

NDIS may be to blame for plateauing numbers of volunteers to help people with disabilities

By Social Affairs correspondent [Norman Hermant](#)

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Chiara Casalaz, 18, lives with Down Syndrome and spends one day a month with a volunteer host family. (ABC News: Norman Hermant)

When Chiara Casalaz arrives at Kathleen Horan's house, she feels right at home. That's because the 18-year old, who lives with Down Syndrome, spends one day a month with the Horan family.

"It's been an extraordinary thing for us, really," said Kathleen Horan, who volunteered to be matched with Chiara 11 years ago.

"She's a part of our family story now."

Chiara will often stay over on a Saturday night. She comes to family events like birthday parties, and the Horans attended her first communion and her presentation ball at school.

She's become like a sister to the family's three children.

"It's given us the opportunity to have this other child, another sibling, to love. And to share," Ms Horan said.

Chiara's stays with her volunteer family are also a huge help for her mother, Pia Casalaz.

Her husband died earlier this year.

Key points:

- Families on waiting list for help up to three years
- 1000 families on waiting list
- No special training required to volunteer

The time Chiara spends with the Horans gives her a few valuable hours when she doesn't need to focus entirely on Chiara.



Pia Casalaz says the Horans' help has made a huge difference. (ABC News: Norman Hermant)

Need for volunteers growing

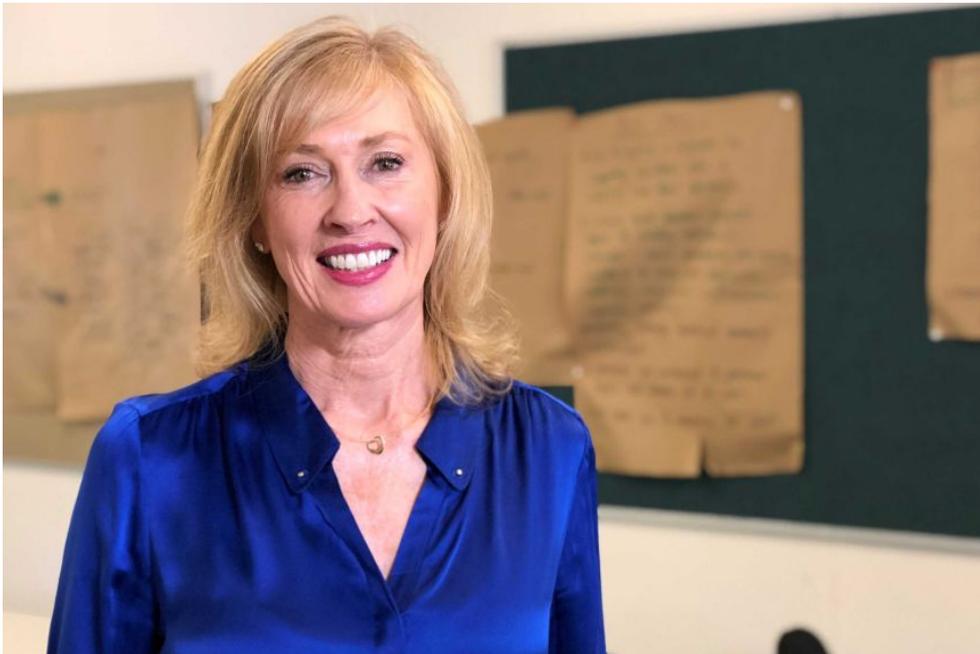
But volunteers like the Horan family are getting harder to find.

The not-for-profit organisation that matched them with Chiara, Interchange Incorporated, says growth in volunteer numbers has stalled, even as the need for volunteers grows.

"Interchange have been running these volunteer programs for 37 years now. And this is a definite change in the number of people applying to volunteer," Interchange executive officer Kerry Uren said.

"What we're finding is the number of people in the community who are inquiring about volunteering has plateaued.

"We suspect it might be because of the NDIS transition. And the community thinks people with disability are now fully supported by the NDIS. But that's not the case."



Kerry Uren is concerned volunteer numbers have plateaued. (ABC News: Andrew Ware)

Demand outstrips number of helpers

Determining just how many people volunteer to assist people with disability requires some guess work.

In Victoria alone, a recent survey of service providers suggested there may be as many as 30,000 people helping through volunteer programs.

But that's not nearly enough to meet demand.

And during the week that marked International Volunteer Day, Interchange is putting out a call for help.

"At the moment, we have 1,000 families on our waiting lists," Ms Uren said.

"Some of those families have been on the waiting list for up to three years."



Sarah Chapman has been waiting three years for a volunteer to host Ayla once a month.
(ABC News: Andrew Ware)

Long wait for help

Sarah Chapman, and her two children, are one of those families.

Her six-year old daughter Ayla lives with an intellectual and physical disability, and is non-verbal.

Her son Deegan is eight and lives with mild autism.

"For us, it would mean so much," Ms Chapman said.

The single mother moved from country Victoria to Melbourne in the hopes it would be easier to get help for her children.

She's been waiting for a volunteer to help with Ayla for three years.

"I would really like it. Not just for myself but for my kids," she said.

"It ... means that my children can have a sense of community, a sense of bonding with people outside the home. It can get quite isolating."

She worries that without a volunteer to help with Ayla, Deegan is missing out.

"Ayla's needs pretty much take up a lot of my time, and Deegan also needs time for him as well, so we struggle," she said.

No special training required

Contrary to what many people may think, says Kathleen Horan, volunteer families like hers didn't need any special training.

"People think it's a lot bigger and a lot harder than it is," she said.

"In fact, Chiara just slots into our family life and has always just slotted into our family life."

It may be just one day a month. That's enough, says Chiara's mother, Pia Casalaz.

"It's made a huge difference. It gives her a sense of special friends, and she does things with them that she may not necessarily do with us," she said.

The connection Chiara feels to the Horan family runs deep. Not long after her father passed away this year, she had to pick a relative to take to the Father's Day breakfast at school.

Chiara chose the Horan's 21-year old son, Seamus.

"How do you put a price on that? She had someone special to go with ... so that was just beautiful," Ms Casalaz said.

"I'd say to anyone who's thinking about it, go for it. Try it. Step outside your comfort zone. Make a difference in somebody else's life.

"You're leaving some sort of a legacy. They remember you."