

# KERRI CASSIDY: CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISABILITY JUSTICE



**SPEECH GIVEN AT THE VICTORIAN PEOPLE'S CLIMATE STRATEGY LAUNCH  
THURSDAY 22 APRIL 2021 | TRADES HALL, MELBOURNE**

Hi, I'm Kerri Cassidy. I'm the Executive Officer at the Disability Resources Centre, also known as DRC Advocacy. We're a disability led organisation that provides individual advocacy to Victorians with disabilities as well as working on systemic issues to improve inclusion of our community in every aspect of society.

Over the past few years, DRC has been campaigning for our state's public transport system to meet Disability Accessibility Standards. Despite decades of promises from our leaders, large portions of regional and metropolitan public transport aren't usable for people with disabilities. As an example, a recent report by the Victorian Auditor General's Office found that only 15% of all Melbourne tram journeys met disability standards.

We were lucky enough to cross paths with Friends of the Earth (FOE) and find a happy alignment between our campaign and their Sustainable Cities objectives. FOE offered us invaluable support as we organised petitions, digital campaigns and live protests to remind our leaders that public transport should work for everyone.

Public Transport is a great of example how systems and technologies that address climate change can also make our world more accessible and inclusive. Sadly, there are also many

examples of climate activism ignoring or sidelining the needs of people with disabilities. More frightening still is the emergence of “Climate Darwinism”, a belief that people with higher needs are acceptable collateral damage in the fight for better environmental outcomes. Whether it’s folding plastic straws or inhalers, people with disabilities rely on equipment and technologies others consider environmental evils. Unaware that these items can make the difference between life and death, non-disabled people are quick to publicly shame people with disabilities making use of them. For these reasons, inclusion of people with disabilities in the climate movement is essential.

It’s essential too because our community members are disproportionately impacted by our changing climate. We’re more vulnerable to extreme temperatures, less able to adapt our lifestyles to environmental shifts, and less mobile and independent in emergencies. Many of us rely on electronically powered technologies for survival, and many more have communication needs that aren’t considered in emergency broadcasts. The United Nation’s resolution on human rights and climate change noted “that persons with disabilities are among the most adversely affected in an emergency, sustaining disproportionately higher rates of morbidity and mortality and at the same time being among those least able to have access to emergency support.”

It’s a frightening statement, but even more so when you begin to see that statement reflected in people’s lives. People like Delwyn, a woman who was living alone in Lake’s Entrance when bushfires erupted in early 2020. Because of Delwyn’s mobility limitations, she couldn’t be accommodated at her local shelter and had to travel 45 minutes on her electric wheelchair to



the next emergency facility, which couldn't take her either. She was facing the prospect of a prohibitively expensive taxi fare to an even more expensive nursing home, the only safe place that could meet her needs. At this point in the story, many people in Delwyn's situation would choose to return home and risk whatever came next. It's one of the reasons people with disabilities are overrepresented in bushfire fatalities. Delwyn was lucky. At the second shelter she crossed paths with a disability advocate who was able to help her negotiate fee waivers with both the nursing home and the cab company. Without this support, Delwyn would have had to choose between returning home, risking damage to her health in an unsuitable shelter space, or extreme financial hardship.

An unnamed older couple living in NSW's Hunter Valley, one of whom is mobility limited, found themselves unprepared for flooding levels reached in 2011. Living 2.4m above the historical flood line, they were told they didn't need to evacuate. When

floodwaters inundated their home overnight, they found themselves trapped inside. A neighbour was able to force down their door and carry each of them to higher ground. Without his help, it's likely the couple would have waited hours for emergency support. Again, luck has played a role. In a world where we're increasingly unknown to our neighbours, this social connection was the difference between days of isolation and an intervention.

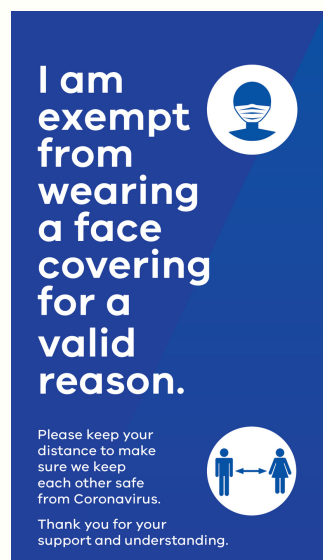


We're still learning about the relationship between disease and climate change, but data suggests increases in certain diseases are likely, as are surprise outbreaks when we fail to predict how a disease will respond to our rapidly changing environment. The outbreak of COVID-19 has demonstrated just how vulnerable the disability community is to a pandemic event. In the early stages of COVID, the Australian Government largely failed to consider the unique needs of the disability community in their planning, resulting in tragic consequences in disability housing centres.

50% of Australians with disability live in poverty (PWD 2020), and increased costs of goods during COVID presented huge financial strain, as did increased levels of already problematic isolation. As one anonymous survey respondent demonstrated: "Very lonely without anyone checking on me. Food is hard to get because we have no delivery and no support means. I have

to pay someone to shop for me. I have to go without my medications to pay for these extra things.”

Tammy Milne, a woman who lives with severe joint contractures, faced a huge challenge when a support worker failed to turn up for an appointment during a hard lockdown in Tasmania. Hours later, she received a phone call to say that her support worker might have been exposed to COVID and was isolating with her household. In addition to failing to receive essential care, Tammy was now faced with the possibility of having contracted COVID herself. Like many people with disabilities, the risk of a severe or even fatal case of COVID was significantly higher for Tammy than the overall average. Thousands of other disabled Australians faced the same risks, reliant on support workers whose essential jobs made it impossible for them isolate. Even now, Australians with conditions that make COVID death more likely are still in isolation. For some of them it's been over a year since they stepped outside.



As harrowing as these stories are, there is also a great deal of hope to be had. Hope in relationships like the one DRC and Friends of the Earth has forged. A relationship built on mutual respect, an awareness of intersectionality and a commitment to climate justice as well as climate action. There is hope in the increasing levels of media coverage on disability issues and climate change. Most of all, there is hope in us. By necessity, people with disabilities are among the most adaptable and innovative you'll ever meet. We are adept at making do with less and at navigating environments incompatible with our needs. We are practiced at pushing against political and social norms to advocate for our rights. We know how to be tenacious, and to constantly adapt our approach to an ever-changing landscape. Many of us are keenly aware of the risks we all face from our changing climate and want to be part of the solution. I'm grateful that DRC and Friends of the Earth found each other, and that our voices were considered as part of the People's Climate Strategy. I look forward to what comes next as groups like ours continue to find alignment in the fight for a better future.

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