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**Multicultural Disability Advocacy**

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**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral  
Matters:**

**Administration of the 2019 NSW State Election**

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**Contact for this submission:**

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## **Background**

The Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW (MDAA) is the peak body for all people in NSW with disability, their families and carers, with a focus on those from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)/non-English speaking (NES) background with disability.

MDAA has more than twenty years of experience working with people with disability and supports the active participation of its members and consumers in all aspects of its work. The voices of our members and consumers informs MDAA's systemic advocacy work thereby contributing to positive change for people with disability from CALD / NESB in policies, procedures, practices and service delivery in government and non-government agencies.

Despite the many barriers faced by people with disability from CALD backgrounds in exercising active citizenship, especially during a state or federal election, MDAA would like to acknowledge the efforts made by the NSW AEC to minimise these barriers. Our organisation has been actively involved in both the Equal Access to Democracy Disability and CALD Reference Groups where many of our concerns were expressed in detail and we were advised on the many strategies in place to mitigate the challenges currently experienced by our community members.

We strongly support the continuation of these reference groups but maintain that people with disability from CALD background, continue to face a number of barriers affecting their ability to engage effectively during an election period.

Coming out of a recent election, and with the opportunity to provide feedback to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, MDAA took the opportunity to consult with our consumers and community members on their experiences. This submission reflects the feedback and experiences we've received from these consumer consultations and forums in a number of NSW locations, namely, Granville, Merrylands, Bega and Griffith. Through our consultations we were able to receive feedback from more than 60 community members.

## **Experiences of voting for people with disability**

Consistent feedback received from our consumers reflected a collective view that people with disability from CALD were eager to participate in active citizenship and valued the importance of making informed decisions when voting. From across the regions consulted, the sentiment was repeatedly expressed that having the opportunity to vote was important and allowed for our consumers to have their voices heard. This was particularly important to hear given that, despite recent social changes, people with disability are often still excluded from participating in many aspects of civil society.

Stemming from this, we would like to acknowledge the positive impact we have seen from recent legislative changes to the wording in reference to citizens deemed to be of 'unsound mind'. For people who were previously disqualified from enrolling to vote in New South Wales on the grounds of being of 'unsound mind', this change is significant and should not go unmentioned. In saying this, promoting the implementation of this change in electoral legislation did not allow for ample time to facilitate the participation of people who were once affected by this provision. It is our opinion that this should have been taken into account in the administration of the 2019 state elections.

Similarly, while we note that a number of strategies were put in place to aid the participation of people from non-English speaking backgrounds, this was done within a timeframe that did not allow the space to generate significant impact. For example, MDAA assisted with a project facilitated by the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) on behalf of the Australian Electoral Commission. The project developed promising resources in different languages as a guide to voting. However, having been commissioned very late into the election period, it was impossible to promote these resources to have the impact desired.

In saying this, our consultations also revealed the success of pre-voting stations, postal voting and iVote in ensuring that participating in the state elections was accessible to people with various disability.

The overwhelming majority of the people we spoke to however, noted their lack of confidence in voting and stated that the areas in which they felt the greatest lack of support, was in finding information on *who* they would like to vote for. Being

confronted with a list of names on election day, without an accessible way to find out what each candidate represents is currently acting as a major deterrent for people with disability to actively engage in the election process. This was the greatest concern expressed to us from people with disability, particularly those from CALD backgrounds. We note that the responsibility to provide public information on different candidates is not accounted for in either the Electoral Act 2017 or the Electoral Funding Act 2018. However, we strongly suggest that funds be assigned and resources be provided for information campaigns to ensure that people are given accessible information to make informed decisions when casting their vote. We are aware, and are highly supportive of the fact, that the NSW Government or NSW AEC cannot promote any candidates. Rather, what we are requesting is for standard basic information be provided in accessible formats, that go beyond electronic resources, to community members.

### **Key Recommendations**

1. Continue engaging with key stakeholders and community representatives through the Equal Access to Democracy Reference Groups. Specifically, the CALD, ATSI & Disability Reference Groups.
2. Invest in building the confidence of people with disability from CALD to participate on election days by providing resources to enable greater awareness of what different candidates represent.

We suggest the funding of an information campaign to make sure that people from CALD backgrounds with disability, their families and carers can make informed choices and they are able to exercise their rights as citizens of the country in a meaningful and responsible way.