**The Absolutely Everyone: State Disability Plan 2017-20 in Advocacy**

***How can Advocates use the State Disability Plan in advocacy, and supporting people with disabilities to use it?***

***What do advocates need in order to get people with disability to use it?***

*Absolutely Everyone: State Disability Plan 2017-20* has target areas in all areas of public life and across all government departments. The idea is that people with disabilities are included and their needs are accommodated to enable them to participate in mainstream society.

Put simply, this plan aims to use five key approaches to make this happen:

* Economic opportunity
* Representation
* Universal design
* Attitude change
* Rights and protections

This plan operates on five key principles:

* Autonomy: having capacity and support to make own decisions
* Opportunity: treated fairly and having a change to take an opportunity
* Human Rights: having human rights respected
* Diversity: discrimination is non-existent and diversity is celebrated
* Accountability: deliver concrete actions and real outcomes.

In theory, and if it is put into real action, this State Disability Plan complements the NDIS well. It commits to resolving the issues that are barriers to full participation in the community by introducing concrete and practical ways to increase accessibility.

There are a number of ways to use the State Disability Plan in advocacy, but also a number of barriers.

As an advocacy tool, approaching it from both a policy perspective and on an individual level, the key for advocating for change comes in the action areas. Advocates can frame their arguments in terms of the commitment from government through the State Disability Plan to enable accessibility and hold the government accountable.

Advocates and people with disability should be key stakeholders to consult in the development of the outcomes framework and give guidance to identify the practical outcomes, collection of data and measurements. The measurements should be effective enough to show change over time. The outcomes should generate clear data to show what this issues are and this information should guide government to focus on what actions are required to improve the biggest issues. It was suggested that there should be an establishment of a collective group of organisations, which could be tasked with the delivery of the outcomes of the State Disability Plan and provide feedback on this.

Advocates discussed how the Disability Advocacy Innovation Fund initiative gives leverage to the State Disability Plan by resourcing projects targeting

* Engagement of diverse and isolated people with disability,
* Addressing demand and gaps in service delivery,
* Systemic advocacy to reduce barriers to social, economic and civic participation &
* Strengthening mainstream consumer protections for people with disability.

It is envisioned that the outcomes of these projects will inform the outcomes of the State Disability Plan.

Advocates can use the State Disability Plan to influence federal policy, non-government planning and local government planning. However the state disability plan is not mandatory so it lacks power as an advocacy tool in this way.

On an individual level, advocates noted that they could reference the plan in letters to the government, but in practical terms, it’s hard to link the actual work they do on individual cases as the State Disability Plan is not an enforceable law.

Advocates also noted that it’s a useful document with a lot of inclusions that haven’t happened previously (such as universal design, education etc.) and is a great start. It would be useful to use the State Disability Plan as an example of best practice for other Departments, local government and organisations to draw from. It was also noted that it is a good tool to use when referencing for grants, sponsors or recruiting volunteers.

In terms of barriers to the State Disability Plan, the biggest challenge is changing attitudes- both of the mainstream community and of people with disability. Enabling and empowering people with disability to actively and meaningfully participate in social economic and civic activities is a challenge that needs a twofold approach. One is to make it physically accessible, and the other is around changing community attitudes.

In terms of the mainstream community, exposure is key to changing the perception of people with disability. People with disabilities need to be seen in all level of government, employed in frontline public service, seen in the community space and normalised. On the other hand, there is a need for continuous education for people with disabilities on their right to participate and be included in the community, and their right to speak up and be heard. Putting the State Disability Plan in action in this way presents a challenge to advocates.

Getting people with disability to participate in their community is a bit like a double edged sword. There is the obvious structural barriers, like the infrastructure, not getting into buildings, lack of changing places, and lack of visual and hearing technology. It’s also an issue of attitudes. For so long people with disability have had to sit and accept the physical barriers and they just don’t ask any more. Many feel tired of having to constantly explain what they need. Many have given up on fighting for that little bit of access that comes naturally to others in the community.

Then there’s the community stigma.

Generally speaking, when people come across a person with a disability, they tend to behave overly sympathetic, incredibly patronising or quietly remove themselves; not because of anything that the person with disability did, but because they are not sure what to do or how to approach them. They have low expectations of people with disability and “let them off the hook” too easily because they believe that forcing participation is too hard for them. Some examples of this is Deaf people being excused from Jury Duty because access is too hard. The public transport Myki ticketing system is not accessible to people with disability, so instead of fixing it, affected people can get free public transport access. This can make people with disability feel incredibly out of place and avoid participating, even though the intention was to make things easier.

There is not enough community education to normalise disability, hence the irrational fear of doing the wrong thing and the incorrect assumptions of people with disability. People with disability themselves are tired of constantly explaining and explaining again about their disability, and being the educator when they simply just want to participate in the activity.

Given the right resources, it’s generally easy to remove the physical barriers, however we need to normalise disability so it doesn’t become the defining characteristic about people. Advocates might be able to advocate for the physical changes to make participation of people with disability in the community possible, but societal attitude changes are needed to make it enjoyable. Minority Groups such as LGBTI groups, CALD/Multicultural groups, Indigenous groups have recently received a lot more mainstream exposure in popular culture in the last few years and this is reflected on television, print media and more. However, even though there is significant media exposure on disability due to the NDIS, it is still portrayed as a tragedy.

Encouraging people with disability to assert their rights to participate in the community requires an investment in mainstream community education and constant exposure to people with disability, taking the pressure of the individual to become educators of disability every time they leave the house. This means putting people with disability in public service jobs and frontline jobs so that interactions with the general public and people with disability happens daily and becomes normalised. The State Disability Plan is a useful tool for Advocates to use for this purpose.