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# Action needed on aged care draft recommendations now, unions say

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Aged care should be overhauled, peak bodies say, with lawyers calling for a shake-up of the sector that includes mandated staffing ratios, the compulsory registration of workers and a new independent watchdog.

After 2½ years of hearings that have included appalling tales of neglect, counsel has submitted 124 recommendations to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety on Thursday.



Royal commissioners Tony Pagone, QC, and Lynelle Briggs, began hearing final submissions on Thursday from counsel on future recommendations to reform Australia's aged care system.

The proposed reforms also include a new Aged Care Act that would enshrine the universal right of older people to high quality, safe and timely care of their own choosing.

They also want to put the nursing back into nursing homes, mandating at least 16 hours of nursing a day at each facility.

The final report is due by February 26, 2021. Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck said the government will consider the final recommendations next year.

But industry groups say the sector needs a shake-up immediately.

"Workers and residents should not have to wait ... The disaster is unfolding right here, right now," United Workers Union aged care director Carolyn Smith said.

The recommendations proposed by senior counsels Peter Gray, QC, and Peter Rozen, QC are contained in a 500-page submission to commissioners, Tony Pagone, QC, and Lynelle Briggs, that was [made public on Thursday](#).

Mr Rozen said a major challenge for the sector was how to attract and retain workers, the vast majority of whom were women. There was a high degree of unanimity that they were underpaid, both in terms of the value of the work they perform and relative to other sectors such as hospital workers.

"The low pay they receive we submit is nothing less than the aged care system exploiting the goodness of their heart," he said.

Mr Rozen called on providers and the government to back a special submission to the Fair Work Commission to make a one-off increase to wages.

During the hearings, the commissioners welcomed some proposals and queried others. Commissioner Briggs questioned whether an independent aged care body was in the best interest of older Australians, given the complex trade-offs and the \$20 billion cost.

Health Services Union national president Gerard Hayes said the recommendations were a "breakthrough moment" for aged care that should be acted on.

"Peter Rozen QC and Peter Gray QC have explicitly recognised resident care won't improve unless we significantly invest in the size and skills of the workforce, which is horrendously casualised and fragmented," he said.

"There is now no excuse for inaction. The government should adopt the recommendations today, not wait another four months."

Minister Colbeck said the government has already responded with significant measures following the Commission's interim and COVID-19 reports.

"The Australian government is listening, acting and working to ensure older Australians are kept safe and quality of care is retained as the important work of the royal commission continues," he said.

But Opposition aged care spokeswoman Julie Collins said the Prime Minister Scott Morrison rejected the commission's previous evidence of failures to plan for COVID-19 in the sector.

"He also failed to properly respond to the royal commission's interim report which included calls for urgent action on the home care waiting list," she said.

"There were more than 100,000 older Australians on the waiting list for home care when Scott Morrison called the royal commission and there are still more than 100,000 waiting today."

Centre Alliance MP Rebekha Sharkie said while the commissioners needed to consider the recommendations, there was plenty of work the government could start doing.

"The government is simply in denial if they think the royal commission won't require action on staffing ratios and it would be a simple action now to require transparency around the staffing arrangements in aged care facilities," she said.

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