



MEDIA RELEASE

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Brighter future for deafblind community

In Western Australia almost 9000 people are living with the dual sensory loss known as deafblindness.

Many of these people feel incredibly isolated, have little means of communication and find it very difficult to be active members of their local community.

However, thanks to an Australian-first project about to be launched by Senses Foundation, their future is looking a lot brighter.

The not-for-profit, Burswood-based organisation has just been awarded more than \$130,000 in grants from the Ian Potter Foundation (\$50,000) and the Disability Services Commission (83,000) to run the country's first pilot project introducing communication guides for people who are deafblind.

This 12-month project, which kicks off on 1 August, will aim to demonstrate whether specialised intervention can reduce isolation, increase independence and reduce the likelihood of premature admission to institutional care.

Senses' Chief Executive Debbie Karasinski says the funding will be used to provide special training for a group of communication guides and at least three hours intervention each week for the 15 people with deafblindness selected to take part in the trial.

"At Senses Foundation we see a desperate need for people who are deafblind, and have profound communication difficulties, to have regular support to maintain their independence, opportunity for socialisation and community involvement," she says.

"We believe this pilot project will increase their physical and mental health, improve their general wellbeing, increase their ability to participate in their communities, enable them to continue to contribute to family and community life and help them deal with the considerable challenges of living with dual sensory loss.

"We are also confident it will reduce the likelihood of premature institutionalisation as a result of a person's inability to care for themselves."

Ms Karasinski says the concept of communication guides is not a new one. In fact, in some countries access to this kind of support is enshrined in legislation.

"In Denmark these support workers are called contact persons," explains Ms Karasinski. "In the United Kingdom they are communication guides and in Canada they are interveners.

"But in each country, no matter what they are called, these people are specifically trained to be aware of the issues related to dual sensory loss and to be the link between the person who is

deafblind and the community, minimising isolation and teaching the skills required for ongoing independence.

“Unfortunately, until now this service has not been available anywhere in Australia. Through this pilot project, however, Senses Foundation hopes to change that.”

Senses Foundation is a charitable organisation providing disability support services to people of all ages throughout Western Australia and specialist services to people who are deafblind.

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