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Submission to the Select Committee on COVID-19

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Issues and Key Recommendations

Education

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government must work with state governments to ensure teachers, communities, and parents are receiving the support and information required for equitable access to education during this time.

Part of this support would be technology as people from CALD mostly experience financial difficulties especially for our cohorts who do not have access to NDIS which may have enabled them to access funding for equipment or communication technology. Schools should work closely people from CALD families who may have challenges with language and other cultural barriers as a “one size fits all” strategy is not equitable such as in providing learning support.

Standard of Living

Recommendation 2: Widen eligibility to allow people on the Disability Support Pension and/or Carer Allowance to have access to the Coronavirus Supplement.

Recommendation 3: Provide greater financial and social security to people on temporary visas. Particular focus should be placed on families living with disability and those in rural and remote areas with limited informal supports.

Access to information

Recommendation 4: MDAA stresses the need for less jargon to be used and information to be made accessible to people from CALD backgrounds. This includes addressing the lack of anticipated need for translators. Processes and information should be easy to follow, consistent and presented in a culturally appropriate way.

Crucial to accessing information, essential support is required for people from CALD backgrounds in terms of technology for access to information, how to use and availability of technology so people can communicate fully given their financial difficulties, language and technical skills.

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.

Our organisation has seven offices located in various locations of the state, namely, Granville, Waterloo, Hurstville, Bega, Griffith, Newcastle and Wollongong.

Unsurprisingly, in the recent months we have heard a variety of concerns from our consumers regarding COVID-19 and the Government responses to it. We have seen trends in requests for assistance specific to our regional offices as well as general concerns we are addressing throughout each location of the organisation. This submission reflects our consumer feedback, along with the experiences of our advocates more generally.

MDAA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and related matters. While working with people with disability from multicultural backgrounds who may be particularly vulnerable at this time, we acknowledge this as a rapidly changing environment and appreciate the need to take extreme measures. In saying this, we must emphasise that human rights must be at the centre of all decisions made both in prevention and treatment with increased support for those who are most at risk.

Education

MDAA acknowledges the need to close down schools as an additional measure to contain the spread of the virus. However, we have seen several consumers who have been adversely affected by the lack of clarity and support when implementing these changes. The response of schools has indicated a need for the Australian Government to work more effectively with state governments to ensure teachers, communities, and parents are able to explore innovative solutions that will mean all students have access to education. Not doing so will mean that many children will continue to be denied a fundamental human right that is, the right to access education.

Case study 1

X is a child with visual impairment who was attending a state primary school. Previously, X was supported by the school with accessible technology to support her learning. X's mother and father are both essential workers and as such X could not be kept at home for schooling. With the changes in place to respond to COVID-19, the school placed all children onsite in one classroom. However, with the school no longer having a Special Education teacher onsite, X was not provided with adequate support and equipment required for her learning. X's parents were told that the teacher in charge had difficulty installing the accessible software to the computer in the class X was placed in.

The parents raised the issues with the school, and nothing was done. With X having no proper support for 3 weeks, X's parents continued to approach the school and felt increasingly frustrated.

X's mother was told to find a solution and teach her child at home or to find another school that can assist during the time COVID-19 restrictions were in place. X's mother felt that was a discriminatory action as the school had not treated her child the same way as they assisted other children without disability who were provided support through transition.

MDAA is currently working with the family on this issue.

Case study 2

Y is a child with an autoimmune condition currently attending a state primary school in Sydney. A couple of days before schools were set to reopen for all students, Y's mother received a call from the school principle advising her that the school did not have the resources to implement the changes required for Y's disability. Without clearance from her specialist, Y would not be able to return to school.

Y's mother was told that as all students were now back at school there were no longer any online units of study or resources she could be given to follow. Contacting the teacher was also ruled out as she would be busy teaching the students on campus.

Ultimately, Y's mother was told that parents will need to find a way for their child to learn and offered an opportunity to send the principal a list of questions, or she could call mid-week to check in. No alternative methods of learning or material given.

MDAA believes that the lack of coordination between the Australian Government and the state's Department of Education has meant that children with disability have been disadvantaged and lack of preparation means they have been denied the right to access education.

The requirements set on parents of children with disability have left many from CALD/NES backgrounds confused and vulnerable. For many, ineffective communication and demands have families seeking help from advocacy organisations such as MDAA to understand their obligations and ensure their child has their right to education upheld. This further extends the time for which their child is unable to engage in schoolwork.

Recommendation 1:

The Australian Government must work with state governments to ensure teachers, communities, and parents are receiving the support and information required for equitable access to education during this time.

Right to Social Security and Adequate Standard of Living.

MDAA recognises that the Australian Government has provided an economic stimulus package designed to support a wide range of people in Australia most impacted by the pandemic. However, we stress that economic support must be equitable and focussed on reaching particularly vulnerable people.

It has been repeatedly acknowledged that legislation and reforms responding to the pandemic have adversely affected a number of communities including people with a disability and people from a culturally diverse background. The restrictions in place have meant many people with disability are unable to access the usual support they receive to maintain an adequate standard of living. Many families and individuals have experienced a negative economic impact to maintain basic hygiene and care services with many support workers cancelling numerous appointments.

While the lump sum transfer through the Economic Support payment of \$750 was a positive step, the exclusion of people on the Disability Support Pension or Carer Payments from the Coronavirus supplement clearly misjudges the vulnerable position of people with disability at this time.

We have seen the need and positive outcomes that such a move has had in the way other countries are supporting people with disability during the pandemic. For example, in Argentina and Peru, persons receiving disability benefits received additional financial support in response to the COVID19 crisis. Additionally, France announced a similar measure prioritising beneficiaries of a disability allowance¹. These efforts have been internationally praised.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2020. COVID-19 AND THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/COVID19_and_The_Rights_of_Persons_with_Disabilities.pdf> [Accessed 25 May 2020].

Upholding socio-economic rights requires a greater focus on vulnerable communities to maintain an adequate standard of living.

Further to this, MDAA's regional offices are reporting particular concern for our consumers who are not yet Australian citizens or permanent residents. Many of our consumers, who live with disability themselves or are a carer for someone with disability, have not been able to receive any support after losing their employment following the lockdown. For these consumers coming from CALD backgrounds, there is a lack of support and accessible information with limited informal supports to fall back on. In regional areas such as Griffith where there is a greater limit to support agencies compared to Sydney, the lack of government assistance and limited access to non-government agencies have had a significantly negative financial, social and psychological impact. For these communities, financial assistance is needed to support entire families often reliant on a single income. More needs to be done by the Australian Government to assist those who are more economically vulnerable regardless of visa status at this time.

Recommendation 2

Widen eligibility to allow people on the Disability Support Pension and/or Carer Allowance to have access to the Coronavirus Supplement.

Recommendation 3

Provide greater financial and social security to people on temporary visas. Particular focus should be placed on families living with disability and those in rural and remote areas with limited informal supports.

Access to Accessible Information

Feedback we have received from agencies and consumers alike, as well as our own direct experiences as an organisation, has shed light on the lack of anticipated need for translators. It has become increasingly hard to find available translators through the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) with unanticipated demands further delaying the process to access necessary supports and information. We are finding it difficult to access interpreters for what were previously popular language

groups such as Greek, Vietnamese, Arabic and Mandarin with even greater difficulty for new and emerging languages.

The need for people with disability from CALD background, their family and carers to access reliable information during this time has been crucial. The absence of this has had a clear effect on the mental health of people during this time and puts them at a greater health risk, and also at greater risk of breaking the restrictions in place. Our communities are directly reporting to us that they are fearful and confused.

Another stark issue that is highlighted during the pandemic is the lack of technical skills of most of our consumers as well as the availability of technology or equipment to facilitate communication as evidenced by the lack of participation with our online sessions. MDAA staff had resorted to teach them how to download apps and use their technology.

Recommendation 4: MDAA stresses the need for less jargon to be used and information to be made accessible to people from CALD backgrounds. This includes addressing the lack of anticipated need for translators. Processes and information should be easy to follow, consistent and presented in a culturally appropriate way.

Key Recommendations

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Standard of Living

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