



Welcome to the autumn edition of *Voices*,

Kerri Cassidy | Photo: Ally Scott

And yes, I'm aware that by the time this reaches your inbox winter will have begun, complete with cold temperatures and a snap COVID lockdown. One of the realities of running a disability-led organisation is that things don't always go to schedule. We all work part time and uphold a commitment to prioritise our health and wellbeing whenever possible. Sometimes this means things are late. In a world where we're constantly encouraged to rush, I hope this serves as a welcome reminder that there's often no need to. The world won't end if that thing gets done a little later than expected.

The DRC team had just gotten into the swing of being back in our Ross House office before lockdown was announced. I cannot overstate the joy we all experienced at seeing one another in the flesh again - a joy that brought with it a new enthusiasm for our work that is sustaining us through lockdown. The transport campaign has had some notable wins, which you can read more about in our Transport article. Our Individual Advocacy team remains busy as always, working alongside people with disabilities to achieve the outcomes they want.

In this edition of *Voices* you'll find a new segment called *Trends in Advocacy*, which notes patterns in our individual advocacy work that point to broader systemic issues. We'll include this segment from time to time to keep you up to date with what we're noticing.

We've welcomed Cath Edwards to our individual advocacy team in the role of Intake Officer. Cath will be responsible for handling initial inquiries for advocacy, helping the advocates determine who they can best assist, and referring people to other services that may be more appropriate. Our first intern, Felicia Andronicou, also started last week. Felicia's internship has been funded by NDIA's Information, Linkages and Capacity Building program and a partnership with the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS). Fel is working closely with our Communications Officer and will help DRC develop its Youth Engagement Strategy. You can get to know both Cath and Fel a bit better in the bios below.

I hope our newsletter provides some useful information and a welcome distraction in these tough times. If you need a bit more DRC in your life, you can find us on Facebook @DRCadvocacy, where we post at least twice a week.

All the best,

TRANSPORT CAMPAIGN

Back in February, DRC launched a petition urging the Victorian Government to make the Melbourne tram system work for everyone.

We all know that affordable, reliable and accessible public transport is integral to independence, and that 71% of our community does not take public transport because of barriers to access. And yet today 85% of the tram network is still inaccessible. 10,725 people signed the petition and in early May a small group of campaigners presented it to the Minister for Public Transport, the Hon. Ben Carroll. The Minister was knowledgeable and responsive. As Melburnians shared their stories of exclusion, we felt that he and his team genuinely heard us.

In March the disability community teamed up with Friends of the Earth and the Rail, Train and Bus Union to take to the streets in a direct action. We stopped a tram in Spring Street, Central Melbourne, and heard from campaigners who have been lobbying for change in the transport space for over 40 years. The protest was covered by Channel 9 News.

The State budget did not deliver the great commitment to infrastructure upgrades we were longing to see. However, there is much to be positive about in the commitment to produce a Public Transport Accessibility Strategy. While some are surely disappointed by the thought of another year spent planning and not acting, the State Government has acknowledged that the absence of a holistic approach to the accessible stop upgrades has been responsible for many delays, and in the past each stop has taken two to three years to complete. We will be lobbying to see a reasonable time frame attached to the Strategy production and its execution, and, as ever, we will be campaigning to ensure that this is evolved through regular and transparent engagement with the disability community.



DRC Staff and activists take to the street to protest Melbourne's inaccessible tram network | Photo: Ally Scott

NDIS INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENTS

#HandsOffOurNDIS

AFDO RELEASES JOINT STATEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO PROPOSED CHANGES

Concern has been steadily growing about the newly proposed NDIS Independent Assessments process, with most disability organisations declaring strong opposition to the scheme. Currently, NDIS applicants present a series of letters to the NDIA about their needs and functional capacity, written by their own specialist medical practitioners. NDIA staff then use these letters to assess eligibility and develop a plan. Under the new Independent Assessments, applicants would undergo a three-hour functional assessment with an NDIA-contracted medical professional. This professional's area of expertise may or may not be relevant to the applicant's disability, and there is no recourse to appeal or challenge assessment results. The NDIA argues that Independent Assessments will address the large discrepancies currently found in plans of participants with similar disabilities, and make the scheme [fairer and more sustainable](#). Critics are concerned that there is an inherent conflict of interest for assessors because they're hired directly by the NDIS, that three hours is too short a time frame for assessing a person's functional capacity and that the assessments are driven by the Federal Government's desire to cut costs to the NDIS. Disability Discrimination Minister Ben Gauntlett himself participated in the current Independent Assessment trial and found the process to be "[unsatisfactory](#)". He also noted that aspects of the approach may in fact violate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability.

On March 11 the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), of which DRC is a part, released a Joint Statement on the Australian Government's planned reforms to the NDIS, which you can read [here](#). The rollout of Independent Assessments has been put on temporary hold by the Federal Government in response to criticism by the disability community.



Logos of the many organisations behind the Joint Statement on NDIS Independent Assessments Photo: AFDO

DISABILITY CULTURE

PERSON -FIRST OR IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE? | DESCRIBING PEOPLE IN THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY

DRC staff and Committee of Management members recently undertook the Youth Disability Advocacy Service's training on working with young people with disabilities. During the training, an extended discussion arose on the use of person-first and identity-first language when talking about members of the disability community.



Person-first language puts the person *before* the disability. For example, Jane is a woman with a disability. The idea behind this is that [people with disabilities are people first](#), and that a disability should not be unnecessarily focused on or over emphasized. It is also a tool used to combat the dehumanisation of people with disabilities that is sadly still prevalent today. Person-first language is used by most disability organisations and much of the community, with notable exceptions being many Deaf and Autistic people. However, language is constantly shifting, and younger members of the community are increasingly using identity-first language to describe themselves.

Identity-first language uses words such as 'disabled', 'Autistic' or 'quadriplegic' to describe someone. Many people who use [identity-first language](#) argue that it is impossible to separate a person from their disability, and that it functions in the same way as any other identity marker (for example: woman, Jewish, gay). Disability is part of how a person identifies and experiences the world, and therefore is indivisible from them. Proponents of identity-first language also add that disability is only negative because society has deemed it so, and reclaiming the label as a neutral or even positive marker challenges that assumption.

DRC uses person-first language in our communications, except when someone has asked to be described identity-first. Because the only hard and fast rule here is respect for a person's individual preference. What's yours?

TRENDS IN ADVOCACY

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN CRISIS



NOTE: This is a new segment of the DRC Newsletter where we reflect on the issues common to many of our individual advocacy clients and the systemic problems those challenges might represent. Great care is always taken to protect the privacy of clients. Trends are noted broadly, and no single person's story will ever be shared without their expressed permission.

The recent release of findings and recommendations of [Victoria's Royal Commission on Mental Health](#) has gotten a lot of attention, with harrowing stories of unnecessary restraint, inappropriate treatments and people in distress being turned away from hospitals. The crisis in our state's mental health sector has been reflected in a marked increase in people with psychosocial disability presenting to DRC for advocacy.

In 2014, the [Naphthine Government](#) stripped mental health funding in a "streamlining" effort that saw 45 mental health service providers culled to just 16. On the rollout of the NDIS most federal funding for mental health support services was cut as well, the justification here was that those resources would be funneled into NDIS packages. Some say sensible in theory, until you realise most mental health conditions aren't considered "permanent disabilities" and therefore are not covered by the scheme.

Almost 50% of Australians will experience mental ill health in their lifetimes, with 20% of people facing those challenges in any given year. Unsurprisingly, the gouging of the mental health system left many Victorians without the support they needed. One consequence of this is that people with psychosocial disability now represent the majority of DRC's individual advocacy clients.

There's no single direct line between the absence of mental health services and presenting to disability advocacy. The paths are complex. Part of the problem is that a lack of adequate health care prevents people from managing their conditions, which can have flow on effects in employment, housing and relationships. A person whose mental health is in crisis is also more vulnerable to arrest - expressions of distress are often misinterpreted as aggression, which can escalate if first responders lack good mental health training. The Royal Commission into Mental Health made [65 recommendations](#), and the Andrews Government has committed to implementing all of them. The [21-22 State Budget](#) includes \$264 million to build 20 community mental health centres, with another 40 to be built in future years. We are heartened by this unprecedented investment in mental health care, but know that rebuilding a system from the ground up will take time. In the interim, our Individual Advocacy team is investing in specialised mental health training to ensure our clients get the best service possible.

IN PARTNERSHIP

KERRI SPEAKS AT THE LAUNCH OF THE VICTORIAN PEOPLE'S CLIMATE STRATEGY



DRC Executive Officer Kerri Cassidy speaking at the launch of the People's Climate Strategy at Trades Hall | Photo: Friends of the Earth.

DRC and Friends of the Earth (FOE) have been in partnership since 2019, when a chance encounter between staff from the two organisations revealed an alignment in mission. FOE follows the principle of Climate Justice, which acknowledges that action on climate change must be led by social justice principles. They were willing to support DRC's work in any way they could, and we discovered that our Transport for All campaign shared goals with FOE's Sustainable Cities project. Since then, we've collaborated and shared skills whenever possible. Most recently FOE staff and supporters joined our direct action to demand an accessible Melbourne tram network.

Over 2020, FOE launched an ambitious project to develop a community-led People's Climate Strategy in lieu of the state government strategy delayed by COVID-19. Knowing that the disability community is uniquely affected by both climate change and attempts to address it, FOE asked Kerri Cassidy to speak at the People's Climate Strategy Launch on Thursday 22 April at Trades Hall. Kerri's speech, which you can read in full [here](#), talked about the ways increasing natural disasters, Climate Darwinism and calls for rapid systemic change make people with disabilities more vulnerable. She also highlighted how these vulnerabilities make it crucial for the disability community to be involved in climate action. To learn more about the People's Climate Strategy, or to get involved with Friends of the Earth, click below.

[ABOUT FRIENDS OF THE EARTH](#)

[THE PEOPLE'S CLIMATE STRATEGY](#)



INTRODUCING

DRC'S NEW INTAKE OFFICER CATH EDWARDS

FROM CATH:

I graduated in 2019 with a Master of Social Work from RMIT University and am passionate about advocating for the rights of people living with disabilities and mental health issues. I have lived with hemiplegic cerebral palsy since birth and have developed strong skills in self-advocacy as well as knowledge of the disability service sector in my work with people who experience discrimination. I also have an interest in policy and service development, having seen in my studies and work the effects of services that are underfunded or may not take into account the needs and wishes of the people they support. I prefer to work with people on an 'advocacy with' basis, hence I am thrilled to become part of the DRC team!



Cath Edwards Photo: Ally Scott

My first experience working with other people who have disabilities was as an Academic Support Worker at the University of Melbourne, where I learned a great deal about the varying experiences that young people have with disability and accessing their education. I completed my social work placements at Doncare with the Information and Emergency Relief Team, and the Australian Association of Social Workers with the Policy and Advocacy Team. I currently work as a one-to-one tutor, specialising in senior English and French. I love getting to know students, helping them discover and build upon their strengths and watching their confidence and skills improve!

When not working with the DRC or tutoring, I love spending time with family and friends, creative writing, walking in nature, singing in my choir and learning languages. Before COVID, I loved travelling and learning about different cultures, most recently in Indonesia and Vietnam. I hope to be able to travel again in the next few years!

INTRODUCING

DRC'S NEW INTERN FELICIA ANDRONICOU

FROM FEL:

I was diagnosed with Autism and OCD in September of 2020, shortly after I participated and graduated from Youth Disability Advocacy Services Young Leaders Program. This led me unknowingly into a huge passion and drive for supporting and advocating for young people with invisible disabilities such as my own. I am currently studying a certificate IV in companion animal services, because caring for animals is my second passion. In my free time I volunteer at Interchange Outer East (a disability organisation) and run my own pet care business called Felicia's Leisure Pet Care



where I get to spend time caring for the cutest pets. I'm excited to be interning at DRC because I get to learn heaps more about the disability industry, build my advocacy skills and turn my ideas about supporting young people with disabilities into reality. At the end of my internship I hope to have learned enough to be able to set up my own peer support group for young people with disabilities in my local community. My ambition is to grow the peer support group into a business where I can provide various kinds of support to my community while also challenging stereotypes.



DRC has partnered with YDAS for this project, offering paid internships to graduates of their Young Leaders Program. Support for the internships comes from the NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Fund.