Disability Support Pension Inquiry: PWDA Statement

**Presented by PWDA Senior Manager of Policy Giancarlo de Vera**

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation on whose unceded land I live and work. I would like to pay respect to Elders past and present, and traditional owners across this continent. In particular, I would like to pay my respect to First Nations colleagues who join me on this panel and today’s hearing today.

Without economic security, people with disability are blocked from social participation, blocked from employment opportunities and blocked from fully realising our rights. The Disability Support Pension causes us suffering and we are pleading with you to stop it.

In its current form, the DSP falls woefully short by any measure. It leaves us in varying degrees of poverty, exposes us to dangerous jobs and ‘mutual’ obligations, and inflicts further discrimination on people with disability. It humiliates us, treats us as one-dimensional and forces us to constantly perform disability in ways that satisfy prejudiced and narrow-minded ideas of what disability is.

These experiences show up repeatedly in stories from the more than 270 people who responded the survey we conducted for this inquiry.

Liz is an older woman who applied for the DSP and was rejected. She has been trying to survive on JobSeeker for more than 5 years. She told us:

My experience of going for the DSP has been that of fear, stress and humiliation. I feel the system they have put in place is so exhaustive and dehumanising that people, like me, give up defeated and still ill. I have wanted to reapply, but am scarred by the former experience. I feel l need help to do it and they make it so hard.

There is no need for things to be this way. We ask the committee to join us in imagining an income support system that is truly supportive. One that helps to make people with disability safe and enables us to live a fulfilling life.

The DSP can only be adequate when it does at least three things:

* provides guaranteed lifelong income to keep every person with disability out of poverty.
* act as a gateway to greater supports that allow us to self-determine how we live our lives to the greatest extent possible, and
* is not treated as an unemployment payment. It must be a well-designed payment that will provide us with what we need to find suitable paid work on our own terms.

There are straightforward changes we are calling on the government to make immediately that will improve the lives of people with disability, and you will find many more in our submission recommendations:

1. Lift the payment rate to the Henderson poverty line plus at least 25% to recognise our higher cost of living.
2. Abolish the program of support.
3. Suspend ‘mutual’ obligations for anyone on JobSeeker while they are applying for the DSP, and get rid of them for those who receive it,
4. End all discriminatory rules based on age and family situation, and
5. Stop the attacks on the NDIS we fought so hard for.

This government can reverse the trend of punitive changes that have pushed more and more people with disability to rely on unemployment payments.

We want to work in partnership with the government to design longer-term changes that will transform the DSP into a payment that provide us with the economic security we need to participate fully and equally in society.

Ultimately income support for people with disability should not mean we live on or near the poverty line. Our experience of disability can be lifelong and can be episodic in nature, as are many of our barriers to work.

Kaya, a DSP recipient from a rural area who is grateful the payment exists told us:

I do not believe that anyone on the DSP is just sitting around doing nothing. It takes all my money and time to care for myself and my children. I am doing the best I can. I am getting by but it would be nice to have enough to thrive not just survive.

Half of the people who stop getting the DSP have moved to the age pension. One quarter have died. Only 3% leave the DSP because they have a steady job.

The DSP should act as a wage replacement, recognising over the long-term our cost of living is 63% higher than those without disability, and that many of us will never have stable employment.

We should be able to apply once, and immediately access payments when we are not working without having to re-apply and re-perform our lifelong disability.

Rules about who can access the payment must be rewritten. They must not only consider functional impairment, but also the discrimination and lack of accommodations that restrict our work opportunities. The slim prospect of finding a suitable job is not a safety net.

Accessing the DSP can be summed up as trial by humiliation. Whether by meeting “disability performance indicators” to satisfy dehumanising impairment tables requirements or proving how “unemployable” we are through the program of support, the application process is traumatic for those who are able to complete it.

The DSP must be complemented by programs that meaningfully increase our chance of getting a job. High quality employment services must be available to every person with disability on a voluntary basis. The Disability Discrimination Act must be strengthened, regulatory bodies resourced to uphold it and employers supported to better accommodate us.

The government should enable the transition away from sheltered workshops, otherwise known as Australian Disability Enterprises, that can pay just a few dollars an hour. Instead, give us control over the type of work we do and let us design employment models that work for us.

DSP policy must be based on the needs of people with disability and not on the fallacy that the federal budget must be balanced on the backs of the least well-off people in society.

It must not continue the damaging fetishisation of waged labour and discriminate against those of us who are considered to be worth less than others in the job market.

Hundreds of people with disability and our advocates have contributed expertise to this inquiry. Our submission was informed by more than 270 people who shared their experiences and views with us. We have exposed beyond doubt what many already knew: the DSP is not adequate and falls far short of community expectations.

Disability is as complex and diverse as the society that disables us. The extent of problems with the design of the DSP and broader social supports means our submission, though long, is far from comprehensive. The people who participated in our survey have guided our response to this inquiry, and so should they yours.

We urge the committee to heed the recommendations of our fellow disabled people’s organisations, that we appear alongside in this panel today, as well as the First Peoples Disability Network and National Ethnic Disability Alliance, and Inclusion Australia whom you will hear from later today.

Today also marks the final time we will appear before a committee chaired by Senator Siewert. On behalf of people with disability who need access to adequate income support, we thank the Senator for her unparalleled work in parliament on our issues.

Advancing the rights of people with disability is not about ideology. Members of the community from across the political spectrum want the government to treat us with dignity and support us to live a full life. We are appealing to each of you, and your colleagues, to follow Senator Siewert’s example and fight as fiercely for us as she has.

The parliament should never have been comfortable with sentencing people to a life of poverty, creating a lower caste of people with disability because we are not seen to have the same economic value by employers. But it’s never too late to change for the better.

This country’s utterly inadequate income support system is killing and harming people with disability. You can choose to stop it.