

# What is disability advocacy?



**Disability advocacy is acting, speaking or writing to promote, protect and defend the human rights of people with disability.**

**Disability** includes impairments of physical, sensory or mental functions that may affect undertaking activities or participating in community life. It may be caused by accident, trauma, genetics or disease. A disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired, visible or invisible.<sup>1</sup>

**Disability advocates** may advocate for themselves, another person, or a group of people with disability. They work through issues that have an adverse effect on rights for an individual or group, or on a society-wide level. Advocates may be paid or operate on a voluntary basis.

**Types of disability advocacy** commonly referred to are:

- **Self-advocacy** – undertaken by someone with disability who speaks up and represents themselves. Support and training for self-advocacy is available through community-based groups.
- **Individual advocacy** – a one-on-one approach, undertaken by a professional advocate, relative, friend or volunteer, to prevent or address instances of unfair treatment or abuse.

- **Group advocacy** – involves advocating for a group of people with disability, such as a group of people living in shared accommodation.
- **Citizen advocacy** – where community volunteers advocate for a person with disability, such as an intellectual disability, over the long-term, supported by a Citizen Advocacy organisation.
- **Systemic advocacy** – involves working for long-term social change to ensure the collective rights and interests of people with disability are served through legislation, policies and practices.
- **Legal advocacy** – where a lawyer provides legal representation in the justice system, pursues positive changes to legislation, or gives legal advice to people with disability about discrimination and human rights.

## What disability advocates do

Disability advocacy may include:

- Providing information to people with disability about their human rights and identifying instances of discrimination.
- Assisting people with disability to uphold their rights by speaking with and writing to people and organisations to raise awareness of problems and seek solutions.
- Helping people with disability negotiate complaints processes or legal action to enforce their human rights.
- Writing submissions and lobbying government to make changes that promote and protect the rights of people with disability.
- Campaigning for social change by speaking to the media to raise awareness and highlight situations where people with disability are treated unfairly.

Disability advocates often require a variety of skills, including:

- Ability to communicate with and support people with a range of disability.
- Understanding laws, legal instruments and jurisdictions.
- Understanding processes within oversight and complaints handling bodies.
- Applying a human rights approach to advocacy.
- Negotiation skills.
- Lobbying and running effective campaigns.

Professional disability advocates often develop these skills through in-house customised training within disability advocacy organisations, or through a range of community-based short training programs.

Disability advocacy is not:

- Providing counselling.
- Making decisions for another person.
- Providing mediation.
- Providing case management.

Advocates can speak out for themselves or for others who are at risk of being disadvantaged or treated improperly as a result of disability. This can include missing out on jobs or services, being pressured to make a decision or choice, or being abused or neglected.

## Why we need disability advocacy

Throughout history, people with disability have been hidden away or subjected to abuse, ignorance and prejudice. The power of disability advocacy over the past century has radically shifted thinking to recognise the rights of all people with disability to live in the community, with choices equal to others.

Disability advocacy came from the disability rights movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, significant battles were fought for the rights of people with disability, including the right to have access to a range of in-home, residential and other community support services necessary to support living an independent, unsegregated life.

Disability activists joined forces, with groups such as those working for civil, women's and Indigenous rights, to demand equal treatment, equal access and equal opportunity for people with disability. They challenged stereotypes, rallied for political and institutional change, and lobbied for self-determination – on the streets, in the courts, across the media, within services and in the halls of power.

Today, over 4 million Australians with disability still face many barriers and further significant change is needed to ensure they enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other people. Disability advocacy continues to promote equal opportunity for people with disability to participate in all areas of life including:

- **Safety** – More than 70 per cent of women with disability have been victims of violent sexual encounters at some time in their lives, and a staggering 90 per cent of women with an intellectual disability have been subjected to sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>
- **Employment** – 53 per cent of people with disability of working age are in the labour force, compared with 83 per cent of people without disability. People with disability have nearly twice the unemployment rate of those without disability.<sup>3</sup>
- **Education** – 36 per cent of people with disability of working age have completed high school, compared with 60 per cent of people without disability.<sup>4</sup>

- **Health** – 35 per cent of people with disability report having poor or fair health compared with 5 per cent of people without disability.<sup>5</sup>
- **Income** – the relative income of people with disability in Australia is approximately 70 per cent of those without disability, the lowest of all 27 countries in the OECD. As a result, people with disability are more likely to live in poverty.<sup>6</sup>

*“The good things in life are universal and include being treated with dignity, respect, acceptance; a sense of belonging; an education; developing and exercising one’s capacities; a voice in the affairs of your community and society; opportunities to participate; a decent material standard of living; a normative place to live; and opportunities for work and self support.”<sup>7</sup>*

## Shifting models of thinking

Over decades, disability advocates have fundamentally shifted traditional models of thinking about disability to a new understanding where society as a whole takes responsibility for enabling inclusion.

The ‘medical model’ of disability focuses on the person’s impairment or physical or mental medical condition and regards the person as the ‘problem’ and unable to do certain things. This thinking has been fundamental in approaches like sending children to ‘special’ schools or employing people with disability only in sheltered workshops.

The ‘charity model’ of disability sees people with disability as in need of ‘help’, unable to do things for themselves. While many charities offer vital support, much traditional fundraising emphasised the ‘helplessness’ of people with disability and risked undermining their autonomy, independence and rights. It is a model often adopted by mainstream media.

The ‘social model’ of disability is the most empowering for people with disability because it makes a distinction between impairment and disability and looks to remove barriers that restrict life choices. It holds that ‘disability’ does not come from having to use a wheelchair, for example, but from being unable to use stairs to get to work or board a train.

Other examples might include:

- A teenager with a learning disability wants to live independently in their own home but is unsure how to pay the rent. Under the social model, the person would be supported so that they can pay rent and live in their own home.
- A child with a vision impairment wants to read the latest best selling book that his or her sighted friends are enjoying. Under the social model, full-text audio recordings are made available when the book is first published.

Impairment is the lack of all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body while disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities that prevent people who have impairments from taking part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical, social, organisational and attitudinal barriers.

## Funded disability advocacy in Victoria

In Victoria, disability rights advocacy was first recognised as a program area to be funded under the *Disability Services Act 1986*. There are currently 33 funded disability advocacy organisations operating in Victoria. Organisations are funded variously by the Victorian Office for Disability's advocacy program, the National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP) operated through the Department of Social Services (DSS), and state and federal justice departments.

For a list of advocacy organisations in Victoria, visit the Organisation Directory on the DARU website.

## About DARU

DARU is unique in Australia as a dedicated resource unit funded to work with disability advocacy organisations to promote and protect the rights of people with disability. We develop and distribute resources to keep disability advocates informed and up-to-date about issues affecting people with disability in Victoria.

Our publications include *Disability advocacy by the numbers*, an annual report including case studies, presenting the aggregated quarterly data collection reports provided to the Victorian government by funded disability advocacy organisations and the *Disability Advocacy: Code of Conduct* which provides a framework that promotes responsible and effective advocacy practice.

## References

- 1 *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, (Cth).
- 2 C Frohmader and T Sands, *Australian Cross Disability Alliance (ACDA) Submission to the Senate Inquiry into violence, abuse and neglect against people with disability in institutional and residential settings*, 2015.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, 2012.
- 4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, 2012.
- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, 2012.
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, 2012.
- 7 W Wolfensberger et al., *International Social Role Valorization Journal* 2 (2), 12–14, 1996.



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