



Tasmanian Deaf Society

VISUAL SMOKE ALARM SUBSIDY

The Tasmanian Deaf Society and Hearing Link Tasmania believe that Deaf and Hard of Hearing Tasmanians should have access to subsidised visual smoke alarms in order to ensure they remain safe in their homes in the unfortunate event of house fire.

We believe that it is imperative that the current State Government follow initiatives of other jurisdictions to guarantee that the well being and safety of all Tasmanians regardless of hearing loss is not compromised.

Subsidy Options

Tasmanian Deaf Society and Hearing Link endorse the Bellman Smoke Alarm package as a portable, easy to install and accredited to Australian Standards. The cost of the package at current prices is \$460:00.

Summary of Options

1. A subsidy provided to reduce the cost of the Bellman unit to that of a standard smoke alarm-\$440:00
2. Bellman Unit is supplied free of charge to all eligible recipients-\$460:00
3. The State government or a corporate sponsor supply a bank of Bellman smoke alarm units to the Tasmanian Deaf Society to be rented out. The equipment remains the property of the State Government and can be reallocated when available-\$460:00 per unit plus \$80:00 managing fee to the Tasmanian Deaf Society for handling and administration.

Recommendation:

To prevent further loss of life, The Tasmanian Deaf Society recommends that Option 1 commence within 6 months.

Background

The Need

In October 2007, a 93 year old man died in a house fire at Elizabeth Town. The smoke alarm was working. It is believed that the gentleman who died was hearing impaired (Mercury & ABC News). (Attachment 12)

This is the second such death that the Tasmanian Deaf Society is aware of since 2003, where the smoke alarm has failed to wake a person

Additionally further evidence such as the article below highlights the dangers of inadequate smoke alarm systems. Tamara McLean's (Medical writer for AAP) article appeared in 2007 and stated that;

“Experts have called for the standard smoke alarm to be replaced after studies revealed it won't wake up half of sleepers who are slightly drunk or suffering mild hearing loss. Australia research presented at an international sleep conference in Cairns has shown that while the current high-pitched alarm works on healthy adults, it is “disturbingly ineffective” in older people, children and the alcohol and hearing impaired.

The specialists from Victoria University say their latest results are the strongest proof yet the alarm must be changed to a more complex sound guaranteed to wake up twice as many vulnerable Australians.

Fire and emergency authorities alerted to the findings say the current alarm is effective and saving lives but “any research on ways to improve it is welcomed”

One study showed that among 38 people with moderate hearing loss, only 44 per cent woke up with the standard alarm sounded at the recommended volume of 75 decibels at the pillow.

Another test showed the alarm only woke up 60 per cent of 32 young people who drank enough vodka and orange before bed to give them a low blood alcohol level of 0.5.

Our experience, the experience of Deaf peak bodies in Australia, Audiologists and other related specialties fully support such findings and research. The current commercial smoke alarms for homes are “useless” for people with significant hearing loss in high frequencies or high pitch range, as in the case where the gentleman in Elizabeth Town died whilst the audible smoke alarm was working.

Tasmanian Deaf Society Lobbying and Submissions to Government to date

Since the late 1990's, the Tasmanian Deaf Society has lobbied the Federal and State Governments to provide subsidised smoke alarms for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Tasmanians.

Following is an outline of our recent interactions.

1. With the death of an elderly gentleman in Ouse 2003, the coroner noticed that; "If the Vibracon (*a visual and sensory smoke alarm*) unit which incorporates a flashing strobe light and vibrating pad, had been used, it may have alerted the deceased sooner and possibly have saved his life" (Attachment 1). As a result of this report, Tasmanian Deaf Society increased its lobbying efforts by meeting with Damian Killailea Director Community Fire Safety at Tas Fire Service and Teresa Banman of Tas Fire Service in November 2003. Tasfire stated that they had no funds but advised The Tasmanian Deaf Society on how to approach the Government to lobby for subsidised smoke alarms.
2. In December 2003 a proposal was written to the then Minister David Llewellyn requesting that smoke alarms be subsidised (Attachment 2) Background information including 3 options was presented. These were:
 - Provision of a subsidy that reduces the cost of a smoke alarm (to that of a standard audible smoke alarm)
 - Free supply of the a smoke alarm to eligible recipients
 - Rental out of the alarm to be managed by The Tasmanian Deaf Society

The proposal included costing, time frame and implementation and was based on the South Australian model which had been operating for a number of years successfully.

David Llewellyn's reply thanked the Tasmanian Deaf Society for the letter and stated that funds for the State were fully committed for 2003/2004 but "please try again in 2004/2005 financial year." (Attachment 3)

The Minister did add that he had spoken to the CEO State Fire Commission and that they had no funds.

3. The same Budget Statement was resubmitted by the Tasmanian Deaf Society as advised for 2005/2006 in November 2004. (Attachment 4)
4. The Liberal Party in December 2005 endorsed the proposal and budget statement by the Tasmanian Deaf Society. (Attachment 5)
5. A meeting with Lara Giddings was held on Tuesday August 29 2006 with Catherine Goodluck and Grant Roberts to seek Government support.

Lara Giddings's response was that there were no funds and that she didn't believe in a pilot project, which had just commenced in Victoria, would be beneficial to Tasmania. Minister Giddings suggested that The Tasmanian Deaf Society seek funds through the Individual Support Program (ISP) (Attachment 6) for visual smoke alarms. In response we pointed out to her that due to the new Disability Services Short Term Support Guidelines (Attachment 7) Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals experienced difficulty in meeting the new criteria to access this program. Minister Giddings also believed that funds should be sought through The State Fire Levy

6. A letter was sent and a replied received from the then member for Bass Michael Ferguson MHA and Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion Minister for Community Services stating that the responsibility for provision of specialised aids and equipment is the responsibility of the State government and forms part of the Commonwealth state/Territory Disability Agreement. (Attachment 8)
7. Meeting with Ruth Forest MLC on the 20th November 2007 with Grant Roberts and Catherine Goodluck. The outcome was a question prepared to be asked in State parliament Upper House for 2008.(Attachment 9)

8. On Wednesday November 14 2007 David Killalea from the Tasmanian Fire Service was once again contacted via email and asked if they had a levy that would subsidise visual smoke alarms, The response was negative.
(Attachment 10)

Other Jurisdictions

South Australia

Provide visual smoke alarms to Deaf and Hard of Hearing free of charge and who meet six eligibility guidelines. These are:

- Adult, over 18 of age
- Living in South Australia
- Profound degree of hearing loss in at least one ear
- Health care card holder
- Living in their own home or private rental property
- Not eligible for other similar schemes

<http://www.guidedogs.org.au/sa-hearing-solutions.html>

Queensland

Queensland has a voucher system in place. The Queensland Fire Service provides vouchers to eligible recipients.(www.fire.qld.gov.au)

New South Wales

As yet there is nothing in place at NSW although investigating possibilities.

Victoria

Subsidised visual smoke alarms for profoundly Deaf people are provided through Department of Human Services on application.

www.dhs.vic.gov.au/humanservicesnews/mar06/deaf.htm) (Attachment 11)