

Policy Position Statement - Disaster, Emergency, and Recovery

Cultural and Content Advisory: A Note Before You Read

This document discusses disasters, emergency events, and the impacts of systemic discrimination on First Nations people with disability. It includes references to trauma, loss, and disruption to essential supports. If this content raises difficult feelings, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, a free, confidential crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The evidence base for this paper draws on the work of the National Disability Footprint, including the Data and Research Footprint (Element 2) delivered in partnership with Dr Scott Avery and Girra Maa Indigenous Health, University of Technology Sydney.



First Peoples
Disability Network

Executive summary and introduction

First Nations people with disability are invisible in Australia's emergency management architecture. No Australian emergency management legislation or framework contains provisions specific to First Nations people with disability. National emergency management frameworks address disability inclusion and First Nations inclusion separately, with no integrated policy or reporting mechanism. Evidence from the Black Summer bushfires, the COVID19 pandemic and the 2022 floods identify persistent gaps in emergency planning, accessible information, evacuation arrangements and continuity of supports for First Nations people with disability (DRC 2021; DRC 2023b; FPDN 2025). FPDN calls on all Australian governments to end this pattern by embedding self-determination and community control at the centre of emergency planning, building the intersectional data systems needed to make First Nations people with disability visible in disaster preparedness, and investing in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as the proven front line of emergency response.

This position statement is grounded in FPDN's Cultural Model of Inclusion and the

Closing the Gap Priority Reforms. It responds to three policy and implementation issues. First, climate change is increasing disaster risk for remote and regional First Nations communities, where disability prevalence is higher and support infrastructure is more limited. Second, six years after the National Agreement on Closing the Gap was signed, no government has reported progress against Clause 64, which requires engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives before, during and after emergencies. Third, the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) Final Report and the NDIS Review set out recommendations relevant to emergency management that remain largely unimplemented for First Nations people with disability.

FPDN advocates for a single, integrated, community-controlled framework for disaster risk reduction, emergency response, recovery and resilience for First Nations people with disability. This requires coordinated action across emergency management, disability policy and Closing the Gap implementation.



Key messages

Emergency management legislation does not address First Nations people with disability.

No Australian emergency management legislation, Commonwealth, state or territory, contains specific provisions for First Nations people with disability. This reflects the systematic failure to recognise the compounding of racism and ableism in emergency settings. The Disability Royal Commission identified the compounding effects of racism and ableism for First Nations people with disability as a form of “double disadvantage” (DRC, 2023a).

Clause 64 has not been implemented or reported on.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits all governments to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives before, during and after emergencies. As at 2026, no government has reported progress against this commitment (Williamson, 2026). The NIDR Disaster Preparedness Scorecard indicates that the preparedness gap is widening.

Aboriginal community-controlled responses have demonstrated effectiveness in emergencies.

Evaluation of the Aboriginal community-controlled health sector’s COVID-19 response estimated that these initiatives saved approximately 2,000 lives, with no deaths in remote communities in the first 18 months (Nous Group/NACCHO, 2025). ACCOs provide culturally safe and locally trusted responses, but are not consistently embedded nor resourced in formal emergency management structures.

Current data systems do not capture the intersection of disability and Indigeneity in disaster contexts.

The ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers excludes people in very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. No national disaster dataset reports deaths, injuries or displacement for First Nations people with disability. This limits the capacity to plan, target resources and monitor outcomes.

Climate change is increasing disaster risk for First Nations communities.

First Nations communities face disproportionate exposure to heat, flooding, cyclones and bushfire. In Darwin, days over 35 degrees Celsius are projected to increase from 11 per year to 288 by the end of the century (Standen et al., 2022). In remote communities, housing and energy systems can limit the safe use of cooling, refrigeration and medical equipment during extreme weather events.

International human rights obligations require disability-inclusive and First Nations-led emergency management.

Article 11 of the CRPD requires states to take all necessary measures to protect people with disability in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. Article 22 of UNDRIP requires particular attention to Indigenous persons with disability. In 2019, the CRPD Committee recommended that Australia involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons with disability in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of emergency management (CRPD Committee, 2019).

Key evidence and statistics

- **Indigenous Australians are 1.5 times as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to have disability and 2.6 times as likely to have profound or severe core activity limitation (ABS, 2022).** Local Government Areas affected by disasters have an average Indigenous population of 14.7%, nearly four times the national average of 3.8% (Williamson, 2026). This concentration of First Nations people in disaster-affected areas, combined with higher disability prevalence, produces compound vulnerability that no current policy framework addresses.
- **The ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) excludes people living in very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which account for approximately 17% of the First Nations population (ABS, 2022).** This means disability prevalence in the communities most exposed to disaster is unmeasured. The AIHW Outcomes Framework measure on accessibility of emergency information for people with disability is flagged as requiring “future data development,” with no baseline data (AIHW, 2024).
- **No disaggregated data exists on deaths, injuries or displacement of First Nations people with disability during any specific Australian disaster event.** No vaccination or infection data disaggregated by both Indigenous status and disability status was collected during COVID-19. No data on NDIS plan utilisation disruption for First Nations participants specifically during any disaster has been reported.
- **During the 2022 Northern Rivers floods, people with disability had 2.46 times the odds of having to evacuate, 2.41 times the odds of having homes flooded, nearly four times the odds of disrupted access to essential services, and 3.32 times the odds of probable PTSD (Gisev et al., 2022).** The Northern Rivers region has a disability prevalence of 24.8%, compared with the national average of 17.7%, partly because people with disability are concentrated in flood-prone areas due to cheaper housing.

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Local Government Areas affected by disasters have an average Indigenous population of 14.7%, nearly four times the national average of 3.8%

17%

The ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) excludes people living in very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which account for approximately 17% of the First Nations population.

25%

The Northern Rivers region has a disability prevalence of 24.8%, compared with the national average of 17.7%, partly because people with disability are concentrated in flood-prone areas due to cheaper housing

Sources: Williamson, 2026, AIHW, 2024, Gisev et al., 2022

- **Eighty-nine per cent of Australian heatwave fatalities from 2001 to 2018 had a disability or multiple disabilities** (Quilty et al., 2022). In remote Indigenous communities, pre-paid power card systems mean people frequently lose electricity, unable to run breathing machines, home dialysis equipment or refrigerators for medication. Eighty-four per cent of respondents in remote communities share a mobile device, and 94% use pre-paid services with limited data (RMIT, 2023).
- **As at December 2022, 7.4% of NDIS participants identified as First Nations. Market gaps were approximately 14% for remote participants and 27% for very remote participants, with over one in four remote participants not accessing any supports at all** (NDIS Review, 2023). The DRC described the lack of NDIS services for First Nations people with disability as “a national crisis” (DRC, 2023).
- **During COVID-19, NDIS participant expenditure in Victoria alone fell by approximately \$31.2 million (8.85% of total expenditure over five quarters) despite temporary flexibilities** (Dickinson et al., 2023). A June 2020 survey found 22% of support workers had not received infection control training.
- **Globally, 71% of persons with disabilities lack an individual preparedness plan for disasters, and 85% have never participated in community disaster management processes** (UNDRR, 2023).

“This is not a point in time to deal with a crisis and go back to business as usual, particularly with people with disability and First Nations people with disability. We have to take on the best practice that has been created during this pandemic, providing support and continuing to improve support to First Nations people with disability then to continue that support post this health crisis.” (Commissioner Andrea Mason OAM, Arrernte/Western Arrernte woman, DRC Commissioner, SBS/NITV News, 30 April 2020).

“It’s very important because it’s okay for a person who is not disabled; they can get up and walk out and go somewhere but it’s not as easy for a person with a disability. There’s a lot of planning involved.” (Uncle Willie Prince, Indigenous Elder with cerebral palsy, who was evacuated twice during the 2022 south-east Queensland floods, ABC News, 14 November 2025).

89%

of Australian heatwave fatalities from 2001 to 2018 had a disability or multiple disabilities.

25%

More than one in four remote First Nations NDIS participants were not accessing any supports at all.

71%

Globally, 71% of persons with disabilities lack an individual preparedness plan for disasters, and 85% have never participated in community disaster management processes

Sources: Quilty et al., 2022, DRC, 2023, UNDRR, 2023

Key recommendations

- **Establish a National First Nations Disability Emergency Management Strategy.** The Commonwealth, through NEMA and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, should co-design with FPDN and ACCOs a dedicated strategy that integrates disability rights, self-determination and emergency management into one framework, replacing the current parallel work streams.
- **Implement and report on Clause 64 with disability-specific indicators.** All governments must immediately commence reporting against Clause 64 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, with specific indicators for First Nations people with disability in emergency preparedness, response and recovery. The six-year reporting gap (as of 2026) is unacceptable.
- **Mandate ACCO membership on emergency management committees.** All state and territory governments should amend emergency management legislation to require ACCO membership on state, regional and local emergency management committees. NSW's December 2024 endorsement of Local Aboriginal Land Council membership on LEMCs should be expanded to include ACCOs with disability expertise and replicated nationally.
- **Invest \$20 million in a dedicated First Nations Disability Disaster Resilience stream under the Disaster Ready Fund.** This should fund community-controlled disaster preparedness programs, accessible emergency communication in First Nations languages and accessible formats, pre-positioned disability-specific supplies at community-level evacuation points, and locally maintained vulnerability registers. The NIDR program has independently called for a \$20 million dedicated investment stream (Williamson, 2026).
- **Close the intersectional data gap.** The ABS should extend the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers to cover very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. All disaster reporting, including the NEMA National Situation Report and DRFA claims data, should collect and report data disaggregated by both Indigenous status and disability status. The NDIA should report on plan utilisation disruption for First Nations participants during declared disaster events.
- **Develop culturally safe, accessible emergency communication.** NEMA and state emergency services should co-design emergency warning and information products in First Nations languages, Auslan, Easy Read and pictorial formats, building on COVID-19 communication materials (including the "Deadly Deaf mob" Auslan films). This should include a commitment to Auslan interpreters on all national emergency broadcasts, consistent with DRC Recommendations 6.1 and 6.2, and the \$12.3 million committed by the Commonwealth.
- **Require culturally safe, disability-accessible evacuation centres.** All state and territory governments should mandate that evacuation centres meet both disability accessibility and cultural safety standards, including disability-specific equipment (wheelchair access, accessible bathrooms, power for medical equipment, sensory-friendly spaces), culturally safe spaces, and distribution of supplies through ACCOs. This responds to the documented failures in the Black Summer bushfires, where communities were evacuated onto beaches inaccessible to people using mobility aids, and to DRC Recommendation 7.35 on crisis housing accessibility audits.

- **Embed disability in the NDIS emergency architecture for First Nations participants.** The NDIA should develop a specific protocol for First Nations NDIS participants during declared emergencies, including after-hours access to plan reviews, automatic authorisation of emergency expenditure from core budgets, and coordination with ACCOs for continuity of supports. The NDIS call centre should operate 24/7 during declared emergency periods, addressing the criticism of the 8am-8pm weekday limitation during the Black Summer bushfires. The NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission should audit compliance with the Emergency and Disaster Management Practice Standard among providers serving First Nations communities.
- **Recognise and resource ACCOs as emergency responders.** The COVID-19 evaluation estimated that the ACCHO response saved approximately 2,000 lives. The Waminda South Coast model demonstrated what community-controlled emergency response looks like in practice. Governments should formally recognise ACCOs as emergency management partners, resource them for disaster preparedness (not only crisis response), and ensure they are included in emergency management training and exercises. Emergency management must move beyond the police-led model that marginalises community-controlled organisations.
- **Commission an intersectional research program on climate, disability and First Nations communities.** No dedicated Australian study exists on the intersection of climate change, disability and First Nations communities. The Commonwealth should commission a community-controlled research program, led by First Nations people with disability in partnership with the NIDR program and relevant universities, to produce the evidence base needed for adaptive planning. This research should prioritise remote and very remote communities where climate impacts are most severe and data is most sparse.



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Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) through funding provided as part of the National Disability Footprint, under the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (DSSP). We acknowledge NIAA as a key partner in enabling the development of these resources.



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Date issued: June 2026

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