

Melissa and Carl's families thought they'd be safe in a group home. The reality was very different

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The royal commission heard stories about what two young adults faced in a group home.

(ABC News: Emma Machan)

They are known simply as Melissa and Carl.

They are not their real names — their identities have been suppressed — and they cannot give evidence due to their disabilities.

But through their family members, their stories were heard this week at the disability royal commission, as the inquiry turned its focus to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services providers.

The commission heard stories of violence and abuse by two support workers at Melissa and Carl's home — a home one investigator described as "dysfunctional" and "in crisis".

The inquiry heard evidence over five days this week about the behaviour of two support workers at the purpose-built home in western Sydney, run by disability services provider Sunnyfield since 2017.

And the families of Melissa and Carl, who both still live at the home, continue to fear for their safety despite the two support workers involved in the alleged abuse being sacked.

Sunnyfield acknowledged this week at the commission that it had failed to protect three residents with profound disabilities — two of them being Melissa and Carl.

Key points:

- The disability royal commission is looking at National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) service providers
- This week, the inquiry was told about abuse and violence that occurred in a Sydney group home
- Families of two young adults who live there say they still fear for their safety

A report by the organisation's chief executive described a pattern of behaviour by the two workers as "staff bullying, racism, intimidation, deceit, absconding from duties, not adhering to client schedules, cover-up, condonement of laziness (and) falsifying records."

Warning: The following story contains descriptions of physical abuse.

Punching, dragging and injuries behind closed doors

Carl's mother Sophia* told the hearing about two incidents where her son was injured, once where he returned bleeding from an outing and another occasion where he needed hospital treatment after his eye was split open.

Sophia said a staff member told her that 24-year-old Carl, who is blind and lives with autism and severe intellectual disability, had been punched, kicked and dragged by a support worker.

"I can only imagine how Carl would have felt in those moments when any of this was happening, when there's no mum and dad, no-one else in sight to see what's happening and who he can call out to," Sophia said.

Another witness to the royal commission, Eliza*, gave evidence about the treatment of her sister Melissa by the same two support workers.

Melissa, 23, lives with multiple disabilities including autism, PTSD and Prader-Willi syndrome – an insatiable desire to eat.

Eliza told the inquiry that when Melissa was younger, she experienced trauma at the special school she attended, as teachers had kept her in a cage when they couldn't manage her behaviour.

She said whilst Melissa was much-loved by their mother, it became unsafe for her to remain at home as she would escape at night, and the decision was made for her to live in residential accommodation.

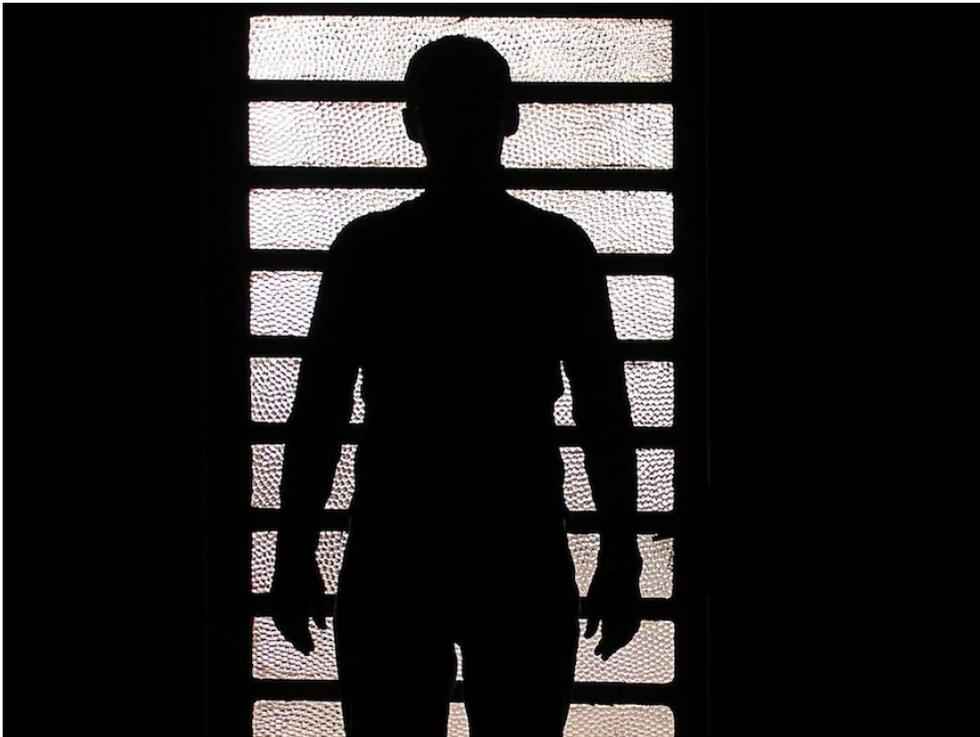
The royal commission heard that a staff member told police that a support worker dragged a naked Melissa down the home's hallway by her wrists.

"It boggles my mind that someone would think that dragging someone across the floor would be appropriate," Eliza said.

The inquiry heard that Eliza became concerned from mid-2017 about incidents at the house, including Melissa breaking her finger, bruising around her eye and a head injury.

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
- [ReachOut](#) at au.reachout.com
- [Care Leavers Australasia Network \(CLAN\)](#) on 1800 008 774



The disability royal commission was told of physical abuse that took place at a group home. (Flickr: Nadar, File photo)

Eliza made multiple complaints to Sunnyfield and to other agencies including the NSW Ombudsman, and told the inquiry the group home had a "culture of blame".

"You couldn't raise an issue without someone being offended," she said.

In 2019, an anonymous tip off about the two support workers' behaviours was made to the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission. Sophia also lodged a formal complaint.

Police charged both support workers, but the royal commission heard a magistrate dismissed both cases due to insufficient evidence.

Sunnyfield terminated the employment of both staff members — one in December 2019 and the other in January 2020.

CEO expresses regret and apologises at inquiry

The inquiry was told the family members and residents never received an apology from Sunnyfield about the incidents and were not offered any compensation or counselling.

Sunnyfield chief executive Caroline Cuddihy faced three days of questioning over the incidents at the group home from 2017-2020.

Questioned about Sunnyfield's employment process and the hiring of one of the support workers, Ms Cuddihy described him as a "con artist".

"We deeply regret employing him and deeply regret his actions," she said.

"I do wish to express my regret and deep sympathy for the pain and distress suffered as a consequence of the events."

But Ms Cuddihy admitted she had not met with the families of the residents and had not apologised to them prior to her evidence at the royal commission.

An investigator, Jennie Piaud, was appointed by Sunnyfield to look into the complaints about the home in 2019.

She told the inquiry the house was in "crisis" and described the culture as "distrustful and divisive".

"This would have to be one of the more dysfunctional workplaces," Ms Piaud said.

Interviews with staff members by Ms Piaud revealed that one of the support workers "bad mouthed" the relatives of the residents and called them "bitches".

'We don't really know the truth': Families still concerned

Both Eliza and Sophia told the inquiry they asked Sunnyfield to install CCTV in communal areas of the home so the treatment of their loved ones could be monitored.

Ms Cuddihy said Sunnyfield had sought legal advice about cameras in the house but it was a "vexed issue".

"It's something that needs deep consideration in the way that it would be done, so it does not disadvantage the clients and their personal privacy and dignity," Ms Cuddihy said.

Sunnyfield has no plan to introduce CCTV and Ms Cuddihy said she would welcome the royal commission's direction on the issue.

Ms Cuddihy was also questioned about an eviction notice served on Melissa in 2018 as a result of Eliza's "personal grievances" with Sunnyfield.

Eliza told the inquiry she went to 13 disability providers to try and find an alternative home for Melissa, but there was nothing suitable as she required a locked kitchen.

Sunnyfield and Eliza went through a process of mediation and Melissa remains at the group home.

Despite the two support workers being dismissed, Sophia told the inquiry she still didn't feel Carl was safe in the home.

"It's a culture of cover-up, I'm sorry to say, because we get told stories that are smoothed over so we don't react as badly," Sophia said.

"I think we don't really know the truth, and that's the thing that concerns me."



Sunnyfield chief executive Caroline Cuddihy expressed "regret and deep sympathy" for the pain caused.

(Supplied)



Melissa also experienced trauma when she was younger, her sister told the royal commission. *(File photo)*

**All witnesses names are pseudonyms*