

## ***SOCIAL PARTICIPATION***

### **Australians with a disability belong in the community**

#### **Inclusive communities are stronger**

During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many people with a disability – particularly an intellectual or psychiatric disability - lived in segregated communities in institutions. With the emergence of the disability rights movement in the last quarter of the century, this began to change. With varying levels of commitment, all Australian governments have now adopted policies that promote the inclusion of people with a disability in normal social and economic life. They recognize that including people with disabilities in the normal life of the community is not just their right, it builds a stronger society. A community that excludes people with disabilities denies itself the range of attributes, insights and talents that such people possess.

#### **There's more to community participation than location**

Residing in a suburban street rather than a large institution is only one step to community inclusion. If people don't interact with their neighbors; if they don't feel welcome at the local supermarket, swimming pool or learning centre; if they can't participate in life outside the home, then they can feel isolated and segregated. Social attitudes - and the way these are reflected in structures and practices - are critical to whether people with disabilities are able to participate in community life.

#### **Some people with a disability need support to participate**

For people with a disability over school age who are unable to participate in employment, specialist services exist to assist their engagement in community life. These services go under various names, including social participation services; community access services, day services, lifestyle services or alternatives to employment.

Like other Australians, people with a disability join clubs; play sport; follow hobbies; go to the movies; do voluntary work; learn life skills like cooking; travel by public transport; do banking; and go on holidays. When they are successfully supported to engage in those activities, they experience a sense of belonging and gain a sense of freedom and control over their own lives. Their self-image improves through the achievement of goals and their social networks increase.

#### **Inter-governmental linkages are weak**

Under the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA), the Commonwealth Government administers disability employment assistance and the States and Territories administer non-vocational services. This arrangement can create artificial boundaries that prevent effective support for an individual's choice and needs, particularly for individuals in transition from school to work or work to retirement. Bilateral agreements aim to improve pathways and linkages between Commonwealth-administered and State-administered services, but there is much to be done to give practical effect to these commitments.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CSTDA Bilateral agreements [http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/disabilities/government-cstda\\_nav.htm](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/disabilities/government-cstda_nav.htm)

## **Not everyone with a disability gets the kind of support they need**

In 2003-04, 47,636 Australians used a CSTDA-funded social participation (or community access) service. Nationally that amounts to less than 70 people of every thousand with a severe or profound disability. In every State and Territory long queues for social participation services exist. In 2002, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare conservatively estimated that an additional 8,200 places were needed.<sup>2</sup>

### **Barriers to inclusion in the community still exist**

In some States, the involvement of people with a disability in community activities is being threatened by a rigid and insensitive enforcement of Occupational Health and Safety regulations, with some safety inspectors adopting a 'zero tolerance' approach that shows little understanding of the ethos and principles that govern disability services. OHS regulation treats all service delivery sites as work-sites but, in the context of disability services, these may be community settings ranging from a TAFE college to a café, a recreation centre to a public park. A solution is needed that harms neither the health and safety of disability workers nor the rights of the people they work with.<sup>3</sup>

Some resistance to the inclusion of people with a disability comes from members of the non-disabled population. Public awareness campaigns – such as the 2005 campaign 'Open Your Mind - Count us In' devised by the WA Government in partnership with NDS (formerly ACROD) - are needed to assist in raising awareness of the fundamental right of people with a disability to participate in community life.<sup>4</sup>

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#### **About National Disability Services**

National Disability Services is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations. Collectively, our members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS's members range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organisations, and are located in every State and Territory across Australia.

NDS defines its purpose under two broad categories. Firstly, it works to increase the capacity of its members to operate efficiently and effectively through provision of information, networking opportunities, and corporate partnerships. Secondly, NDS exists to make the voices of people with disabilities and their service providers heard by governments at both state/territory and federal levels. By so doing, NDS influences public policy to deliver outcomes that are responsive to the needs of people with disabilities and their providers.

NDS has a National Secretariat in Canberra and offices in every State and Territory.

More information:

Locked Bag 3002 DEAKIN WEST ACT 2600

Phone: 02 6283 3200 Fax: 02 6281 3488

Email: [nds@nds.org.au](mailto:nds@nds.org.au) Web: [www.nds.org.au](http://www.nds.org.au)

<sup>2</sup> *Unmet Need for Disability Services – Effectiveness of funding and remaining shortfalls*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2002

<sup>3</sup> *Submission to the Productivity Commission in response to its Inquiry into Worker's Compensation and Occupational Health and Safety Frameworks* ACROD, January 2004

<sup>4</sup> *Understanding Community Attitudes about Disability: Laying Foundations for Participation through Community Inclusion* Executive Summary, DisAbility Services, Victoria, July 2001