Submission to the inquiry into Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers

Introduction

The Coalition for Disability Rights (CFDR) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Victoria’s inquiry into Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers.

The CFDR brings together people with disabilities, families, carers, advocacy bodies, peak bodies and disability support provider organisations. The Coalition covers the whole of the disability sector in Victoria with partners to this Submission including:

- Association of Children with a Disability
- Carers Victoria
- Victorian Disability Advocacy Network (VDAN)
- Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS)
- Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID)
- National Disability Services (NDS) Victoria

CFDR’s guiding principles state that people with disabilities and their families, like all Victorians, have a right to a good life – to an adequate standard of living and quality of life consistent with accepted community standards. We work with the Victorian Government and other stakeholders and advocate for action to redress long-standing marginalisation, exclusion and disadvantage experienced by people with a disability and their families - a key component of an agenda for creating a civil society.

The inquiry should take into consideration the Victorian Charter of Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. The Victorian Charter does not expressly refer to people with a disability; however it recognises that all Victorians have rights and responsibilities. The Charter has been significant in that it has contributed to promoting a human rights dialogue within organisations, the disability services sector and across the state.

The Charter supports and has influenced the increased adoption of a human rights based approach by disability service organisations. In turn, this has led to improved service delivery and better outcomes for people with a disability. An increasing number of disability service providers have undertaken a range of activities to adopt a human rights based approach including: at a board level; in policy and procedures; workforce and recruitment, rights based
education and training of staff; and day-to-day service delivery. Human rights have also been used to measure how well an organisation is doing.

Increasingly, disability legislation, policy and standards are being underpinned by human rights and the Charter is important to ensuring that this focus continues. In Victoria, the Disability Act 2006, which provides a legislative framework for the provision of a range of services for people with a disability, aims to promote and protect the rights of people with a disability who access services and advance the inclusion and participation of people with a disability in the community.

CFDR understands that the Inquiry has a specific focus on access and interaction with the justice system by people with an intellectual disability. While members of the CFDR do not possess any specialised medical experience working with people with cognitive impairments, we conclude from our experiences that these issues not only relate to people with an intellectual disability but also extend to individuals with cognitive impairments as well. The recommendations outlined in this submission therefore apply to both categories of condition.

CFDR holds the view that in an inclusive society, it is necessary for the law and its processes to be continuously adapted to remain relevant and equitable for the needs of all citizens. People with a disability and those who support them have varying understandings and experiences of the law. It is imperative that the legal system is sensitive to these experiences and ensures that it serves the interests of all Victorians.

**Achieving Access and Equity for People with an Intellectual Disability and Cognitive Impairment within the Justice System**

People with intellectual disabilities and cognitive impairments are demonstrably over-represented – both as victims and offenders – in the criminal justice system. People with mental health issues, intellectual disabilities and acquired brain injury constitute a disproportionate number of Victorians serving a custodial sentence.

As part of its 2006 Victorian State Election Call to Political Parties Statement, CFDR called for the Victorian Government to conduct an inquiry into access and equity issues affecting people with a disability within the justice system. The rights of every Victorian should be respected and assistance should be provided when people need support to exercise their rights. Fair access and equal treatment within the legal system are fundamental requirements of citizenship and the rule of law.

For these principles to be realised, it is necessary to understand that many people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment are overly-compliant, easily intimidated and prone to confusion. Because they often face discrimination, exclusion and social injustice in their lives generally, their experience of the justice system is likely to be associated with an overwhelming sense of anxiety, fear and powerlessness. People with an intellectual disability, in particular, are likely to be highly susceptible to suggestion, influence and coercion.

It is a sad reflection on our community that people with a disability are also over-represented in victim of crime statistics. It is an equally sad indictment of both the disability support system and the justice system that many crimes against these most vulnerable people continue to go unreported and unaddressed.

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1 Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria, *Submission to the Law Reform Committee’s Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers*, pg. 5. (accessed 29 September 2011)
Persons with disabilities have a right to equality before the law and access to justice

It is well recognised that people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment are more vulnerable to being denied their right to equality before the law and effective access to justice. This is inconsistent with the rights under the Charter and Australia’s obligations under international law.

The right to equality before the law is recognised by the Charter: s. 8. As it currently stands, Victoria Police, public officials, including those in the Department of Justice; and courts acting in their administrative capacity, are considered public authorities for the purpose of the Charter: s. 4(1). As such, they have an obligation under the Charter to act compatibly with human rights and give consideration to human rights in their decision making: s 38.

Australia also has obligations at international law under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The CRPD specifically recognises the rights of persons to equality before the law: Arts. 5 & 12 In particular, appropriate steps must be taken to ensure that reasonable accommodations are provided to ensure the equality and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities before the law: Art 5(3) CRPD

The CRPD also recognises that people with disabilities have the right to effective access to justice at all stages of the legal process and outlines the measures that must be undertaken to ensure that this right is realised: Art. 13. These measures include: the provision of age and appropriate procedural accommodations at all stages of legal process to people with disability in whatever role they encounter the justice system; and the provision of appropriate training of all those personnel working in the administration of justice area: Art 13

CFDR asserts that the following actions must be taken to ensure the rights of people with disability are effectively supported within the Victorian justice system, as well as more broadly:

1. Support for Early Intervention Programs

Early intervention and prevention of crime are increasingly recognised as policy and program goals in the criminal justice arena. Resources and research attention have been directed over the past decade in particular, to early intervention with particular groups from the criminal justice system, including Indigenous Australians and people with a disability. However, a number of these findings share the view that there has been little practical resolution of the problems of repeated incarceration and lack of alternatives to custodial sentences.²

The research focus on developmental approaches and early intervention is characterised by an emphasis on pathways and critical timing. Each individual has a series of pathways throughout their lives, typically branching off acutely at transition points, for example: ‘leaving home’, ‘leaving school’, ‘leaving institutional care’, or bereavement. Early intervention, in this context, relates to intervention to assist a person who is at risk to take a pathway other than one which would lead them into criminal activity.³

A New South Wales Law Reform Commission Inquiry reports that people with an intellectual disability are more likely to experience discrimination at every point of contact with the Justice system – as witnesses, suspects, victims and prisoners.⁴ Methods to ensure their fairer treatment are outlined in 2. ‘Access to advocacy support’.

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² Carolyn Mason, Walter Rob, Preparing Pathways to Justice – Intervening early for vulnerable people with impaired capacity, Queensland Advocacy Incorporated, August 2010, pg. 35.
³ ibid., pg. 35.
The over representation of people with an intellectual, or psychiatric disability or ABI is argued by the 2011 Productivity Commission’s Disability and Care Support report as being a direct result of an inadequate, fragmented and highly rationed disability care and support system. This is reflected in the limited availability of early intervention and diversion programs for offenders with an intellectual disability, as well as the poor availability of housing, support and appropriate employment opportunities.

Engagement in criminal activity can be a particular feature of the transition from school to adulthood if appropriate employment and support services are not available. This is exacerbated if a vulnerable and socially isolated person with a disability engages with other vulnerable and disengaged people. The consequence is a more cost intensive use of resources in comparison to resource allocation to appropriate early intervention and prevention strategies.

CFDR argues that there is an immediate need to boost support for disability service providers to support clients in early intervention programs. Service providers have the ability and knowledge to activate appropriate assessment and referral mechanisms, case management and advocacy, and direct liaison with the courts. At present there are effective models operating on an ad hoc basis, which need to be systematised. CFDR calls on the Victorian Government to develop and provide resources for a state-wide response model for service providers to directly support clients in early intervention programs. The model aims to:

- Identify people at risk and develop early intervention programs to divert people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment from life paths within the criminal justice system to improve client and social outcomes
- Develop early response options at key transition points, by working with service providers to identify response models that can be implemented with variations in metropolitan, rural and regional contexts. The model should particularly address change points or phases within the criminal justice system, but also individual life transition points as a client transits from one major life event or life stage to another

Recommendation: CFDR calls on the Victorian Government to develop and provide resources for a state-wide response model for service providers to directly support clients in early intervention programs.

2. Need for Advocacy Support

Many people with disabilities require support to exercise their rights. Advocacy services provide essential support to people with a disability in defending and promoting their human rights, citizenship rights, and consumer rights as service users.

Advocacy services help to ensure the rights of all people are promoted and protected in areas including access to employment, education, health, housing and the legal process. People with a disability are often unable to gain adequate access to advocacy support because advocacy services are grossly under-resourced and greatly over-stretched. Many disability advocacy organisations struggle financially, with limited staff, increasingly complex demands, and an environment of spiralling costs. Services are struggling to meet current demands as more people seeking their support are struggling to manage multiple and complex life situations.

The policy shift by the Victorian Government to provide disability specific funding directly to the individual, whilst a welcome reform, is also placing greater responsibility on people with a disability and their families to make choices about how funding will be administered and who
will provide services. Access to good information and independent advice and advocacy will increasingly in the Victorian context now be a critical factor under a more individualised approach to funding disability supports, particularly in readiness for a National Disability Insurance Scheme.

For many people with cognitive impairment or an intellectual disability, these pressures are compounded by insufficient support to assist with managing their lives, low socio-economic status leading to insecure housing and often significant legal issues that could lead to criminal convictions. One of the leading barriers in the justice system for people with a disability is the lack of knowledge and understanding of its processes and functions. As a result, when they come in contact with the justice system they can become confused, are not fully aware of their fundamental rights and are therefore unable to exercise them at these critical times. This limited knowledge can also inhibit their ability and confidence to voice concern over issues, the manner in which they are treated or their entitlement to lodge a complaint.

Evidence has suggested that those witnesses who are linked in to victim support agencies appear to be better prepared to meet the challenges of giving evidence in court.\(^5\) Funded advocacy programs can assist – however, many people with a disability or their families (especially those having first contact with the justice system) are unaware of the advocacy services which exist in Victoria. In general these services are under resourced and overstretched. In addition, existing advocacy programs are rarely positioned to directly assist caring families with advocacy support.

It is our understanding that the Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria provides only six victim support advocates for the state and there is therefore significant inequity for people in regional and rural areas, who often go into court without advocacy support to face magistrates who have little understanding of the issues affecting the presentation in court of people with cognitive impairment or an intellectual disability.

Family members are often the strongest and most committed advocates for a person with an intellectual disability. Where family relationships are healthy, a family member will frequently be well positioned to support and assist the person with an intellectual disability through the criminal justice process - police interviews, charging, sentencing etc. However, most will need information and support to assist them with this role. Conversely, where family support does not exist, outcomes will be more negative.

We need to ensure that victim’s advocates are fully aware of the rights of their clients during the court process and can advocate more effectively on their behalf. Given that many advocacy organisations provide important services to address key issues for people with disabilities, CFDR recommends the provision of funding for advocacy services to coordinate education and awareness programs to provide ongoing support for people with disabilities to understand their rights, link in with legal services to develop effective working relationships and provide advocacy on behalf of their clients.

Community Education

In the experience of CFDR, more accessible information is required to ensure that people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment are more aware of their legal rights and responsibilities. We recommend a community education and awareness raising campaign targeting people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive impairment, focused on proactive

\(^5\) Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria, *Submission to the Law Reform Committee’s Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers*, pg. 6. (accessed 29 September 2011)
and positive strategies for de-mystifying the justice system and empowering people to feel more confident in seeking to redress injustice in their lives.

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government will ensure all Victorians with an intellectual disability and/or cognitive impairment have access to independent, professional, advocacy support as needed.

3. Alternative Dispute Resolution options and specialised advocacy and advice

Promotion of Mediation

CFDR believes that stronger awareness of rights and responsibilities amongst people with an intellectual disability will lead to a more responsive and accessible justice system. A community education campaign, such as we have recommended, would also be useful in promoting less costly and cumbersome approaches for resolving issues. For example, we think that the use of Alternative Dispute Resolutions (ADR) would have significant advantages for people with a disability, allowing the possibility of an agreement being reached without going to court. Yet many people with disabilities – and their advocacy support organisations – are unaware of how to access and utilise this important mediation option.

Specialised Advocacy and Advice

Given the range and diversity of issues faced by people with intellectual disabilities involved in the justice system, it is often beyond the capacity and ability of disability advocacy organisations – and even a legal rights focused organisation such as Villamanta Disability Legal Rights Service - to provide the specialised support needs of people who are caught up in the ‘fringes’ of the justice system.

For example, people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment who are also parents, have a disproportionately higher chance of becoming involved with Child Protection, and in turn a disproportionately higher level of involvement with the justice system, including the Family Law Court, than parents without such a disability.

At every step along this path, there is a critical need for independent advice and support, to ensure the parent with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment is afforded fair and equitable treatment. For instance, at the evidence collection stage (commonly known as assessment), staff need to be, but often are not, skilled in gathering evidence from a parent with a disability. The parent/s will often feel traumatised by Child Protection’s involvement and will not have the capacity or skills to effectively represent themselves. However, as formal legal advice and support is generally unavailable to them at this critical stage, they will often get off to the worst possible start.

Therefore specialised advocacy for parents with a disability is required. While some generalist advocates form a working relationship with legal representatives to assist in the preparation of the case, this support is usually ad hoc, unfunded and limited.

In the same way as the promotion of ADR mediation options would have the effect of reducing both trauma and costs, CFDR believes that the delivery of specialised advice and advocacy support to parents with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment at an early stage would greatly assist in improving the wellbeing of both the parent and child, as well as reduce the need for engagement with the formal justice system.

Recommendation: CFDR recommends that the provision of funding for advocacy services to coordinate education and awareness programs (to provide ongoing
support for people with a disability to understand their rights), link in with legal services to develop effective working relationships and provide specialised advocacy on behalf of their clients.

4. Need for a whole of government approach

Meeting the needs of people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment and their families is not a job for just one government department. All government services, programs and facilities must be equally and fairly available and fully accessible, and departments must ensure that the particular circumstances of people with a disability and their families are taken into account in the programs and services which they administer.

Further commitment is needed to improve inter- and intra-government cooperation and coordination to enable people with an intellectual disability to access a combination of programs and supports which are appropriate for their individual circumstances and aspirations. Therefore, CFDR recommends that consideration be given to establishing a Disability Justice Advisory Group, led by the Department of Justice and to include relevant government departments such as the Disability Services Commissioner; VDAN; VALID; NDS Victoria; Office of the Public Advocate and the Law Institute of Victoria. The Disability Persons Justice Advisory Committee would facilitate the achievement of the Inquiry's objectives by ensuring collaborative and co-ordinated approaches across government departments and agencies, identifying the availability of appropriate services and supports to deliver just and equitable outcomes.

Members of CFDR have had positive experience working with consecutive governments through various advisory groups coordinated and supported by individual departments. These groups and gatherings provide opportunities for information sharing, collaborative problem-solving, relationship building and debate on relevant issues of concern.

Recommendation: CFDR recommends that the Department of Justice consider establishing the Disability Justice Advisory Committee to improve access and interaction with the justice system for people with an intellectual disability or and cognitive impairment and coordination of whole-of-government support to strengthen engagement, communication, and outcomes.

5. Need for Post-Release Case Management

CFDR believes that there is a need for greater diversity in sentencing options for people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment; options which ensure their continued participation in community life, with appropriate levels of support.

As part of Corrections Victoria’s commitment to review the Disability Framework 2007-2009, feedback of prisoners with a cognitive impairment at the Marlborough Unit, on programs, staffing, governance and recommendations for improvements were sought and formed the basis for a report conducted by John McKenna in 2008. The report is based on a series of visits and focus groups conducted with prisoners with cognitive impairments.

The responses indicated that the prisoners felt more positive about the increase in programs and appeared more engaged than in the previous consultation; and prisoners were able to see the benefits of participation in programs more clearly. This could be attributed to the embedding of the program implementation and the prisoners’ familiarity and level of engagement with programs. Prisoners were clearly able to link their participation in programs with their rehabilitation. It is vital that such programs continue to evolve and expand. In particular, prisoners would like to see the inclusion of more real-life examples into the
programs, as well as the development of programs that have a more practical post-release component, such as job skill development.\(^6\)

There needs to be a greater focus on strengthening case management prior to release, to ensure improved planning and enable the prisoner to develop a relationship with the case manager prior to release. Furthermore, prisoners need to have more opportunities to interact with their caseworkers prior to their release: to reduce anxiety; improve confidence; and to prepare prisoners for life post-release, in particular job seeking skills and awareness of community resources.\(^7\)

**Recommendation:** That the Victorian Government strengthens the case management support to people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment prior to release. This will enable the development of a client/case management relationship prior to release and to undertake post release planning, particularly job seeking skills.

6. Need to improve dealings with Police

Victoria Police is doing positive work in its development of disability policing strategies through its Disability Action Plan. Victoria Police’s work in this area has been demonstrated by its Strategic Directions Paper published in 2007, *Peace of Mind: Providing policing services to people with, or affected by, mental disorders*. While this paper outlines a number of strategic directions, CFDR thinks that there is more to be done to ensure people with a disability are supported appropriately.

Mechanisms to introduce fair treatment of people with an intellectual disability by the criminal justice system have been introduced in NSW.\(^6\) People with an intellectual disability are regarded as vulnerable and can nominate a support person to be with them at police interviews. The New South Wales Police Code of Practice (CRIME) obliges police to attempt to contact someone responsible for the person’s welfare and tell them of the arrest. The CRIME Code of Practice provides a list of behavioural indicators to assist police to identify if a person has an intellectual disability.\(^8\) Support people can be parents, family, a friend or someone with expertise - the latter equivalent to the Victorian Office of Public Advocates Independent Third Person system.

In our discussions and consultation with the Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria (OPPV), CFDR has been informed that Victoria Police do not currently have guidelines in place to assist members of the Police force to identify ‘cognitively impaired’ witnesses. We support the Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria’s submission to this Inquiry recommending the UK Police Service Guide, in particular the chapter on ‘Prompts’, to assist in identifying these witnesses; with a view to OPPV developing its own guidelines and to increase awareness of police of this issue.\(^9\)

\(^7\) ibid., pg. 21
\(^8\) Carers NSW, *Submission to the Inquiry re access to and interaction with the Justice System by people with an intellectual disability and their families/carers*, 2011.
\(^10\) Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria, *Submission to the Law Reform Committee’s Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers*, pg. 3. (accessed 29 September 2011)
CFDR strongly recommends that Victoria Police work with the Department of Justice to consolidate the work and focus for people with a disability into a Disability Policing Strategy. A Disability Policing Strategy would include:

- Providing extensive disability awareness training to existing police and future recruits, including educating Victoria Police about the need for sensitivity when dealing with people with disabilities and the need to avoid social stereotyping.
- A commitment to recruiting and training people with disabilities to work in Victoria Police.
- Funding positive community interactions between police, disability service providers and advocacy groups outside of a law and order context.
- Funding Disability Liaison Officers to work cooperatively with disability service providers and advocacy groups to improve relationships with Victoria Police.
- Ensuring that dedicated funding for disability policing strategies comes from within Victoria Police.
- The establishment of a Disability/Police Advisory Committee to identify issues and discuss matters of concern between disability services and policing to ensure a focus to improve dealings with police and the breaking down of barriers to the system is maintained.

**Recommendation:** That further training is offered to police who conduct recorded disclosure interviews with witnesses who have an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment to ensure that he/she has the opportunity to provide their evidence at the highest level of accuracy.\(^{11}\)

**Recommendation:** That Victoria Police work with the Department of Justice to consolidate the current focus of work relating to people with a disability in the form of a Disability Policing Strategy with a significant funding commitment from Government.

7. **Need for Training and Education for legal practitioners**

Legal practitioners such as magistrates and lawyers need an overall understanding and appreciation of the impact of disability on their clients. Under the Continuing Professional Development Rules 2008, all Victorian legal practitioners must meet the mandatory annual requirement of completing a minimum of ten Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points, with one point generally equally one hour. At least one CPD point must be earned in each of four mandatory areas of: Ethic and Professional Responsibility; Professional Skills; Substantive Law; and Practice Management and Business Skills. CPD points can be accrued in a number of ways including for example, by attending seminars, presenting seminars and private study, such as online CPD modules; and engaging in committee work.

As compliance laws, legal obligations and rights can be quite complicated, further funding and resources need to be provided to establish high standard training and information sessions for legal practitioners that provide a detailed step-by-step guide to communicating with people who have an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment. These training

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\(^{11}\) Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria, *Submission to the Law Reform Committee’s Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers*, pg. 1. (accessed 29 September 2011)
programs need to involve disability service providers to ensure that consistent and accurate information is being provided.

Prosecutors and their instructing solicitors would also benefit from training in how to manage the needs of witnesses who have an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment; in particular, how to conduct a pre-trial conference, especially where the prosecution is considering discontinuing a matter.

Therefore, CFDR recommends that the Government prioritises and implements a variety of training sessions for both new and existing legal practitioners to improve professional practice and the achievement of equitable outcomes for people with a disability. Recommended topics for training include the following:

- The experiences and challenges faced by people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment
- Knowledge of the relevant types of disability and related impacts
- Relevant communication strategies and techniques to ensure the establishment of positive relationships

**Recommendation:** That the Victorian Government implements disability competency training to new and existing legal practitioners to ensure that services and communication mechanisms are sensitive and responsive to intellectual disability or cognitive impairment needs in the justice system
8. **Recommendations**

1. That the Victorian Government to develop and provide resources for a state-wide response model for service providers to directly support clients in early intervention programs.

2. That the Victorian Government will ensure all Victorians with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment have access to independent, professional advocacy support as needed.

3. That the provision of funding for advocacy services to coordinate education and awareness programs (to provide ongoing support for people with a disability to understand their rights), link in with legal services to develop effective working relationships and provide specialised advocacy on behalf of their clients.

4. That the Department of Justice consider establishing the Disability Justice Advisory Committee to improve access and interaction with the justice system for people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment, and coordination of cross-government support to strengthen engagement and communication, and outcomes.

5. That the Victorian Government strengthens the case management support to people with an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment prior to release. This will enable the development of a client/case manager relationship prior to release; and to undertake post release planning, particularly job seeking skills.

6. That further training is offered to police who conduct recorded disclosure interviews with witnesses who have an intellectual disability or cognitive impairment to ensure that he/she has the opportunity to provide their evidence at the highest level of accuracy.\(^\text{12}\)

7. That Victoria Police work with the Department of Justice to consolidate the current focus of work relating to people with a disability in the form of a Disability Policing Strategy.

8. That the Victorian Government implements disability competency training to new and existing legal practitioners to ensure that services and communication mechanisms are sensitive and responsive to intellectual and cognitive disability needs in the justice system.

\(^{12}\) Office of Public Prosecutions Victoria, *Submission to the Law Reform Committee’s Access to and Interaction with the Justice System by People with an Intellectual Disability and Their Families and Carers*, pg. 1. (accessed 29 September 2011)
Coalition for Disability Rights Submission Partners

- Association of Children with a Disability
- Carers Victoria
- Victorian Disability Advocacy Network (VDAN)
- Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS)
- Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID)
- National Disability Services (NDS) Victoria

The **Association of Children with a Disability** is an information, support and advocacy organisation for children with a disability and their families, in Victoria. The organisation is run by parents of children with a disability - most of the staff and committee are parents - so we know what it means to have a child with a disability. We cover all types of disability and are a non-profit organisation.

**Carers Victoria** is the statewide voice for family carers, representing and providing support to carers in Victoria. Carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail. Over 700,000 Victorians are caring for a family member or friend with a disability, mental or chronic illness, or who is frail aged.

**Victorian Disability Advocacy Network (VDAN)** is a coalition of independent, community based organisations that advocate with and for people with any disability and, where appropriate, their families. VDAN’s aim is to maintain an effective coalition through networking and education as well as promoting and defending advocacy. It has more than 30 member agencies.

**Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS)** Established in 2006 and funded by the State Government, YDAS is the only disability advocacy service in Australia (and possibly the world) which exists specifically to represent and work on issues of concern to young people with disabilities.

**Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID)** VALID’s mission is to protect and defend the human rights of people with an intellectual disability and to champion their rights as citizens to community presence, choice, respect, self determination and community participation. VALID aims to empower people with intellectual disability to, Exercise their human rights and citizenship status within their local communities, inform and influence the policies and practices of disability service agencies, governments and other authorities and have control and influence over the decisions and choices which affect their lives.

**National Disability Services (NDS)** is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote and advance services for people with disability. Its Australia-wide membership includes around 600 not-for-profit organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. Its members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.