

The Voice

Issue 15 - **AUTUMN 2024**



Thomas' exciting visit to Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary

A shift to support

From pitch to support

Samantha's blossoming friendship with furry friend

AbilityOptions



A Message from our CEO



Dear readers, welcome to our Autumn edition of TheVoice. I hope you all had a relaxing break over summer and look forward to kicking new goals in 2024.

There is a lot to be excited about this year, as we continue to grow our services and support more people in more ways. Since January, we have opened a new house for accommodation participants in South Windsor with vacancies for participants in the area looking for their ideal home. We also have vacancies in Spring Farm, the Hunter, and other areas of NSW for participants looking for trusted Supported Independent Living or Short-Term Accommodation.

I encourage you to get in touch with our friendly team on 1300 422 454 to find out how we can best support your accommodation needs.

We have increased the number of community services in Sydney in Seven Hills, offering an exciting new day program service for participants if they choose. We are also making progress in offering more services to participants living on the Mid-North Coast following our purchase of our popular hobby farm in Coffs Harbour. We have also finished signing a building contract which will see another house being built in the Hunter region and are working with another

provider to build two more homes in Sydney. Find out more on our website.

With our ParentsNext contract being extended, we will continue to support more parents to work towards achieving their employment goals while finding the right balance that meets their needs.

We hope the recommendations handed down in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review's historic final report will help improve outcomes for people with disability and our sector, bringing a true sense of inclusion to our society through a joint support 'ecosystem'. Inclusion is at the heart of everything Ability Options does, and we are committed to contributing towards achieving a more inclusive Australia, ensuring those who need us receive the best quality services that will enable them to be included in the community. You can read more about my take on the Review in this edition.

Regardless of how the Government responds to these recommendations, I'm optimistic the NDIS will improve. I look forward to seeing what the next five years will bring as we move towards making Australia truly inclusive with an ecosystem that works for everyone.

Best wishes,
Julia Squire
julia.squire@abilityoptions.org.au

How volunteering helped me unlock my independence



Finding my first job was a challenging road to navigate with many applications often requiring experience. Since I was new to the workforce, having no experience was a barrier for me and every rejection felt like I was hitting a brick wall.

I looked for opportunities that could help me get experience. After coming across a volunteer video editor role that matched my skills, I signed up.

I worked for a social enterprise supporting vulnerable people to overcome social isolation. Working as part of a small team, I was responsible for editing and distributing cooking demonstration videos to the organisation's YouTube channel to support seniors and people with disability learn to cook healthy meals while on a budget.

As my confidence grew, I began to master the art of video editing, I took on new responsibilities and developed a strong interest in media.

In my role, I was given the opportunity to participate in the production of each video. Through each filming session, I learnt to appreciate the value teamwork brings to the workplace, while getting a practical taste of my chosen career. One of my favourite projects

was a savoury pancake cooking demonstration where the chef cooked alongside a person with disability. Watching them work together taught me that people with disability can learn to live independently and it was through this experience that I was introduced to the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

One of the biggest rewards I gained as a volunteer was creating a network with the people I worked with. Networking is an important skill to learn as it connects us to future job opportunities. Every day was an opportunity for me to network with my colleagues, including the organisation's CEO, who helped me land my first job at Ability Options by acting as my referee.

Volunteering is an attractive quality for employers to see in an applicant's resumé as it shows they are committed to making a difference while possessing transferrable skills which they can bring to the workplace.

If there is one thing I learned as a volunteer, it's to never underestimate the power of networking, because the people you meet will support you in unlocking your independence.

Kind regards,
Rafael Sanchez-Bayo

"Life's better with Options" campaign to help fill the housing gap for people with disability

Leading disability and employment services provider Ability Options is on a mission to help fill the housing gap for people with disability with its accommodation services vacancies as part of a new campaign launched recently.

With the housing market across the state continuing to be highly competitive with reports of low stock, specialist accommodation providers like Ability Options are supporting people with disability to find high-quality accommodation that offers choice while also being tailored to meet their needs.

To promote our suite of property vacancies in purpose-built and equipped homes, Ability Options has

launched a campaign to showcase our accommodation options and expertly trained teams who are on hand 24/7 to provide support to residents.

Ability Options CEO Julia Squire says the campaign will build awareness about accommodation options for people with disability and help reduce the pressures faced by people living with disability searching for the right place to call home.

"Our teams work hard to support people living with disability who are looking for inclusive and accessible living options across NSW. We believe in our campaign message that Life's better with Options, providing choice and expert service so people with disability can find new homes that are comfortable and designed with them in mind," she said.

"As a long-standing accommodation services provider under the NDIS, our Supported Independent Living accommodation options give participants looking for long-term accommodation peace of mind and a place to call home."

Ability Options' "Life's better with Options" Campaign launched on 11 March. For more information on Ability Options' accommodation solutions, visit our website.



Thomas' exciting visit to Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary

The Mid-North Coast is home to a range of wonderful experiences. The award-winning Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary is no exception. Opened in 1970, the Sanctuary is not only a tourist attraction that is home to many native marine animals, but a place providing a wide range of skill-building activities.

In their own words, the Sanctuary invites people to experience marine animals up close, discover their programs, and learn why it's important to protect Coffs Coast wildlife and their habitats. The Sanctuary further inspires people to act responsibly every day to care for our environment for future generations.

Ability Options Supported Independent Living (SIL) participant, Thomas is always ready for new experiences. Last November, he had the opportunity to travel to the Sanctuary.

After travelling down south from his SIL home, Thomas was fortunate enough to meet the dolphins, seals, and penguins in a 1-to-1 capacity. The Sanctuary's dedicated team welcomed Thomas with open arms and taught him many things that day.

Ability Options staff are incredibly thankful to the Sanctuary's Managing Director, Tiga for creating a wonderful learning experience for Thomas. In



addition, Ability Options Support Worker, Danny said this was the most special experience he's ever had in the history of his job.

"Thomas loves animals. He was thrilled to have the opportunity to connect with the wildlife at the marine sanctuary and found it quite therapeutic," Danny said.

"Support Workers from Ability Options are always looking for ways to provide participants with enriching experiences, tailored to their interest. We feel privileged to facilitate activities participants don't get to engage in their everyday life."

Thomas stayed at Ability Options' Retreat short-term accommodation house to have new experiences in line with his NDIS goals. Our diverse short-term offering sets Ability Options apart giving participants the opportunity to build their life and social skills within a variety of settings.

Our accessible short-term accommodation gives participants the ability to have various new experiences. Activities just like these highlight an extensive range of benefits for many participants. To find out more, visit our website.

Supporting people doing it tough over Christmas

Ability Options 300 Jobs for Christmas campaign hits its mark

In the lead up to Christmas Day, our employment teams wanted to make an ambitious push to support at least 300 of our employment program participants to find work.

"This campaign helped us make real change for the people we support, especially those who were experiencing hardship," Anita said.

Having employment during peak seasons like Christmas helps people provide for their families, feel more financially stable, helps support businesses, and grow our own wellbeing.

"Christmas can be a difficult time for participants and finding a job at this time of year can change not only a person's life, but their family and the local community. The dedicated teams across our employment programs decided that we would push to change the lives of 300 participants, whilst supporting employers to meet their staffing needs," said Karen, General Manager for Employment Programs.

"Our staff are passionate about supporting participants into employment. Providing links to employment opportunities for participants allows them to fully participate in the community and supporting them to achieve this is a key part of Ability Options being an inclusion driven organisation," Karen said.

"We managed to exceed our goal, supporting 301 participants to gain employment through our services."

Participants we supported:

392

vacancies generated between October to December

402

referrals from sites

360

participants referred to employers

301

participants employed



We spoke with one of our Recruitment Mentors, Anita, who supported Catherine to land a role as a school crossing supervisor for Transport NSW.

Anita said Ability Options' 300 Jobs for Christmas campaign helped bring the community together at such a crucial time.

"It really brought the community together, especially in cases like my participant Catherine's, where I was able to connect her with a local business."

On her experience in the 300 Jobs for Christmas campaign, Catherine worked with Anita in overcoming some of the barriers her disability presents to find work.

"When I got the job, it felt amazing," Catherine said. "It was a great experience and I love my new job."

"Anita supported me with regular check ins to help me develop my communication skills, tips on how to stay task-focused, and helped me stay connected with my mental health support appointments."

Since landing her job, Anita says Catherine has started being more active in her local community and feels more included – going for regular swims during her breaks, she has become active in maintaining her mental and physical health and has made some new friends through her netball team.

"When I met Catherine, she was anxious about working and socialising with others," Anita said. "Helping Catherine build her confidence has changed her whole outlook on employment and her life."

"My participant is extremely happy with the progress she has made."

Join our dedicated Clinical Governance Committee

Ability Options is extending membership to our Clinical Governance Committee to more members of our community for a broader representation of people living with disability.

The Clinical Governance Committee has the responsibility of ensuring that the care we provide to the people we support is safe, effective, and participant-centric. The committee meets every quarter to discuss any gaps that are identified in our person-centred support systems and services through case study presentations. Together, we explore solutions to close these gaps for continuous improvement.

We are looking for people who have lived experience and/or knowledge of

clinical principles to join the committee and work towards creating, reviewing, and improving policies and processes to ensure high-quality healthcare supports and services are provided.

If you're interested in quality improvement and want to make a difference in our care, fill out an expression of interest form.

<https://forms.office.com/r/K2GJ1by5rL>



The committee is diverse and encourages anyone who engages in Ability Options services to apply.

If you have any questions, contact clinicalservicesteam@abilityoptions.org.au



Growing to make a difference to the community



Hello everyone,

I hope you're enjoying the first edition of TheVoice for 2024. My name is Greg, and I'm Ability Options' Chief Growth Officer. I want to take a moment to update you on some exciting steps we have taken to grow as a leading, for-purpose disability and employment service provider.

You may remember towards the end of last year we told you about our plan to expand our services on the Mid-North Coast. We have been making great progress on that goal with two well-respected providers in the region, R&R Care and CHESS Connect, having fully transitioned into the organisation and are now part of our community.

We also grew in a new and different way with the purchase of a farm in the region. As you may expect, we are excited to support more people to build skills and have even expanded our community to welcome many farm animals into the fold.

I joined Ability Options last year as Chief Growth Officer (CGO) to grow and continue providing high-quality supports for people in more communities and in more ways. This is being undertaken with the help of a diverse, driven team across Ability Options.

If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I love being part of

an amazing team delivering excellent services. My passion ignites when I see what we're doing is making a difference to the lives of local communities.

To maintain a genuine organisation like Ability Options, we focus on opportunities that fit within our values and contribute to achieving our Mission.

We're now taking further steps forward to support people in more ways through the expansion of our day programs in Western Sydney.

Recently, we have worked with The Junction Works, a highly respected provider in South-West Sydney, to transition their Day Program, staff, participants, and state-of-the-art Seven Hills facility into the fold.

Fitted out to a high standard, the new location at Seven Hills, provides enormous potential for us to shine as a service provider in Western Sydney. I think the opportunities are boundless once we merge our two Seven Hills operations into this fantastic location.

I continue to be impressed and excited to be part of a terrific team at Ability Options. We're truly a great organisation brimming with people who care about delivering the best service possible wherever we operate.

Greg Bergan
Chief Growth Officer

A shift to support: The change to a new calling

Meet Jodie, a dedicated and compassionate Support Worker committed to making a positive impact on members of her local community.

Jodie began her career in support work driven by a genuine desire to support others beyond what she could at her previous customer service role.

"I couldn't see the benefits I was bringing to people behind the phone. I wanted to work more closely with the people I'm driven to support," Jodie said.

"I started out doing some volunteer work in the disability sector and loved every minute of it. I realised if you put maximum effort into supporting people and then seeing the benefit of that support to someone's life, you can tell you're making a difference."

Through the smiles on participants' faces, Jodie says she had found her calling.

"After seeing the difference compassionate support can make, I jumped ship from my old job and here I am, loving every minute of what I do."

Jodie believes true fulfilment in support work comes from the heart.

"I think you need to have the compassion to want to be in this industry," she said.

"We don't go into this role for any kind of recognition. It's about wanting to



support people in your community. If you are a compassionate person, I think you will find support work very fulfilling."

Jodie finds immense reward in supporting participants to live life to the fullest and is dedicated to understanding the unique needs and goals of everyone.

Jodie takes pride in supporting individuals to achieve their goals, empowering them to live life on their terms.

"What I find most rewarding in my role is being able to listen and understand participants' needs and goals, and then using that rapport to help them live independently to the best of their ability," she said.

Jodie's commitment to creating an inclusive community shines through every interaction. Her dedication to the wellbeing and independence of participants makes her an invaluable asset to our team.

Our Christmas hampers raffle

In the lead up to Christmas last year, it was our goal to not only spread cheer, but give back to people who might be doing it tough in many of our communities.

In our effort to give back, we hosted a raffle of more than 25 Christmas hampers for our Employment participants to win.

This campaign brightened many participants' days, helping them further in reaching their employment goals.

A stellar example of a participant reaching their goals through this campaign and our services, is Nancy. Following a brain tumour, Nancy underwent extensive physiotherapy to regain most of the use of her body. Our DES team at Hornsby was able to successfully support Nancy into her final stages of recruitment in her dream role with our employment partner Healthshare. We would like to congratulate Nancy on not only her progress but on winning a hamper along the way.



Deemed more than an overall success – the campaign's total hamper entries totalled to a staggering 2,318 responses. That's nearly double the entire workforce of Ability Options.

We were thrilled to announce our winners in December. Below are some of our lucky winners.

"This hamper means a lot to me."

- Shabnam

"I'm happy to have won. I'll surprise my other with this and make her very happy." - Jayden

"Thank you for nominating me and for organising these hampers during the festive season!" - Shereen

"I'm very happy with my hamper. We're going to eat a lot on Christmas Day when I share this with my family." - Kyhe

These kind words of appreciation warm our hearts and remind us why we do what we do at Ability Options. We'd like to thank everyone involved and can't wait to host the next raffle.



My Take: Julia on the NDIS Review

Last year, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) released its historic final report, having undergone its ten-year review. This report continues to be a topic of discussion for a sector that looks to its recommendations with hope for a more inclusive Australia. Like many in the sector, Ability Options' CEO Julia Squire is eager to see how these recommendations may improve outcomes for people with disability and bring about a true sense of inclusion in Australia. Julia sat down with our Communications team to discuss her take on the Review's final report and share her optimism for our sector's future.

What are your thoughts on some of the recommendations in the report?

The Review presents many opportunities that will give participants and families a joint 'ecosystem' to make sure they are safe, can choose high quality supports, and be included in the community.

Some of the biggest concerns for service providers could be addressed if the recommendations are enacted in the way we hope. Whilst this all depends on the responses from all levels of Government, I'm optimistic the NDIS will improve. I see the recommendations falling into a few headings:

Inclusion

Making sure people with disability can choose supports which enable them to be included in the community, provided by a joint ecosystem. This is a huge step forward and one we must hold all

Governments to account to deliver this. Inclusion is at our core in Ability Options, and we strive for it every day.

Quality and choice

We welcome the recommendations that look to improve and recognise quality in the sector, so that those service providers who do their jobs well are rewarded. Working to ensure genuine choice and control is complicated, but I am optimistic that choices will become real for everyone.

Pricing

The proposed reform of pricing frameworks to improve incentives for providers to deliver quality supports to participants is welcome and having an independent price authority should eliminate the conflicts we see in current price settings. This ensures our sector's sustainability and credibility.



You mentioned inclusion is one of Ability Options' focus points. How will the organisation respond to the recommendations surrounding inclusion?

We have always focused on inclusion. Making sure we contribute to Australian society by ensuring anyone we support can be fully included in the community is key to our Vision and Mission.

We'll look to support all Governments in their quest for inclusion while being an inclusive employer and service provider.

What makes you excited for the future of supporting people with disability?

There is an opportunity to ensure the significant difficulties participants face in Australia today are addressed for the long-term.

Both the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review spent enormous amounts of time talking to participants and families, so they heard very clearly what those who contributed think about their experiences.

In addition, the Panel engaged with our peak sector body and many service providers to hear our thoughts. While many people who have had positive experiences did not see the need to engage, I know the panel worked hard to listen to a broad group of people.

We now have every opportunity to make Australia truly inclusive for all people with disability. I am excited about the next five years, as we move towards a positive future with an ecosystem that works.

Accommodation

I'm hopeful there are ways to ensure funding for supported accommodation is fair and will support participants to exercise genuine choice and control over their living arrangements.

Navigators

The idea of supporting participants to navigate the system is an important one. However, the details will be important, to see this recommendation being effective. Our Support Coordinators do an awesome job, and I think we have real opportunities to grow our services depending on what the tender looks like when it is drafted and if the Government accepts that recommendation.

Workforce

Whilst we already do a lot of work in supporting our employees, the costs of most of what we do in this regard are not funded. If this Review means we can do more, then we will implement these aspects to ensure our Mission gets delivered today, tomorrow, and long-term.

Ability Options is growing!

At Ability Options, we want to create opportunities and services that give participants choice and foster inclusive living. To do this, we constantly seek fresh approaches and new ways to support people in the community.

NDIS Plan Management

Ability Options now offers Plan Management services to NDIS Participants.

What is Plan Management?

Plan Management is a NDIS service that supports participants to administer the funding in their plan, giving them the freedom to engage in the Scheme without the burden of paperwork and financial management.



How does Plan Management help NDIS participants?

A Plan Manager can:

- Keep track of a participant's NDIS funding.
- Manage payments to service providers.
- Create and share easy to understand monthly statements.
- Collaborate with other service providers to make the most of a participant's NDIS Plan.
- Share budget and invoicing details with a participant's Support Coordinator.

Referrals to Ability Options' Plan Management services now open!

We are thrilled to welcome Angie to our team. Angie is an experienced Plan Manager who loves working with NDIS participants to help them better understand their funding and get the most from their Plan.

If you or someone you know are interested in Plan Management, contact Angie today to discuss your options.

Availability: Across NSW

Eligibility: NDIS Participants

Funded: Yes

Referrals:

E. planmanagement@abilityoptions.org.au
T. 02 5622 8453

Learn more about our Plan Management services at abilityoptions.org.au



Low Intensity Mental Health Services

Ability Options now offers Low Intensity Mental Health Services (LIMH) to local people across the Mid-North Coast and Northern NSW as part of the Head to Health Initiative.

What are Low Intensity Mental Health Services?

Our Low Intensity Mental Health Services help individuals experiencing general symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Designed and tailored to support the unique needs of participants, our supports empower people to take an active and mindful role in supporting their holistic wellbeing.

Our services help people to set goals, build resilience and learn coping skills to foster a positive mindset and practice good, mentally healthy habits.

Referrals to Ability Options' Low Intensity Mental Health Services available to locals on the Mid-North Coast and Northern NSW.

Our LIMH services are available to people aged 18-65 living on the Mid-North Coast and Northern NSW.

Led by Team Leader Rick, our team deliver LIMH services from Healthy Hubs in Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, and Byron Bay face-to-face, as well as online via video link, phone, or telehealth.

If you or someone you know may be interested in our Low Intensity Mental Health Services, you can access an assessment through the Head to Health service.

Availability: Ability Options supports the Mid-North Coast and Northern NSW (Port Macquarie – Tweed Heads)

Funded: Yes

Eligibility: Assessed by the Head to Health service

Referrals through Head to Health

The Head to Health Service connects people to mental health support services across Australia.

T. 1800 595 212

W. headtohealth.gov.au

Samantha's blossoming friendship with furry friend

Having a pet can be a great source of comfort, often providing companionship that motivates us to live mentally healthier lives.

For Samantha, an NDIS participant supported by Ability Options, having a pet makes her feel happy and wanted.

She says her dog and best friend, Harley, helped her overcome challenges in her everyday life and that their strong relationship had a positive impact on her overall wellbeing.

"I was in a bad place before I got Harley, but he helped me find a purpose and get back to my happy place," Samantha said.

Harley brought Samantha lots of happiness and their friendship has created many lifelong memories together.

"Harley's a special dog. One of my favourite memories is when he would run around the yard because he wanted to be in the TikTok videos I was making. He would also come and give me kisses to comfort me whenever I was having a sad day."

Sadly, their friendship ended just before Christmas when Samantha learned that Harley had passed away. Samantha was devastated. She called her Support Coordinator Lena to ask if she could help her and help find another dog but was

not sure if she had enough money to find one. Lena knew how much a dog meant to Samantha and suggested to ask the local animal shelter to see if they have any puppies she could adopt.

"When Samantha rang me after Christmas, I knew she was feeling sad, and we talked about getting her another dog as this seems to really help her with her emotions," Lena said.

"With so many animals in need of a loving home, I assured Sam that going to the shelter was the best choice to look for a new companion and that all we had to do was ask."

Supporting Samantha, Lena called the shelter to find out if they had any puppies available for adoption. After explaining Samantha's situation, the shelter told Lena they had a Shar-pei-cross puppy who needed someone who can give them a safe home. When asked if Samantha would be interested in adopting the puppy for free, Lena was delighted and shared the good news.

Samantha's face beamed with excitement as Lena showed her photos of the dog on the shelter's website. After explaining the shelter's offer, Samantha's excitement grew and she asked Lena if she could help her adopt it. Lena supported Samantha in



completing the adoption paperwork and organised a day to pick up her new friend.

A few weeks later, the big day finally came. Samantha instantly fell in love with the puppy's playful personality. She brought her new pet home and named it Jack.

Since Jack came into her life, Samantha is happier than ever and has been having fun getting to know her new best friend. She thanks Lena for helping her adopt Jack and looks forward to going on adventures around the neighbourhood with him.

"Jack is an adorable dog. He loves his new home and won't stop jumping up. Thanks

to Lena's support, I have returned to my happy place. I cannot wait to take Jack for walks after he gets his needles," Samantha said.

Lena is glad Samantha is happy with Jack and hopes to see their friendship grow.

"Sam's wellbeing has improved since getting Jack and this has made her life more complete," Lena said.

"Sam loves to send me photos of her and Jack sitting and cuddling together. I'm looking forward to watching them grow together."



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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or communications@abilityoptions.org.au

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