

Empowered Lives

SECURING CHANGE FOR VICTORIANS WITH DISABILITY



Supporting Victorians with disability during COVID-19 restrictions

Empowered Lives is a network of over 40 Victorian disability advocacy organisations, working together to advocate for the rights of people with disability. Our vision is for an inclusive Victoria where people with disability have the same opportunities as other Victorians.

Empowered Lives brings together people with disability, advocates, and organisations in the disability community to collaborate for systemic change. As an ally and advocate for a better, fairer and more just Victoria, the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) provides backbone support for the Empowered Lives network.

The challenges that need to be addressed

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacts people facing disadvantage and marginalisation, who may not have access to the tools, resources and supports to know about, understand, prepare for, or comply with public health directives, and remain safe. The return to stay-at-home directives across Melbourne and public housing lockdown measures will heighten these impacts.

Empowered Lives members are concerned about the impact of these measures on people with disability, their families and carers, who may be more vulnerable to the virus than others, face greater challenges and impacts from restrictions, and are likely to face economic hardship.

Empowered Lives members are concerned that:

- People with disability with chronic health conditions or compromised immune systems face very high risks to their health if they contract COVID-19. Avoiding close contact is simply not possible for many people with disability who require daily, face-to-face personal care and support.
- Social distancing measures and location-based restrictions may prevent people from accessing safe, continuous assistance from paid services and from family, friends, carers and support networks. It is unclear what supports are available to support people with disability and carers if a member of their household becomes unwell and needs to self-isolate.
- Current directives do not specifically recognise the role of support services and carers, which prevents people from leaving or entering locked-down housing and/or their local area to provide vital care and support.
- The lack of accessible information for people with disability living in locked-down public housing and restricted postcodes is deeply concerning. Broadcast messages or internet-based updates are not enough – people with disability need accessible information to ensure they are fully informed about what's happening.

- People with disability already experience unacceptably high rates of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and this risk is even greater in times of crisis. Violence in the community and in the home is increasing for many people during the pandemic. Empowered Lives members report people with disability in public spaces are being shoved or having items taken from them while shopping, and some have had PPE stolen from their mobility devices. There are also fears that family and co-resident violence is likely to be increasing, however, due to the restrictions, people will be forced to remain in unsafe environments and less able to seek help and connect with support services.
- People with psychosocial disability are experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety during the pandemic. A reduction in services, the transition to online forms of support which are not always accessible, and the loss of freedom and social connections is having a major impact on people's health and wellbeing.
- There needs to be greater consideration of the additional barriers that may be experienced by people with disability who face multiple layers of disadvantage and discrimination. For example, First Nations people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with disability, women with disability, and children and young people with disability, will all have different individual needs that require tailored, culturally safe, gender-sensitive and age-appropriate support.

We acknowledge that the Victorian Government is doing everything it can, as fast as it can, to support the health and safety of Victorians during the pandemic. The Government's responsive and agile approach to this ever-changing challenge, and its commitment to collaboration and partnerships, is to be commended. However, Empowered Lives members believe further action needs to be taken to ensure the rights and needs of people with disability, their families and carers, are recognised and supported as part of Victoria's public health measures.

Our call to action (detailed over the page) outlines key areas for immediate change to improve and strengthen responses to support people with disability. We urge all levels of government to engage with people with disability, their families and carers, disability advocacy organisations to design and deliver better responses to support people with disability during this difficult time.

This statement is supported by:

- Amaze
- Association for Children with a Disability
- Aspergers Victoria
- Barwon Disability Resource Council
- Carers Victoria
- Cerebral Palsy Support Network
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- Cystic Fibrosis Community Care
- Disability Discrimination Legal Service
- Disability Resources Centre
- Future Social Service Institute
- Gippsland Disability Advocacy
- Grampians DisAbility Advocacy
- Leadership Plus
- Rights, Information and Advocacy Centre
- Self Advocacy Resource Unit
- Syndromes Without A Name
- VALID
- Victorian Council of Social Service
- Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council
- Visionary Design Development
- Women with Disabilities Victoria
- Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
- Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Our call to action to support people with disability

- Urgently identify and contact people with disability, their families and carers living in areas with high community transmission and/or locked-down public housing to make sure they are supported:
 - Ensure all levels of government and the NDIA collaborate to identify, connect with and support people with disability, their families and carers
 - Proactively contact people with disability, their families and carers in locked-down public housing and across all restricted postcodes to find out what support they need
 - Support people with disability and their household to develop a personal preparedness plan, in case they or anyone in their household contracts COVID-19
 - Ensure people can make choices and provide feedback about the support they need.
- Provide immediate accessible and appropriate alternative accommodation for people with disability, chronic health conditions and people experiencing family violence to move out of locked-down public housing and/or areas of high community transmission.
- Amend or clarify *Stay at Home*, *Detention* and *Restricted Activity* directions to ensure support workers and carers are recognised and authorised to enter locked-down public housing, and/or leave their own home, to provide support and care.
- When support from existing services and carers cannot be accessed, ensure people receive appropriate and timely support from a safe, high quality support provider and that regular communication with family and friends continues.
- Share timely and accessible information about the health measures and directions:
 - Develop clear and easy to understand plain English, Easy English and translated materials, Auslan video messages and visual resources
 - Explain what is happening, why, any rules and next steps to impacted residents first, before news is shared in the media
 - Allow extra time for people to understand information and how they can access support
 - Ensure people on-the-ground, including police, health professionals and government officials, are patient and compassionate in explaining public health measures
 - Communicate with people with disability in locked down towers face-to-face (while maintaining social distancing) and through door-knocking – many may not have access to technology, will be feeling unsafe and worried, and people who are Deaf or hard of hearing will not be able to access loudspeaker announcements
 - Connect with people through the media channels they use, including social media
 - In addition to language interpreters, ensure Auslan interpreters are available in community locations and locked-down public housing, and on screen for media announcements
 - Include messages for people with disability, their families and carers in media briefings – even if all the answers are not known about how support will be provided, people want to know their rights and needs are being considered and prioritised by government.
- Support people with disability to connect and communicate by providing free mobile phones and devices, and access to high-speed, safe and independent internet to enable access to:
 - Emergency contact numbers and hotlines
 - Telehealth and other forms of remote service delivery
 - Education and work
 - Social connections with family and friends.

- Make testing equitably accessible to people with disability, their families and carers:
 - Ensure health professionals understand how to communicate with people with a range of disabilities about the testing process, what to expect and what happens next
 - Make saliva testing and nasal swabs available
 - Where home testing is not available, support people to travel to and access community testing locations safely
 - Fast-track testing results for people with disability, their families and carers to ensure the risk of the virus spreading can be rapidly addressed.
- Where people with disability, their families and carers, or other household members test positive for COVID-19, ensure other household members can access immediate support to minimise the spread of the virus, including in-home respite or alternative accommodation.
- Ensure people with disability, their families and carers can continue to access vital supports for their health, safety and wellbeing, regardless of their eligibility for NDIS or other funding, including:
 - Disability and psychosocial services, including personal care, therapy and behaviour support
 - Medication and hygiene products
 - Health care through both telehealth and face-to-face appointments when needed
 - Food and any nutritional supplies, including access to priority food delivery
 - Mental health supports and counselling
 - Support for carers, especially carers providing additional or 24-hour support
 - Parenting support, for parents of children with disability, and for parents with disability
 - Disability advocacy services
 - Accessible avenues to raise issues, make complaints and be heard
 - Social connections and communication with family and friends.

We are particularly concerned that in situations where households are in 'hard lockdown' that NDIS-funded supports continue.

- Make PPE available and mandatory for disability support workers, especially those working within and across areas with high community transmission.
- Support people to care for and keep their guide dog or assistance animal with them at home, by allowing toilet breaks outside, walks and food.
- Assist people with disability, their families and carers to keep their jobs during the pandemic, through targeted employee and employer support and resources, and ensure people with disability can access employment opportunities post-pandemic.
- Extend income support measures to people with disability, their families and carers, who have higher and increasing daily living expenses during this time, and advocate to the Commonwealth for the removal of Centrelink compliance measures.
- Ensure students with disability can continue to fully participate in learning.
- Ensure people with disability, who need access to outside spaces, can do so safely.

For more information about Empowered Lives, visit empoweredlives.vcross.org.au