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“Breaking Point” -- Four Corners, 15th February at 8.30 pm on ABC TV.

This week on Four Corners, “Breaking Point”. The heart-rending story that tells what it’s like to live with a disability, or to care for someone who is disabled, in Australia today. Reporter Wendy Carlisle meets the families the nation has neglected.

The system of assistance for people with a disability in Australia is broken. Carers know it, charitable organisations know it and so do the governments. Now the federal government says something must be done. It’s holding an Inquiry, with the intention of creating a new and fairer system. It’s even considering a national disability insurance scheme. But will the system be reformed in time to save the families now at breaking point?

In Sydney, 65 year old Dick Jones showers his profoundly disabled son Robbie. It’s a task he does willingly but at his age he doesn’t know how long he can keep giving his son the care he needs. He’s been told the only way to get more help would be to abandon his child and leave him in the care of the state.

Amanda Royle’s 9 year old daughter Rosie is deaf and blind, cannot speak, and is intellectually disabled. On her own with two other children to look after, Amanda is in desperate need of assistance that the system cannot provide.

The Nguyen family has twin boys with severe autism. At thirteen they are intellectually disabled and need to wear nappies. Three years ago one of the twins was given a place in a special school. For the family it was a god-send. Now the funds have dried up and the school is threatened with closure.

These families are desperate and they are not alone. Across Australia it's estimated that there are 1.5 million people with a severe disability. Only a small proportion of them receive any direct physical care from government or charities. The vast majority rely on family and friends to help them survive.

"It doesn't matter where you look across the sector, across the states of Australia, the system is broken." Bruce Bonyhady, Independent Panel Member, Productivity Commission Inquiry into a National Disability Support Scheme

The reasons for this situation aren't hard to find. Thirty years ago governments radically reformed the system of disability care in Australia. They promised to set people free from institutions, and at the same time they promised a major boost in funding so that people with disabilities could be supported to live at home or in community settings. Instead those services have been starved of funds leaving carers, many whom are now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, to carry the burden. It's a terrible situation as Dick Jones told Four Corners:

"We were told... the only option you have, is when you are in a wooden box , that's probably the only time that Rob [his adult son] will get any accommodation."

The Federal Government accepts the system needs reform and has begun to allocate extra funds for services and carers.

Most significantly, the Federal Government has set up a Productivity Commission Inquiry to recommend systematic reform and the establishment of a comprehensive National Disability Support Scheme. The problem is if the Inquiry recommends a new scheme and the Federal Government agrees to act, even the best estimates suggest real change in Australia would take five to seven years to implement.

"There'll obviously I think be more meat on the bone for a scheme towards the end of a second term. When the scheme could finally be implemented, I don't know." Bill Shorten: Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities.

For thousands of people this is simply too long to wait. Four Corners reveals the growing number of people who are packing their bags and going to live in countries where the support system is better resourced. These people are being called "disability refugees". Reporter Wendy Carlisle goes with one young mother to Britain as she investigates the possibility of moving her family back there so her daughter could be better cared for.

While the Government recognises the need for fundamental reform, many families of the disabled are at 'breaking point'.

BREAKING POINT goes to air on the 15th February at 8.30 pm on ABC1. It is repeated on the 16th February at 11.35pm.

It will also be available online. <http://abc.net.au/4corners>

A public online forum with some of the people from the story will follow the screening on Monday night starting at 9.30pm AEDST. An invitation is extended to all to join in.