

The Voice

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Letter from the Editor

A decade ago, disability rights advocates in Australia won the fight for the implementation of a National Disability Insurance Scheme, which now supports over 550,000 Australians with disability.

Since its implementation, the NDIS has transformed the lives of many Australians with disability, but we still have a long way in making disability inclusion a societal norm. The path forwards may not be easy to navigate, but if we are determined, we can create change.

To reach it, we need to overcome the obstacles that come with this journey. One of those is challenging people's perceptions towards accessibility.

Accessibility can be a confusing term to use when accommodating people with disability. When creating an accessible environment, it's important we understand everyone's needs. Accessibility shouldn't be treated as a one-size-fits-all label — what may be accessible to one person may not be to another. Our job is to work alongside those with lived experience and find solutions that are flexible to all.

There are many ways you can challenge attitudes towards disability. One way is by learning the art of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy allows you to speak up for yourself and help people break common misconceptions about disability.

Rafael Sanchez-Bayo
Editor, TheVoice



I recently had the privilege to share my lived experience of disability at a conference where I talked about living as a person with Cerebral Vision Impairment (CVI) and gave advice on how to interact with someone with CVI. Speaking in front of an audience felt scary, but it empowered me to further embrace my disability.

Through self-advocacy, you are educating others to look beyond a person's disability. With practice, you will become confident in explaining your needs to others, showing society that people with disability are as capable as many of their peers.

Former Australian of the Year Dylan Alcott inspired people with disability during his acceptance speech last year saying, ***'My advice to you is this: you don't need my advice. You know what to do because you've had people telling you what to do your whole life.'***

You have the power to advocate for disability inclusion. It is in your hands to make it happen.

Ability Options participants' new home sweet home



Recently, Ability Options worked alongside our Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) provider Casa Capace to acquire two new homes as part of further enhancing our accommodation services to better support participants.

In August, we welcomed the first group of participants who moved into one of our new properties, with help from a small army of support staff. Now that they have settled in, the residents are thrilled with their new home and can't wait to explore their new neighbourhood.

To learn more about our accommodation services, and about vacancies, visit our website.

D P N | Casa Capace



As a leading provider of supported accommodation and independent living, Ability Options is committed to supporting participants live the life they want in a home that is uniquely theirs.

A message from our CEO



Welcome to TheVoice Spring newsletter. I hope you enjoy reading the stories packed in this edition.

As I write, we are awaiting the outcome of the work of the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) and the NDIS Review panel. The DRC is due to report at the end of September, and the NDIS Review a month later with a date to be confirmed. Both Reports will shape the way the sector operates in future. We will be sharing the key messages from these Reports and our responses to them, in the coming weeks and months.

Looking into the future, we must also remember the hard-won fight for our NDIS when participants, advocates, Providers, and the wider Australian community came together to insist on the establishment of an NDIS. Because **Every Australian Counts**.

For Ability Options, our Vision to inspire and lead communities, creating opportunity and services for people to participate fully in society, and our Mission to support people who need assistance to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community, reflect this. Since 1976, Ability Options has and continues to support thousands of people. From parents wanting to return to work, to First Nations people looking for employment services; whoever you are, if we can help you, we will do so.

As part of Ability Options' 10-year strategic plan: Towards 2030, we have made it our mission to support participants to achieve their goals, while ensuring our employees are supported to do their jobs well. To assist our mission, we have continued to grow our organisation by welcoming new organisations into the Ability Options community. This ensures participants have choice and control over which services and people they choose to work with. We have also equipped our staff with the most up-to-date training to make sure the needs and wishes of participants are met.

To achieve the best outcomes for participants and their families, we need to support people outside the sector to advocate for and educate themselves on the needs of people with disability. This way, we can continue to change our society for the better.

Julia Squire
Chief Executive Officer

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We have been thrilled to hear your feedback since we launched the newsletter's new look in the last edition. Please always feel free to reach out to us with your thoughts.

Thomas' dream job lands him independence

Finding your calling for work can really come down to what you love in life.

For Thomas, that was a keen interest in fish and plant life. Having realised his passion, Thomas decided to pursue his interests and enlist the support of Ability Options' Employment Services.

As a participant, Thomas worked with his Employment Consultant who helped him study various courses to fulfil his employment goals.

"My Employment Consultant helped me develop strategies to find employment that suited my goals," Thomas said.

"I tried reverse marketing, which helped me find out Petbarn was looking for an aquatic life specialist and immediately that felt like the job for me."

Thomas went into his first meeting with Petbarn with the goal of working with animals in mind.

"Ability Options helped me find an open position at my local Petbarn and supported me to apply online," he said.

After working for just 13 weeks, Thomas hit a big employment milestone and has taken on extra responsibilities.

"I'm now in charge of managing the aquatic tanks at the store," Thomas said.

"In my job, I have learned new skills in customer service, working on the floor and registers, and have already reached my 13-week employment milestone."

Thomas is now independent and, after being successful in his interview, hasn't looked back since.

He has worked longer shifts, and to make it even more of a dream job, can walk to work!

Thomas has saved up enough money that he was able to fly to the U.S.A. and visit his sister.

"I absolutely love my job," Thomas said.



Farming with a purpose: Participants build pathways towards independence

A Support Worker on the Mid-North Coast has been supporting people with disability build pathways to independence by providing opportunities at her family farm.

Carla, an Ability Options Support Worker, owns and manages Privada Farm together with her husband



Duncan. She regularly runs farm programs for NDIS participants where they get to interact with animals and participate in farm activities.

Having grown up riding horses, Carla uses her knowledge of animals and passion for helping people to provide Animal-Assisted Therapy and capacity building experiences for people who visit her property.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a type of therapy that uses animals to help a person manage and overcome challenges. Carla says Privada Farm's programs do just that, providing therapeutic outcomes for participants in a fun, safe environment, while catering to their needs and interests.

Each program is jam-packed with a variety of activities designed to support people with disability reach their goals. Visitors work in groups on projects that focus on maintaining different parts of the farm, including gardening and looking after the animals.

Through these experiences, participants learn important life skills, such as teamwork and communication skills while enjoying nature.



"Being outdoors is good for our health. Spending time with animals makes it even better. Our hands-on programs are unique and aim to empower people to realise their potential and get involved in the community," Carla said.



But there is more to life than just farming. After finishing all the jobs for the day, the groups socialise and explore the koala habitats near the property.

Carla is glad her farm is making a difference to people's lives. She says the participants have had many exciting experiences lately and recalls one time when one group roasted marshmallows after a busy day.

"One of our farm groups had a big bonfire in the paddock and cooked marshmallows around the fire," Carla said.

CHESS Connect joins the Ability Options family

Mid-North Coast disability and employment services provider CHESS Connect recently joined the Ability Options family as part of our continued expansion of services in the region.

CHESS Connect has been supporting people across the Mid-North Coast and Northern NSW for over 25 years. The for-purpose organisation provides a range of disability and employment services in the region, including Disability Employment Services and NDIS Direct Supports.

In April, Ability Options CEO Julia Squire visited CHESS Connect on the Mid-North Coast and was delighted by the warm welcome she received. She is excited to welcome new faces to the Ability Options community and further expand in the region, continuing to provide exceptional support to people with disability.

The acquisition of CHESS Connect comes within six months of Ability Options also welcoming R&R Care, a fellow disability services provider on the Mid-North Coast. To learn more, visit our website.



"Further expansion on the Mid-North Coast is an exciting opportunity for us as a leading disability and employment services provider in New South Wales. The services CHESS provides are a great fit with ours and I look forward to working with our new colleagues to continue our shared Mission in supporting people to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community," Julia said.

**CHESS
CONNECT**

Empowering participants to unlock their potential

Emma, Manager, WorkReady

NDIS Employment Assistance, also known as WorkReady, is a service offered by Ability Options that supports people with disability prepare to enter or re-enter the workforce with confidence. Delivered by our team of passionate WorkReady Consultants, participants work on building the skills needed to be work ready.

Emma, an Ability Options employee, is our WorkReady manager who oversees the delivery and performance of the program.

Having first joined Ability Options as an intern while completing her Bachelor of Social Work, Emma commenced her role as a WorkReady Consultant shortly after finishing her degree. Her passion for helping people has seen Emma climb her way to become the program's manager.

"I find WorkReady to be such a rewarding role. In my role, I get to work with all kinds of people and love watching the program grow," Emma said.

Every day, the WorkReady team provide a range of services to help people reach their goals. Because each person's story is different, Emma's job is to make sure WorkReady's services meet participants' needs and that her team provide them in a safe, supportive environment.

"WorkReady uses a person-centered approach to ensure our services are tailored to every person. We work with participants in a 1:1 capacity and support them in a way that suits their learning style and needs," Emma said.

Emma's favourite part of her job is community engagement, where she gets to visit the community to promote WorkReady's services.

"I love getting out into the community to speak all things WorkReady and work with other organisations to provide positive opportunities and outcomes for participants," Emma said.

Being a manager of an employment program is a huge responsibility and there are many challenges that come with the role.

While keeping up with growing demand has not been easy, Emma's experience at Ability Options has allowed her to navigate through policy changes and provide enhanced training to her team, so they can continue to support participants.

Emma's contributions have led to great outcomes for WorkReady. Her biggest achievement is leading the program's growth, which has seen an increase in the number of participants and staff.

Emma is proud of how far the program has come and hopes her work will continue to empower people to realise their potential and work towards their goals.



"WorkReady's motto is we don't say no to anyone. We believe that every individual no matter their barrier, deserves the chance to build their own pathway to independence. With the right support, participants can move into employment and contribute to the community," Emma said.

We want to hear from you!

Ability Options' 2023 Participant and Parent/Carer Satisfaction Survey, delivered by the Voice Project, is live from Monday, 6 to Tuesday, 21 November 2023. Please head to our website to take part.

For more than 10 years, we have partnered with the 'Voice Project', distributing Satisfaction Surveys to participants across our services. In recent years, we have begun conducting these surveys bi-annually to ensure we have consistent feedback from participants and their circles of support.

In our most recent survey, Ability Options achieved an overall satisfaction rating of 84%, with an overwhelming gratitude for the work of our frontline teams. This means more than 8 out of 10 people were happy with the supports they receive from us.

We also had some actions, that we as an organisation, have been committed to over the past 12 months and are optimistic about future feedback. These include:

- Providing more opportunities for participants to upskill in areas they identify as areas of interest, such as, understanding human rights, self-advocacy, and empowerment.
- Establishing consultation groups and organising regular social events to enable participants to meet others, foster friendships, and get involved in the community.
- Tell you more about Ability Options, the people we support, and their circles of support through forums, newsletters, our website, and more.
- Share more news about our overall strategy, progress, and results to inform and seek further advice, feedback, and commentary.



The surveys will ensure we continue to provide person-centred supports and services, continue our commitment to Ability Options' Vision, Mission, and Values, and allow us to strive for industry leading benchmarks.

We will gain valuable insights and an independent assessment of how we are tracking and what improvements we need to make.

If you have questions or would like to provide feedback on your experience with the survey, please email practiceandoutcomes@abilityoptions.org.au

The 'Voice Project' are delivering our survey for participants and their circles of support to ensure it delivers an independent review. They will be working with Ability Options to identify the aspects of our organisation that are driving participant satisfaction and provide recommendations to assist us in prioritising our focus to maximise this.

NDIS Review panel works with self-advocacy groups to amplify voices for people with disability

In July, members of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review panel worked with self-advocacy groups in Victoria to find solutions to make the Scheme better for people with disability.

In collaboration with the Self-Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU), a Melbourne-based self-advocacy consultancy organisation, the panel heard from people with disability, and their circles of support, who called for improved accessibility of mainstream services.

Participants and Self-Advocacy Groups called for improvements in education and healthcare, reducing gaps in supports outside the NDIS, and helping participants understand the importance of self-advocacy and peer support.

NDIS Review panel member Professor Kirsten Deane OAM said she values the opportunity to consult with self-advocacy groups on how to make the system better for people with disability.

"Self-advocacy and peer support are critical to bringing people with disability together to share their experiences and build their skills to speak up on issues that matter most to them," Professor Deane said.

Self-advocacy group Power in Culture and Ethnicity spoke about the important role self-advocacy plays in promoting choice and control, and improving the quality of life for people with disability.

"Self-advocacy brings us together and gives us the power and a sense that we're not alone and can make change happen," the Group said.

The NDIS Independent Review Panel will provide a final report to the Disability Reform Ministers' Meeting by October 2023. The report will make findings and recommendations for reforms. Keep an eye on your inbox for our full coverage of the NDIS Review Report in October, which will also be available on our website.

To find out more about the NDIS Review and how you can get involved, visit their website. <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au>

Ability Options hosts social event for accommodation residents

In June, Ability Options staff from one of our Supported Independent Living (SIL) homes organised a barbecue get together for accommodation participants.



During the event, residents spent the afternoon socialising with each other, while indulging in an assortment of delicious food.



AbilityOptions



We really hope you enjoy reading TheVoice.

We are always open to suggestions, comments, and feedback of any kind to:

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