

## **Free counselling, advocacy and legal support critical to supporting people with disability to heal from trauma, access services and the legal system**

For more than three years people with disability and their supporters across Australia have had access to free counselling, advocacy and legal services to ensure they can safely take part in the Disability Royal Commission and share their lived and living experiences of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Thousands of people have taken up this free support, with Your Story Disability Legal Support (Your Story) receiving over 10,000 enquiries and delivering more than 13,000 accessible legal services since being established for the inquiry in September 2019.

Blue Knot Foundation, which runs a telehealth trauma counselling service, has provided more than 33,000 services to people with disability with experiences of complex trauma and their carers and advocates since October 2019, including in Correctional Centres nationally.

Together with disability advocates across the country, Your Story and Blue Knot have been working to support the disability community to share stories of mistreatment, heal from trauma, and access vital services, supports and the legal system.

“Despite submissions to the Disability Royal Commission closing on 31 December 2022, we continue to receive a high volume of enquiries,” said Louise Glanville, chair of National Legal Aid, which delivers Your Story in partnership with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

“These are often from people needing support with legal problems such as NDIS, guardianship, discrimination and family violence. We’ve found that many of the people whom Your Story has supported to share their stories with the Royal Commission now want to address the issues they raised but need legal assistance to do this.”

Ms Glanville said people with disability can experience a range of barriers and related legal and social problems, which are often across state and Commonwealth jurisdictions.

“In recognition of this, and amid ongoing demand for legal assistance, we hope to continue supporting people with disability and their families and carers beyond the Disability Royal Commission – Your Story is currently funded until the end of the inquiry in September.

“We have a unique opportunity to proactively address many of the issues raised in the Royal Commission and to use our national network of legal, advocacy and counselling services to provide holistic, trauma-informed support for the one in five people who live with disability in Australia, and who disproportionately experience mistreatment.

“Ensuring access to the legal system is an important part of achieving a more inclusive, just society.”

Blue Knot Foundation President and Executive Director, Dr Cathy Kezelman AM, said the National Counselling and Referral Service (NCRS) has provided a critical service for people living with disability who have been mistreated and whose emotional needs have been chronically unmet or poorly met.

“The NCRS currently provides between 300-450 occasions of service a week of specialist emotional support to people living with disability and experiences of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation,” she said.

“The Disability Royal Commission has identified significant service gaps for people with disability. Disproportionate experiences of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation – the core focus of the Royal Commission – mean pervasive and significant emotional and psychological distress, compounded by isolation, social exclusion, and marginalisation.”

“The emotional support provided by the NCRS is filling this critical service gap for people living with disability, their families, carers and advocates. We hope to ensure its continuity.”

Blue Knot is also seeking to expand the remote support it provides in Correctional Centres across the country.

“We’re seeing escalating demand from people with disability in closed institutions, who experience complex trauma more commonly than the general population,” said Dr Kezelman.

“Many of the inmates we speak with want to understand their trauma, reactivity and criminality better and acquire strategies and tools to change their behaviour, make different choices and learn how to walk away from violence.”

Disability advocates are also reporting high unmet needs in their communities, according to Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA), the national representative body for independent disability advocacy organisations.

“The Disability Royal Commission has heard that people with disability can experience discrimination, exclusion and structural, systemic and practical barriers to accessing supports and services in all settings and contexts,” said DANA Interim CEO Jeff Smith.

“There are huge unmet needs, however, insufficient, fragmented and insecure resourcing continues to severely compromise the provision of effective disability advocacy across Australia, and many people with disability are prevented from accessing the advocacy support they need.”

Mr Smith said Royal Commission funding for individual advocacy support and systemic advocacy and representation will cease in June 2023. He added the economic and other benefits of disability advocacy far exceed the costs.

“Advocates support people with disability, and their families and supporters, in a range of ways,” he said. “This includes assisting them to be aware of and assert their rights, facilitating their access to services and supports that enhance their capacity to participate fully in society, and intervening in situations before they progress to crisis or further harm.

“We are concerned that people with disability will be further disadvantaged if ongoing individual and systemic advocacy support aren’t available. Without any interim funding, valuable expertise, skills and experience will also be lost from the sector.

“Advocates have played a key role in supporting people with disability to share their stories. They will be a crucial force in pushing for and guiding the implementation of the Royal Commission’s recommendations and assisting people to navigate the processes for seeking remedies or compensation for the discrimination and harms they have experienced.”

**ENDS**

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