

13 December 2023

Dear Robyn Kruk AO, Professor Catherine Bennett, and Dr Angela Jackson,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a brief submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry. Our organisation (Disability Advocacy Network Australia) is the national representative body for a network of independent disability advocacy organisations throughout Australia. DANA's purpose is to strengthen, support and provide a collective voice for independent disability advocacy organisations across Australia - advocating for and with people with disability.

Undoubtedly, the disability community has been one of the groups most impacted during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are people with disability at greater risk of serious illness, complications and death from infections like COVID-19, but the [Disability Royal Commission \(DRC\)](#) also found that during the pandemic, people with disability were at greater risk of experiencing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. As noted in the terms of reference, better mechanisms are needed to target future pandemic responses to the needs of people with disability, among other diverse population groups. Furthermore, independent disability advocacy is a community support that can enable people with disability to access vital services related to education, housing, domestic violence or help with daily living.

In times of disaster, disability advocacy organisations provide crucial support to people with disability, helping them regain access to essential supports, navigate crisis-ridden systems, and develop accessible communication materials. However, this assistance significantly increases the organisations' workloads and poses financial and long-term sustainability challenges due to inadequate resourcing.

This is why our recent [Pre-Budget Submission](#) calls for tripling of funding for the independent advocacy sector to meet unmet demand and need, and also specifically identifies support for advocacy during disasters as one of several critical areas for targeted investment. We call for \$2,000,000 be provisioned in a Disability Disaster Management Fund for advocacy organisations to – subject to Ministerial fiat - draw from to provide high-intensity emergency supports and additional human resourcing during disasters.

In the context of the growing awareness of the need for [emergency planning and crisis response](#) to include and involve people with disability, DANA chose 'Fires, Floods and COVID-19' as one of four topics of focus during our engagements to inform the [NDIS Review](#) this year. We published a [Discussion Paper](#) authored by Elly Demarschelier that summarised evidence, articulated problems and proposed solutions that would assist in future pandemics and in other emergencies or disasters:

- Establish a Disability Disaster Management Centre
- Invest in [person-centred emergency preparedness](#)
- Permit flexible use of NDIS funds during disasters
- Develop a Workforce Disaster Surge Plan for the NDIS
- Establish a specific disaster funding stream for advocacy organisations
- Strengthen safeguards.

To read examples and additional solutions that DANA heard during our engagement with advocates and people with disability, please refer to the relevant [Summary Report](#).

During the pandemic, disability advocacy, representative and peer support organisations assumed an active information-sharing role, creating or disseminating accessible resources, and proactively seeking out people with disability at risk in the community or, where possible, reaching into closed or segregated settings. However, as we explored in this 2022 [Submission on Independent Disability Advocacy](#), the sector fulfilling these vital crisis response functions exacerbated the existing strain from chronic under-funding, and diverted efforts from the more developmental and preventative work of rights education and awareness raising, capacity building and early stage problem-solving and dispute resolution.

These issues of unmet demand and need for independent disability advocacy have been evidenced by DANA's extensive engagement with the sector, including through two reports of surveys conducted during 2020:

- [DANA Snapshot of COVID-19 Advocacy Demand](#) captures insights from disability advocacy services in late April to early May 2020, confirmed that demand had increased significantly in key areas and many organisations were not able to meet this increased demand, in-part due to the sector already operating at or over capacity.
- [Lessons for Disaster Preparedness](#) (March 2021) – Report on the impact of COVID-19 disaster management for people with disability and the advocacy sector, with preliminary advice for future disaster management – analysing survey responses from November 2020.

We heard that the sector's workforce was overstretched and at greater risk of burn-out and vicarious trauma due to urgency of immediate need. Advocacy organisations had to pivot from planned activities and projects (including supporting people with disability to engage with the Disability Royal Commission processes) to redirect their efforts to meeting the immediate demand and working to address the risks to the safety, health and wellbeing of the people with disability for whom they advocate and inform. Similarly, in 2020, DANA swiftly collaborated with Inclusion Australia to create a pop-up plain language [website](#) with Information Access Group, distributing an associated Newsletter until 2021. We also continued to disseminate official government information and the many COVID-19 resources created across the disability advocacy sector. (Find a list of examples in this [Issue Spotlight](#) post on our website).

To inform the current inquiry, we would also like to draw your attention to relevant work by, or in the context of, the Disability Royal Commission:

- [Report – Public hearing 5](#) - Experiences of people with disability during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic
- [Report – Public hearing 12](#) - The experiences of people with disability, in the context of the Australian Government’s approach to the COVID-19 vaccine rollout
- Evidence of advocates and others at [Hearing 5](#) (in August 2020) and [Hearing 12](#) – examining the Australian Government’s approach to the COVID-19 vaccine rollout (in October 2021)
- This transcript we submitted to the Disability Royal Commission – [Advocates discuss: Emergency planning and crisis response](#) (in July 2022)
- Various submissions, statements and reports by [disability advocacy and representative organisations](#) on the broader topic of emergency planning and response and COVID-19 specifically, including the call for a [full COVID-19 recovery plan](#) by national disability peak organisations in May 2022.

Other consultation processes inquiring into Federal COVID-19 responses have had significant input from disability representative and advocacy organisations and groups around Australia, often reflecting the experiences and needs of specific cohorts they represent:

- [Submissions](#) to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, particularly from People with Disability Australia, Women with Disabilities Australia, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, Blind Citizens Australia, Queensland Advocacy Incorporated, Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (NSW), People with Disabilities WA, and the Australian Disability and Aged Care OPCAT Working Group.
- Submissions to the Department of Education [Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability](#) by [Children and Young People with Disability Australia](#), [Advocacy for Inclusion](#) (ACT), and [Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion](#).

We urge the Independent Panel and the Taskforce to consider the relevant recommendations and proposals in the reports and submissions cited above, to inform and develop improved planning and response measures that will uphold the human rights of people with disability and focus on centring the voices of people with disability and their experiences. To be truly responsive to the needs of Australians with disability during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and preparation for future pandemics, governments at all levels must include people with disability in their planning, response, recovery and reconstruction processes and frameworks.

Regards,



Jeff Smith
Chief Executive Officer
Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA)