty confronting for us all, if that's what comes back in 12 months' time," Senator Colbeck told an aged care conference this week.

As the Morrison government prepares to respond to the [royal commission's initial findings](#), Senator Colbeck put the sector on notice that the quality of aged care would not simply be fixed through higher government spending.

"The response from the sector can't be just, 'give us some more money and everything will be OK'," he told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. "There has to be some attitudinal change and cultural change in the industry," he said, adding he did not want to over-regulate aged care providers.

As of June 30, there were about 120,000 people on the home care package waiting list, with the royal commission noting 16,000 people died in 2017-18 while waiting for help.

The royal commission has called for urgent action to reduce waiting times, [with Prime Minister Scott Morrison previously confirming there would be more money for home care packages in the mid-year budget update next month](#).

While noting there was "no question" about extra funds, Senator Colbeck cautioned the government could not "flood the market" when boosting home care packages, noting this ran the risk of enabling "shonky providers".

The royal commission also questioned the sector's ability to grow quickly and maintain quality.

Earlier this year, the Department of Health told the royal commission it would take between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion extra each year to provide access to everyone on the home care waiting list at the level of care they needed.

Ahead of the mid-year budget update, Leading Aged Services Australia (LASA), the national association for all providers of aged care services, is suggesting a figure of about \$500 million a year extra for home care packages, with a maximum wait time of three months. LASA chief executive Sean Rooney said delivery should be phased in over two to three years, "prioritising people of high need but low means".

Mr Rooney said the government should also promote its pensions loan scheme and drop the interest rate to help people pay for their own care while they waited for home care package funding.

Labor and aged care advocates are among those also pointing to an estimated \$450 million in unspent home care package funds (money that has been allocated to a person but not spent), which the royal commission heard was due to the "saving mindset of older people" as well as the over-assessment of needs.

The royal commission's first report in October [said the country's aged care system was "sad and shocking" and "diminishes Australia as a nation,"](#) while calling for immediate action to help Australians stay in their homes, reduce the use of chemical restraints and get younger people out of aged care.

Senator Colbeck said he was looking "closely" at government regulations on chemical and physical restraint, introduced in July 2019, [following calls from the Greens and groups like the Older Persons Advocacy Network for the rules to be strengthened](#).

"I'm looking at what might be possible."

Labor's ageing and seniors spokesperson, Julie Collins, said the government was failing to act "despite the urgent need for change".

"We already know that for every week that Scott Morrison delays action, 300 older Australians die without the home care package that they have been approved for."



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