



**Media release**

**Thursday 26 March 2020**

# **Disability Royal Commission calls for urgent action**

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability is calling on all Australian governments to ensure that responses to COVID-19 include dedicated strategies and take all necessary measures to protect and support people with disability.

The Royal Commission has issued a Statement of Concern about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with disability.

Emergency planning and responses of Australian governments should include a specific strategy to provide appropriate guidance, support and funding to meet the particular needs and requirements of people with disability.

The Royal Commission has heard directly from people with disability who are, like many in the broader community, very anxious about the COVID-19 pandemic. We have also heard that this anxiety is exacerbated by the feeling that they are being left behind or ignored in government and community responses.

People with disability, particularly First Nations people with disability, may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to increased risk of infection, higher number of co-morbidities and because of underlying health conditions such as chronic diseases and respiratory illnesses.

The Royal Commission has heard from members of the community that people with disability:

- continue to face barriers in accessing health care, including prevention, screening and treatment for COVID-19
- are unable to access regular and vital medications and therapeutic services due to low supplies and restrictions in access
- may not have access to mental health services at a time when the need for accessible and responsive mental health is heightened
- are unable to easily access essential health supplies to keep themselves safe, such as personal protective equipment, hand sanitiser and sterilising equipment
- are worried that discrimination or unconscious bias could impact their access to critical and lifesaving health care during this crisis.

The Royal Commission calls on the government to take all reasonable steps to ensure access to and the provision of appropriate health care to all persons with disability.

We are also very concerned about the wellbeing of people with disability living in closed residential facilities, such as group homes, prisons and mental health facilities.

We understand that measures to 'lockdown' facilities and/or restrict visiting are to reduce the risk of infection.

However such measures may have the unintended consequence of reduced formal oversight mechanisms (such as Community Visitor Schemes) and informal oversight provided by family, friends, supporters and advocates.

With the decrease of oversight comes an increase in the risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. We encourage governments to implement all necessary measures to protect and support people with disability in residential settings during the pandemic.

We acknowledge the efforts made by all levels of government in Australia on new measures to ensure essential support is in place for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants and workers through the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, these measures are specific to the NDIS and NDIS participants. Many people with disability do not use NDIS supports and will also need access to COVID-19 information and support outside the NDIS.

Australian governments should seek input from people with disability, leading disability experts and advocates in developing their dedicated strategy, and in particular, in its COVID-19 Coordination Commission initiative.

Now, as always, we want to hear from people who wish to provide information to the Royal Commission about violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability, including information with respect to the government and community response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is within the terms of reference of the Royal Commission to investigate the extent to which people with disability have experienced violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation as a consequence of any lack of coordinated action to address their particular needs in this time of crisis.