Integrated disAbility Action Inc.
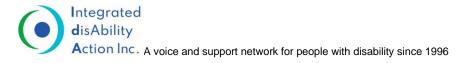
A voice and support network for people
with disability since 1996

A Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community Sector Consultation Response

Nightcliff Community Centre

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Who We Are

IdA: The Voice and Support Network for Territorians with Disability

Integrated disAbility Action Inc (IdA) IdA is a not-for-profit, charitable, grassroots organisation that was established in 1996 to offer independent advocacy to help empower people with disability and their families, carers and guardians, to improve the quality of their own lives and to look at and improve the professionalism of the disability sector in the Northern Territory.

IdA advocates for positive change on issues that affect the lives and rights of people with disability to accessibility and inclusion in all areas including education, employment, health, housing and transport. IdA ensures that people with disability have an active voice and representation on various government and non-government committees and boards.

IdA also hosts the 'All Abilities Expo' is a unique and interactive event that connects disability service providers and people with disability, carers, guardians, and families.

IdA is also the provider of the Companion Card in the NT, which allows people with disability to access events and activities with a companion at no extra cost.

Acknowledgements

IdA would like to acknowledge the Larrakia people, who are the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work today, and pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging. As an organisation that empowers people with disability, improves the quality of their lives, and advocates for positive change, we are committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities to achieve equitable outcomes for all.

We would like to thank our Patron, life members, Board and valued members for their dedication and support to our organisation.

We value and appreciate the skills, talents, and perspectives of people with disability in the NT, and the strength and resilience they demonstrate every day. We also recognise and support the efforts and involvement of their families, friends, and allies in promoting their wellbeing and inclusion.

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Introduction

IdA (Integrated DisAbility Action, Inc) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Department of Social Services on the issues paper "A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector". We appreciate the government's commitment to better support Australian communities through the design and administration of grants to the sector, including more meaningful working partnerships and options for greater innovation.

Our submission reflects the views and experiences of our members, partners, and stakeholders, as well as our own expertise, and knowledge as the peak body for people with disabilities in the NT (Northern Territory) and a legacy community sector organisation, built by individuals in the community for the community.

Please note that the quotes attributed to respondents are de-identified, singular to their perspective and taken at face value. We appreciate the time it takes to respond to surveys. They do not necessarily reflect the views of IdA as an organisation or any other Organisations in the Northern Territory.

Our position:

IdA believes that a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector is essential for achieving social justice and inclusion for all Australians, especially those who are marginalised and disadvantaged.

Summary of issues:

IdA and other community organisations have struggled to meet the increasing and diverse needs of people with disabilities in the NT, especially in remote and regional areas, due to the lack of adequate and sustainable funding that reflects the true costs and complexities of service delivery. Many services have had to wind up, faced funding cuts, delays, or uncertainty, which have affected their ability to plan, recruit, retain, and train staff, as well as to maintain and upgrade their infrastructure and equipment.

IdA and other community organisations have faced challenges in developing and implementing innovative and responsive solutions to the emerging and changing issues affecting people with disabilities in the NT, due to the lack of flexibility and consistency in grant design and administration that allows for local adaptation and innovation. Many grants have been prescriptive, short-term, and competitive, which have limited the scope for collaboration, co-design, and co-production with the people they serve and other stakeholders.

IdA and other community organisations have experienced difficulties in engaging and consulting with Commonwealth Government and agencies within the NT that do not have a disability focus as well as other decision makers on policy development and service delivery, due to the lack of meaningful engagement and consultation with the community sector and the people they serve in policy development and decision making. Many community organisations have also faced restrictions or risks in advocating for change, due to the lack of recognition and support for the role and value of advocacy in the community sector.

Key Issues:

- The lack of adequate and sustainable funding that reflects the true costs and complexities of service delivery in remote and regional areas.
- The inflexibility and inconsistency in grant design that prevents local adaptation and innovation.
- The absence of meaningful engagement and consultation with the community sector and the people they serve in policy and project development and decision making.
- The proliferation of funding rounds that are exclusive to "National" organisations without any requirement to partner regionally when they do not have a presence in the Northern Territory.

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- The confusion around funding and grants for the community being open to private and for-profit entities that are not Community Service Organisations (CSO).
- The lack of recognition and support for the role and value of local advocacy in the community sector.
- The lack of capacity building and professional development opportunities for the community sector workforce and volunteers.

Our recommendations:

We propose the following recommendations to address the issues and enhance the strength, diversity, and independence of the community sector:

- Increase and index the funding for the community sector to ensure its viability and quality.
- Simplify and streamline the grant application and reporting processes and reduce the administrative burden on the community sector.
- Adopt a co-design and co-production approach with the community sector and the people they serve in policy development and decision making.
- Acknowledge and protect the right and responsibility of the community sector to advocate for change.
- Invest in and facilitate the capacity building and professional development of the community sector workforce and volunteers.
- Acknowledge the unique diversity of the Northern Territory by including NT based organisations in national projects rather than excluding them.

We hope that our submission will contribute to the development of a package of recommendations for government consideration, on innovative approaches to grant funding that will support both short and longer-term reform to the operation of grants. We look forward to working with the government and other stakeholders to achieve a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector.

Consultation Focus Areas

Area 1 Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership.

Having some way to ramp organic community groups into becoming organisations that makes sense, as well as funding the group rather than individual projects
– Survey Respondent #4

We believe that a partnership between CSOs (Community Services Organisations) and the government that achieves outcomes for Australians being supported by the community sector would look like:

- A partnership based on mutual trust, respect, transparency, and accountability.
- A partnership that recognises and values the expertise, experience, and contribution of CSOs in delivering community services.
- A partnership that involves CSOs in all stages of policy and program development, implementation, evaluation, and review
- A partnership that supports CSOs to engage with and represent the voices of their clients and stakeholders, especially those who are marginalised or hard to reach.

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- A partnership that fosters innovation, learning and continuous improvement in service delivery

promoting people in the community doing good work! The good news will flow around everyone who helped, it doesn't have to be so granular in the way we discuss what is happening.
-Survey Respondent #3

Some of the ways that CSOs and government can streamline the sharing of information, particularly through utilising technology to effectively engage, distribute, share, influence and inform in a timely and efficient manner are:

- Establishing regular and consistent communication channels and platforms between CSOs and government, such as newsletters, webinars, forums, surveys, and feedback mechanisms
- Developing common standards and protocols for data collection, analysis, reporting and sharing between CSOs and government, such as using compatible software systems, formats, and templates
- Creating an online database, with dashboards and portals that allow CSOs (Community Services Organisations) and government to access relevant information easily and securely, such as service delivery data, performance indicators, best practices and lessons learned, that is accessible by any CSO rather than limiting it to invited partners
- Leveraging social media, websites, and other digital tools to raise awareness, give information and showcase achievements of CSOs and government in delivering community services.

Implementing adult mental health resources with the help of the state was very successful.
- Survey Respondent #3

Some of the ways that government can ensure the community sector, including service users, and those not able to access services, have an opportunity to contribute to program design without imposing significant burdens are:

- Adopting a co-design approach that involves CSOs and service users in defining the problem, generating ideas, testing solutions, and evaluating outcomes.
- Supplying adequate resources and support for CSOs and service users to take part in co-design activities, such as funding, training, facilitation, and feedback.
- Ensuring that co-design activities are accessible, inclusive, and respectful of the diversity and preferences of CSOs and service users, such as using different methods, formats, and languages.
- Valuing and acknowledging the input and contribution of CSOs and service users in co-design activities, such as providing recognition, incentives, and rewards.

Grant deadlines can place pressure on general service delivery if there are increased demands for core business services during the grant timeline.
-Survey Respondent #11

Fund the group, promote the group, rather than folding it into a bulletin or a press conference that people forget about immediately.
-Survey Respondent #4

Area 2 Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services.

We rely on a fee for service model (no block funding). Therefore, we need to generate the work and run things efficiently. Block or grant funding may assist with developing new programs and resources that may be beneficial to clients and the sector. – Survey Respondent # 11

We believe that adequate and flexible funding would look like:

- Funding that covers the full cost of delivering quality services, including staff salaries, training, travel, equipment, administration, and overheads
- Funding that is indexed to reflect the changes in the cost of living and service delivery.
- Funding that is supplemented to address the specific needs and challenges of delivering services in remote and rural areas.
- Funding that allows CSOs to allocate funds according to their priorities and needs or design the scope and objectives of grant agreements to align with identified priorities and needs.
- Funding that enables CSOs to invest in capacity building, innovation, and improvement of their services.

More funding and easier programs - we barely make any conversions from the engagement programs we run to profit.
- Survey Respondent #6

Some of the administrative and overhead costs that are not being considered in current grant funding are:

- The cost of travelling in rural and remote areas including the Darwin area rising the further you go from urban centres increasing, as well as some areas being unreachable without expensive flights or sometimes boat travel.
- The cost of complying with complex and inconsistent reporting requirements across multiple grants, such as staff time, software systems, data collection and analysis
- The cost of maintaining and upgrading equipment and technology to deliver services effectively and efficiently, such as computers, phones, internet, software licenses and subscriptions.
- The cost of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of staff and clients, especially during emergencies or crises, such as personal protective equipment, insurance, security systems and contingency plans
- The cost of engaging with and representing the interests of clients and stakeholders in policy and program development, implementation, evaluation, and review, such as travel expenses, consultation fees, advocacy materials and campaigns.

The rising operational costs are impacting the delivery of community services in the following ways:

- Reducing the quality and quantity of services that CSOs can provide to their clients and stakeholders.
- Increasing the workload and stress levels of staff who must do more with less resources.
- Affecting the recruitment and retention of qualified and experienced staff who are attracted by better pay and conditions elsewhere.
- Limiting the ability of CSOs to innovate, improve and expand their services to meet the changing needs and expectations of their clients and stakeholders.

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Some of the ways that CSOs and the departments can work together to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds are:

- Conducting regular needs assessments and gap analyses in collaboration with CSOs and service users to identify the current and emerging issues, priorities, and opportunities in the community
- Developing and applying clear and consistent criteria and indicators for allocating and distributing funds based on the needs, performance, and outcomes of CSOs and service users
- Establishing and maintaining a transparent and accountable process for reviewing and adjusting the funding allocations and distributions in response to changing circumstances and feedback
- Providing timely and constructive feedback and support to CSOs on their funding applications, agreements, variations, and acquittals

We have shyed away from interacting with government and even some NGOs in the Territory because often we have found that they want our connections, but because we have disabilities ourselves they assume we will secede control or agree with all of their ideas and assumptions.
-Survey Respondent #4

Some of the ways that government can streamline reporting requirements, including across multiple grants, to reduce administrative burden on CSOs are:

- Harmonising and simplifying the reporting requirements across different grants, programs, and departments, such as using common formats, templates, and deadlines
- Aligning the reporting requirements with the objectives, outcomes, and indicators of the grant agreement, rather than focusing on inputs, outputs, and activities
- Adopting a risk-based and proportionate approach to reporting requirements, such as reducing the frequency or intensity of reporting for low-risk or high-performing CSOs
- Utilising technology to facilitate and automate the reporting process, such as using online platforms, data integration and analytics

Ideally we'd just be paid to run community marketing programs and be allowed to convert sales leads without having to report on pointless deliverables.
- Survey Respondent #6

Area 3 Providing longer grant agreement terms

They're OK. If we don't get funding to do it we just won't ever do them again. Frankly unless we could convert them to revenue, we would prefer not to at all, but it'd be irresponsible to pass up the money
- Survey Respondent #6

We believe that CSOs are seeking grant agreement terms that are at least three to five years long to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery. We also believe that longer grant agreement terms would enable us to:

- Plan for our service delivery, staff development, resource allocation and budget management

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- Invest in building our organisational capacity, such as staff training, equipment upgrade, quality improvement and innovation
- Develop long-term relationships and partnerships with our clients, stakeholders, communities and other CSOs
- Deliver better outcomes for our clients and stakeholders by providing continuity, consistency, and quality of service

We think that the government should aim for a minimum timeframe of six months to provide final outcomes on grant variations/extensions before the current grant ceases. This would allow us to:

- Prepare for the transition or continuation of our service delivery without disruption or uncertainty
- Communicate with our staff, clients, stakeholders and partners about the status and implications of our grant variation/extension
- Adjust our organisational plans, policies, and procedures accordingly
- Seek alternative sources of funding or support if needed

we can't enter into one so it is hard to say. I know many organisations we communicate with are constantly worried their funding will not be extended.
-Survey Respondent #4

We require funding flexibility that enables us to:

- Allocate funds according to our priorities and needs within the scope and objectives of the grant agreement
- Respond to changing needs and expectations of our stakeholders in a timely and effective manner
- Experiment with new or improved ways of delivering services that are more efficient or effective
- Manage unforeseen events or circumstances that affect our service delivery, such as emergencies or crises.

Great demand for services raised concerns with sustainability and the risk of burn out.
-Survey Respondent #11

We require flexibility in acquittal processes that supports and encourages sector innovation by:

- Allowing us to report on the outcomes, learnings, and challenges of our innovative initiatives, rather than penalising us for deviating from the original plan or budget.
- Providing us with feedback, recognition, and support for our innovative initiatives, rather than imposing sanctions or restrictions
- Sharing our innovative initiatives with other CSOs and government agencies as examples of best practices or lessons learned
- Involving us in evaluating the impact and sustainability of our innovative initiatives

Some of the ways that government can improve the variation process, with consideration that CSOs must demonstrate alignment with the grant agreement and provide evidence of value for money outcomes are:

- Providing clear and consistent guidelines and criteria for requesting, assessing, and approving grant variations and extensions
- Streamlining and simplifying the application process for grant variations/extensions

- Communicating with CSOs throughout the variation process, such as acknowledging receipt of application, providing updates on progress, explaining decisions, and providing feedback
- Allowing reasonable timeframes for CSOs to submit their variation requests and receive their variation outcomes
- Inviting CSO's to apply for any grants that are being varied or extended if they meet the criteria, even if they were not a part of the initial successful applicants

Area 4 Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs

We are a pretty small group, it's nearly impossible to be entirely across every stream available, but also many funding projects these days are far too specific to be useful for the people they're aiming to help
- Survey Respondent #3

We believe that the government should ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding by:

- Conducting outreach activities to raise awareness of funding opportunities among new and emerging organisations
- Providing mentoring or coaching services to new and emerging organisations to help them prepare their funding applications, such as providing advice, guidance, or feedback
- Offering capacity building programs or resources to new and emerging organisations to help them develop their organisational skills, knowledge, and systems, such as training courses, toolkits, or networks
- Encouraging collaboration or partnership between new/emerging organisations and established organisations to share their expertise, experience, and resources

Funding the organisation from tail to tooth rather than piecemeal projects would make our ability to provide better services and advocate for bigger changes possible
—Survey Respondent #3

Some of the ways that larger CSOs could support smaller CSOs are:

- Providing mentoring or coaching services to smaller CSOs to share their expertise, experience, and advice
- Offering sub-contracting or partnership arrangements to smaller CSOs to share their resources, networks, and opportunities
- Advocating for the interests and rights of smaller CSOs in policy and program development, implementation, evaluation, and review

Improved communication and sector updates for service providers from government regarding the disability sector
- Survey Respondent #11

Some of the barriers to providing this support are:

- The lack of trust, communication, and collaboration between larger and smaller CSOs
- The competition and fragmentation within the community sector for funding, recognition, and influence

- The limited resources and capacity of larger CSOs to provide this support

Area 5 Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

We have shyed away from interacting with government and even some NGOs in the Territory because often we have found that they want our connections, but because we have disabilities ourselves they assume we will secede control or agree with all of their ideas and assumptions.
- Survey Respondent #4

Our experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches are:

- We support the idea of place-based funding approaches that recognise and respond to the unique needs, strengths, and aspirations of different communities
- We have experienced some benefits from these initiatives, such as increased community engagement, empowerment, and ownership of service delivery
- We have also faced some challenges from these initiatives, such as lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities, coordination difficulties, duplication, or gaps in service provision

Some innovative approaches that could be implemented to ensure the grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links are:

- Using community-led or co-design processes to identify, prioritise and allocate grant funding for community services
- Using participatory budgeting or crowdfunding methods to involve community members in deciding how grant funding is spent
- Using social impact bonds or pay-for-success models to link grant funding to the outcomes achieved by community organisations

Locally we have very good relationship with the minister and the premiers office, federally we have no communication with them at all
-Survey Respondent #3

Some areas that we consider have duplicative funding or gaps that need to be addressed are:

- Duplicative funding: We think that there is some overlap or duplication in funding for similar or related services or programs across different grants, departments, or levels of government. For example, we think that there is some duplication in funding for disability advocacy services under the National Disability Advocacy Program and the National Disability Insurance Scheme's ILC (Information, Linkages and Capacity) Grants.
- Gaps in funding: We think that there are some gaps or unmet needs in funding for certain services or programs that are essential or emerging for our community. For example, we think that there is a gap in funding for cultural competency training for service providers who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. Further, there is an enormous gap in funding for Territory based organisations who are left out of national programs despite other organisations claiming to be national without providing any service in the NT.

we are sometimes in the NT and they have been good at promoting our engagement, but locally we are often missed in communications to people. It isn't so bad as many people

know we're doing it already but it does make the staff feel sad being left out sometimes
-Survey Respondent #3

The evidence that we have for these duplicative funding or gaps are:

- Our own experience and observation as a disability advocacy organisation in the NT
- The feedback and input from our clients, stakeholders, and partners in the community
- The data and reports from relevant research studies or evaluations

We think that where there is a community-led change initiative, shared accountability to community and funders (government) could strengthen service delivery by:

- Enhancing the trust, respect and collaboration between community organisations and funders
- Ensuring that service delivery is aligned with the needs, preferences, and goals of the community
- Encouraging innovation, learning and improvement in service delivery
- Measuring and demonstrating the impact and value of service delivery

We aren't able to convert NTG program leads into sales very reliably. It is a big problem.
Also people have unreasonable expectations of us to lose money on programs for people
who don't engage much.
-Survey Respondent #6

Other Considerations

Some other solutions or changes that could also be considered are:

- Providing more opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration between CSOs, government agencies, private sector organisations and academic institutions
- Providing more opportunities for peer learning and exchange between CSOs, especially those working in similar or related fields or contexts
- Providing more opportunities for recognition and celebration of the achievements and contributions of CSOs, especially those who demonstrate excellence or innovation in service delivery

Funding the organisation from tail to tooth rather than piecemeal projects would make our
ability to provide better services and advocate for bigger changes possible
- Survey Respondent #3

Conclusion

We are encouraged that CSAG is being proactive in their search for finding solutions and look forward to this space being revitalised with:

- A Community Sector that is independent, frank, and fearless in its advocacy.
- A community sector that is valued, respected, and supported by the government.
- A community sector that is diverse, vibrant, and dynamic in delivering quality services
- A community sector that is responsive, effective, in achieving outcomes for people with disability

Thank you, for your consideration

Integrated disAbility Action

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