

Policy Position Statement - Employment



Cultural and Content Advisory: A Note Before You Read

This document contains discussion of systemic exclusion, racism and ableism, and discrimination. 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

This policy position statement identifies the evidence and policy reforms required to improve employment outcomes for First Nations people with disability. First Nations people with disability have the lowest employment rate of any population group in Australia, but employment policy and programs continue to address Indigeneity and disability separately. As a result, this cohort is not consistently recognised in data, targets, or service design. The Disability Royal Commission (2023), the NDIS Review (2023), and FPDN consultations indicate that mainstream employment systems do not

deliver equitable outcomes for First Nations people with disability. Key barriers include limited cultural safety, insufficient specialist support in remote communities, and the combined effects of racism and ableism. This statement is grounded in FPDN's Cultural Model of Inclusion (Avery, 2018), which identifies culture as a protective factor and a foundation for participation. Reform is required if Closing the Gap employment targets are to be achieved for First Nations people, including the one in four who live with disability.

Key messages

Employment policy does not respond to the intersection of Indigeneity and disability.

First Nations people with disability experience the combined effects of racism and ableism, but employment policies and programs continue to address these issues in separate silos.

Employment outcomes for First Nations people with disability are substantially lower.

In 2022, 40.2% of First Nations people with disability aged 15–64 were employed, compared with 74.5% of First Nations people without disability (ABS and Avery, 2025).

Employment data does not adequately capture outcomes for this cohort.

Closing the Gap employment targets are not routinely disaggregated by disability status, so progress for First Nations people with disability cannot be measured (Productivity Commission, 2025).

Mainstream employment services produce worse outcomes for First Nations participants with disability.

. Inclusive Employment Australia (formerly DES) and Workforce Australia record lower outcomes for First Nations participants with disability, and many remote communities have had limited access to specialist disability employment support (AIHW, 2025b,).

Culture is a strength, not a barrier.

Effective reform requires genuine co-design, shared decision-making and sustained resourcing for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver education supports. This approach is consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reforms One and Two.

<p>Implementation of relevant reform recommendations remains slow and incomplete.</p>	<p>FPDN's Cultural Model of Inclusion demonstrates that cultural connection mitigates the harms of discrimination and builds pathways to meaningful economic participation (2018, Avery).</p>
<p>Community-controlled solutions work.</p>	<p>Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) employ more First Nations people and deliver culturally safe services, yet less than 1% of NDIS providers are First Nations organisations (2023, FPDN).</p>
<p>Self-determination must drive reform.</p>	<p>Employment policy for First Nations people with disability must be co-designed and led by First Nations people with disability, consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reform One.</p>

Key evidence and statistics

- **One in four (25.3%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had disability in 2022, with 11.6% experiencing profound or severe core activity limitation (up from 8.8% in 2018).** These figures likely undercount disability prevalence because the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) excludes very remote areas and discrete First Nations communities (ABS and Avery, 2025).
- **Only 40.2% of First Nations people with disability aged 15–64 were employed in 2022, compared with 74.5% without disability, a gap of 34.3 percentage points.** Over half (52.1%) were outside the labour force entirely, and 79.9% reported employment restrictions (ABS and Avery, 2025).
- **Among First Nations NDIS participants in the labour force, just 12% were in open employment at full award wages in 2025–26 Q1, compared with 26% of non-Indigenous participants,** a 14 percentage point gap revealing systemic failure in the NDIS employment pathway (AIHW, 2025a).

25%

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had disability in 2022, with 11.6% experiencing profound or severe core activity limitation (up from 8.8% in 2018).

40%

Only 40.2% of First Nations people with disability aged 15–64 were employed in 2022, compared with 74.5% without disability, a gap of 34.3 percentage points.

12%

Among First Nations NDIS participants in the labour force, just 12% were in open employment at full award wages in 2025–26 Q1, compared with 26% of non-Indigenous participants.

Sources: ABS and Avery, 2025, AIHW, 2025a

- **In 2024–25, only 5.4% of First Nations people with disability using Workforce Australia Services achieved a 26-week employment outcome, compared with 7.2% of non-Indigenous participants.** This measure is classified as showing "regress" under Australia's Disability Strategy Outcomes Framework (AIHW, 2025b).
- **The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) 2025 workplace study found First Nations employees with disability were twice as likely to report their workplace was never or rarely culturally safe compared with First Nations employees without disability.** Only 32% felt safe disclosing their Indigenous identity at work (Centre for Indigenous People and Work, 2025).

Content note: the following quote describes systemic exclusion from employment. Dr Scott Avery, a Worimi man who is profoundly deaf and the author of FPDN's foundational research report Culture is Inclusion, has stated: **"A lot of people with disabilities have to fight just to be in the room. So there's a struggle just to have inclusive education, just to be in the classroom, there's a battle to get a job... We actually want a right to sparkle, like actually let's set off party streamers once we're in the room as well"** (Avery, c. 2023). This reflects the aspiration for employment that is not merely accessible but affirming of identity and contribution.

Content note: the following quote describes compounding discrimination. Tim, a young Aboriginal man aged 20 with autism and intellectual disability whose grandmother was part of the Stolen Generations, told researchers: **"It's not just my disability. It's also my [Aboriginal] heritage as well I've had to prove; so, it's just been a bumpy ride the whole way through"** (Inclusion Australia, 2020). Tim's experience demonstrates the dual burden of having to prove both identity and capacity across institutional and employment settings.

5%

In 2024–25, only 5.4% of First Nations people with disability using Workforce Australia Services achieved a 26-week employment outcome, compared with 7.2% of non-Indigenous participants.

2X

The Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) 2025 workplace study found First Nations employees with disability were twice as likely to report their workplace was never or rarely culturally safe compared with First Nations employees without disability.

Sources: AIHW, 2025b, Centre for Indigenous People and Work, 2025

- **Closing the Gap Targets 7 and 8 (youth engagement and employment) are not routinely disaggregated by comprehensive disability measures.** The only available breakdown uses the narrow Census "need for assistance" indicator, which captures severe disability only. No mechanism exists to track whether employment outcomes are improving for First Nations people with disability specifically (Productivity Commission, 2025).
- **The Disability Royal Commission found that services for First Nations people with disability were "unsafe, traumatising and inequitable" and identified a need for approximately 13,000 additional NDIS workers in the First Nations disability sector by 2031.** In its Volume 9 recommendations, the Commission called for block funding of community-controlled organisations and disability-inclusive cultural safety standards across all service systems (DRC, 2023; FPDN, 2023).



The Disability Royal Commission found that services for First Nations people with disability were "unsafe, traumatising and inequitable" and identified a need for approximately 13,000 additional NDIS workers in the First Nations disability sector by 2031.

Sources: DRC, 2023; FPDN, 2023

Key recommendations

- **Disaggregate all Closing the Gap employment data by disability.** Governments must report Targets 7 and 8 by disability status using comprehensive measures, not the narrow Census proxy. Responsible: Productivity Commission, ABS, NIAA. Aligns with Priority Reform Four (shared access to data).
- **Block-fund First Nations disability employment services.** Provide multi-year block funding to ACCOs to deliver disability employment supports, building the community-controlled sector. Responsible: DSS, NIAA. Aligns with Priority Reform Two and DRC Recommendation 9.5.
- **Guarantee specialist disability employment support in remote communities.** Ensure Inclusive Employment Australia operates in all 60 former CDP remote servicing regions so First Nations people with disability can access specialist support. Responsible: DSS, NIAA. Aligns with DRC Recommendation 9.13.
- **Mandate cultural safety standards across all employment services.** All providers under Inclusive Employment Australia, Workforce Australia, and RAES should meet FPDN's Cultural Model of Inclusion standards. Responsible: DSS. Aligns with Priority Reform Three and DRC Recommendation 9.12.
- **Embed disability targets in the Indigenous Procurement Policy.** The IPP should require disability employment and procurement commitments from contracted suppliers, creating new employment pathways. Responsible: NIAA, Department of Finance. Aligns with Priority Reform Three.
- **Remove practical barriers to workforce entry.** Fund place-based programs addressing documentation barriers (birth certificates, drivers licences), culturally safe diagnostics, and school-to-work transitions for First Nations young people with disability. Responsible: DSS, NIAA, state governments.
- **Recognise family carers as paid disability workers in remote communities.** Amend NDIS rules to allow family members to be remunerated support workers where thin markets exist, consistent with cultural practice. Responsible: NDIA. Aligns with DRC Recommendation 9.9 (2023, FPDN).
- **Set and report NDIS employment targets for First Nations participants.** NDIA should publish annual targets to close the 14 percentage point gap in open employment at full award wages between First Nations and non-Indigenous participants. Responsible: NDIA. Aligns with NDIS First Nations Strategy 2025–2030.
- **End subminimum wages and segregated employment by 2034.** Implement DRC Recommendation 7.32 through a National Inclusive Employment Roadmap co-designed with FPDN and Disability Representative Organisations, with specific transition pathways for First Nations people with disability. Responsible: DSS, Fair Work Commission.

References

- ABS and Avery, S 2025, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, 2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-disability-2022>
- AIHW 2025a, NDIS participants in full award wage employment, Australia's Disability Strategy Outcomes Framework, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-disability-strategy/outcomes/employment-and-financial-security/ndis-participants-in-full-award-wage-employment>
- AIHW 2025b, Employment services, Australia's Disability Strategy Outcomes Framework, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-disability-strategy/outcomes/employment-and-financial-security/employment-services>
- Avery, S 2018, Culture is Inclusion: a narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, First Peoples Disability Network, Sydney. <https://fpdn.org.au/cultureisinclusion/>
- Avery, S c. 2023, 'Dr Scott Avery: exploring why culture is inclusion', Remarkable podcast, icare Foundation. <https://www.remarkable.org/insights-podcast/dr-scott-avery--exploring-why-culture-is-inclusion>
- Centre for Indigenous People and Work 2025, Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) 2025, University of Technology Sydney. <https://firstnationsnews.com.au/disabled-indigenous-australians-face-double-discrimination/>
- DRC (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability) 2023, Final Report, Volume 9: First Nations people with disability, Commonwealth of Australia. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report-volume-9-first-nations-people-disability>
- FPDN 2023, NDIS Workforce Paper, First Peoples Disability Network, submitted to the NDIS Review. https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/FPDN_Workforce_Paper.pdf
- FPDN 2025, 10-Point Plan to Close the Gap for First Nations People with Disability, First Peoples Disability Network. <https://fpdn.org.au/10-point-plan-to-fix-ndis/>
- Inclusion Australia 2020, 'First Nations people with disability', Real Stories series, Inclusion Australia. <https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/story/first-nations-people-with-disability/>
- NDIS Review 2023, Working together to deliver the NDIS: Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis>
- Productivity Commission 2025, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard>

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.

First Peoples Disability Network Limited

 policy@fpdn.org.au

 fpdn.org.au/policy



First Peoples
Disability Network

Accessibility Statement

If you encounter difficulties, or need this document in an alternative format please contact media@fpdn.org.au or by calling (02) 9267 4195.