



# Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association of NSW

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## 2026 Census Topic Consultation Submission

Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (MDAA) is the state-wide peak disability advocacy service in NSW which specialises in supporting people with disability and their family members from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. MDAA offers a variety of services including individual and systemic advocacy, NDIS appeals, Disability Royal Commission (DRC), and aged care navigation (EnCompass) and capacity building projects.

### Summary of information to be collected

The national Census is an integral part of data collection in Australia, helping us understand how we are growing, what the needs of the population are, and help execute plans for the future. Community groups, non-profit organisations, and governments are concerned with the results of each Census as it allows for better informed decisions on the allocation of resources and population demographic.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (Cwth)1991, which is currently under review, has an out-of-date definition of disability as the partial or total loss of bodily or mental functions and includes disabilities that presently exist, have previously existed, or may exist in the future. Champions of people with disability have long moved on from a medical model to a social model of disability. Interestingly enough, the current definition of disability adopted in the Australian Census is even more limited. It does not encapsulate this broader definition and focuses on limitations that are long-term or likely to be long-term. This definition excludes many people with disabilities who experience limitations that are short-term or who may have episodic disabilities. Basing Census questions on a broader definition that includes a wider range of disabilities and limitations would provide a more accurate picture of disability in Australia.

## **What topic the information most relates to**

The questions allocated to the topic of disability in the recently conducted Census all pertain to the individual's need of assistance for core activities. Where this data collection is useful in its own right, it removes a percentage of people who have a disability yet require no assistance. Such individuals would then be most likely answering 'no' on the questions presented. In consultation with MDAA consumers, such a narrow scope left the individuals disheartened and demeaned by the assumption that people with a disability will always require assistance. It is in their view and the view of MDAA that this is an incorrect assumption as disability and need for assistance are two separate and distinctive concepts. Instead, MDAA promotes independence and emphasises ability when referring people with disability.

Additionally, the current Census provides a lack of diversity of disability and does not encompass the extent of one's disability. Further, it does not identify people who are deaf, blind, have physical or intellectual disabilities, leaving an incredible gap in the data and the underrepresentation of the diversity of disability in Australia. The questions in the census are framed as one having a medical condition or illness, which can vary from having a disability. A medical condition does not necessarily mean that the individual will experience a disability or have a negative experience of disability.

As highlighted through the work MDAA conducts, there exists a percentage of people who do not receive care from others and live independently with their disability. This demographic is then grossly underrepresented within the data as it ignores the diverse ways in which people live with a disability. MDAA promotes inclusive and accessible environments where people with disability from CaLD backgrounds are able to easily connect with accessible communities, transport, infrastructure, and information, without requiring assistance or supervision from others.

The type of assistance that is required by the individual should also be included, to encapsulate an accurate demographic of needs. It would do well to include an option for individuals to be able to specify their needs to allow for more accurate data collection. By including diverse questions on the type of disability an individual may have, it will help to organise resources for communities where they may be most needed.

People with disability deserve to be seen and it is therefore acceptable to state that the current questions on disability in the Census are not an accurate data collection on people with disability.

## **Why it is important that the ABS collect and produce this information**

The Census data currently being collected does not give a well-rounded answer to the question 'what percentage of Australians live with a disability?'. The Census as it stands, is more concerned

with the percentage of the population in need of assistance which is problematic as it ignores individuals who live with their disability without assistance.

Question 27 asks:

***‘What are the reasons for the need for assistance or supervision  
shown in Questions 24, 25 and 26?’***

Even by providing an option of disability, there is no room for an individual to clarify or state what kind of disability they live with, or what other assistance used to assist with said disability. Additionally, the previous question is only concerned with whether or not the individual requires assistance. For those who have answered no, it is meaningless to tick the disability box in question 27.

Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 presents various integral policy priorities, building strategies to improve the lives of people with a disability. Noted in the Strategy is the outcome of inclusive and accessible homes and communities for people with disability, listing among others, policy priorities as accessible built and natural environment, and the ability to participate in social and cultural life. In order to fulfill this National Strategy, data must be adequately collected to ensure that there is no under or over-representation of a disability. This is vital as the data will allow for better demographic research, policy actions, and allocation of resources.

In addition, it remains of utmost importance to non-profit organisations and community groups to be able to identify the communities they serve and where the need for support and services lies. This further informs community engagement and outreach programs and allows for community development opportunities where they may be needed. The forms of access needs which are required within a community can be recommended by community groups and non-profit organisations and reviewed by governments as a result of said data collection.

Ideally, there would be separate questions asking whether or not someone requires assistance, as well as if someone identifies as having a disability. It would do well to separate the two and not create an assumption that people with disability are automatically in need of physical assistance. Oftentimes, reasonable adjustments are what is necessary to allow a person with disability to participate in society. For example, accessible transport, accessible ramps placed at the entrance of buildings, wide enough elevators. It is correct to say that some require the service of a carer, but it would be a gross overestimation to assume that all people with disability are in need of such care, like the questions posed by the census.

Individuals feel ignored and demeaned as a result of the presumptuous questions and the possible lack of awareness of the differences between disability and medical condition. Where an individual’s disability does not and should not define who they are, it remains imperative that such data is collected to ensure that community services and governments have the ability to adequately allocate resources and services to where it is needed.

This would be particularly important for people with disability and their family members from CaLD backgrounds who may experience numerous barriers and challenges, as the data gathered would provide more accurate information on the support needs of the varying communities. This would help organisations understand what the overall need is in CaLD communities which would allow for better planning by organisations and government, community outreach, and where the gaps may be in terms of services.

### **The purposes you will use the information for**

MDAA and community organisations alike, would utilise the information collected to address three key areas:

#### ***1. Identifying the interventions needed to address accessibility and equity***

Through the use of a broader definition of disability, and the inclusion of diverse options in the Census, barriers could be identified in terms of employment, education, social activities, or movement of people with a disability. Alongside the questions of employment and education, among others, the Census has the ability to garner a more cohesive picture of the behaviours of people with disability, where support may be lacking, and has the potential to open and continue a conversation on the reasons this may be. As a peak disability advocacy organisation, MDDA has a role in systemic advocacy which can be aided by this information to propose recommendations to policy to government bodies. Additionally, the information could be used to target interventions and programs that aim to remove these barriers and improve the participation of people with disability in society, as part of community development initiatives.

#### ***2. Improving accessibility***

The data collected will allow for better identification of varying disabilities and understanding of the diverse needs of people with disability and their family members from CaLD backgrounds and allow organisations such as MDAA to better present information to their consumers and to be better equipped their resources, ensuring the continuous use of plain language and accessible formats, such as easy-read or audio versions of information and services.

Additionally, such data will allow for the understanding of the diversity of the community in relation to cultural background and ethnicity, and any other intersecting identities such as First Nations and LGBTIQ+. Through these data, organisations would be able to better implement culturally responsive services and information which would make access to services and the community safer and more possible.

#### ***3. Increasing awareness and understanding***

By collecting more detailed and accurate data on disability in Australia, the Census would be used as a tool in increasing awareness and understanding of disability in the wider community. This would help in reducing the stigma and discrimination which surrounds disability and would promote greater inclusion and understanding of people with disabilities.

**The smallest area or geography you will use the information for.**

MDAA covers all of NSW but may need data on a small demographic such as a portion of Greater Western Sydney in order to implement a program or a project.

## **General Feedback**

MDAA recommends that the Australian Census captures the disability component even better by collecting information regarding NDIS, that is, whether they are NDIS participants or not.

From the perspective of people with disability and carers from CaLD backgrounds, there should be an easy and accessible way to access data from ABS.

For further information on this submission, please contact [mdaa@mdaa.org.au](mailto:mdaa@mdaa.org.au).