



**PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY
AUSTRALIA**

**A voice
of our
own**

**Report from the Improving
Outcomes for People with
Disability in Disaster
Management Roundtable**

**5 MARCH
2025**

Copyright information

Report from the *Improving Outcomes for People with Disability in Disaster Management roundtable*

First published in 2025 by People with Disability Australia Ltd.

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Typeset in Arial 12 and 14 pt and VAG Rounded 26 pt

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Title: *Report from the Improving Outcomes for People with Disability in Disaster Management roundtable*

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Suggested citation:

Wallace, B., *Report from the Improving Outcomes for People with Disability in Disaster Management roundtable*, 5 March 2025, People with Disability Australia, Sydney.

About PWDA

People with Disability Australia (PWDA) is a national disability rights and advocacy organisation made up of, and led by, people with disability.

We have a vision of a socially just, accessible and inclusive community in which the contribution, potential and diversity of people with disability are not only recognised and respected but also celebrated.

PWDA was established in 1981, during the International Year of Disabled Persons.

We are a peak, non-profit, non-government organisation that represents the interests of people with all kinds of disability.

We also represent people with disability at the United Nations, particularly in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Our work is grounded in a human rights framework that recognises the CRPD and related mechanisms as fundamental tools for advancing the rights of people with disability.

PWDA is a member of Disabled People's Organisations Australia (DPO Australia), along with the First People's Disability Network, National Ethnic Disability Alliance and Women with Disabilities Australia.

DPOs collectively form a disability rights movement that places people with disability at the centre of decision-making in all aspects of our lives.

'Nothing About Us, Without Us' is the motto of Disabled Peoples' International.

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Introduction

PWDA undertook research and prepared a [Roadmap for Improving Outcomes for People with Disability in Disaster Management](#) which was published in October 2024. This resource and its recommendations call for:

- greater inclusion of people with disability in all aspects of disaster and emergency planning
- emergency management systems and communication that prioritise accessibility
- early evacuation processes, resources and accessible transport that meets the needs of people with disability
- resourcing to ensure emergency management systems are inclusive.

This report is an accompaniment to that roadmap resource, and they should be read together.

Following publication of the roadmap resource, PWDA organised a roundtable and invited representatives from across Australia to attend and provide their feedback. We wanted to:

- hear the lived experiences of others, and gather accounts to help in our ongoing work to improve accessibility and inclusion
- explain to our peers why we had developed the resource, and anything that was unclear
- identify anything we had missed
- to share the opportunity to apply for the next National Emergency Management Agency funding round to help address local issues
- offer help to our peer organisations.

Methodology

We invited 66 attendees from across Australia from disability representative organisations, or aligned organisations representing people who are older and may or may not consider themselves disabled. 22 people attended the meeting which was scheduled on Wednesday 5 March from 1-3pm Australian Eastern Standard Time.

The meeting was conducted using the Zoom online meeting platform, which is generally preferred for its accessibility. Two Auslan interpreters attended to provide interpreting services, and we explained to participants how to use the closed captions function.

We spoke to a set of PowerPoint slides and encouraged attendees to interrupt if they had questions or comments, or to use the chat function. These slides are extracted at Appendix A and were shared with participants.

The roundtable was co-facilitated by PWDA Senior Policy Officer Bastien Wallace and PWDA Board Director Stuart Mawbey. In addition to his professional experience and a lived experience of disability, Stuart served in the State Emergency Service (SES) in NSW for 25 years.

As well as researching and preparing the roadmap resource and representing PWDA in meetings related to disaster and emergency preparedness, Bastien has 18 years' experience as an active Surf Life Saver. In addition to coastal service Surf Life Saving is now asked to 'back-fill' in emergency situations. Both facilitators shared their lived experience with attendees.

The meeting was recorded and a transcription prepared from it. The contents of the meeting chat were also copied for reference, although it was regularly referred to and comments shared as part of facilitation. Relevant comments from participants have been extracted and de-identified for inclusion in this report. Where the person commenting changes, the colour of the extracted quote changes. They have been organized around key themes of: warnings, responder capacity, person centred emergency preparedness, transport, councils, communication, trust in emergency logistics, and ways forward.

What we heard

Warnings

The issue of warnings being insufficient or coming too late was raised.

“I don't think the warnings are sufficient. And I don't think they sufficiently reach everybody. [Emergencies] do things like smash up the telephone systems and the internet and the communication systems and things like that so we've got to think ahead.”

“But again, those warning systems are coming in incredibly late [for indigenous people with disability]... So Clarence [river] is due to flood. We have Clarence, which is a privatised jail there. You know, again, there is no forethought from the ministers... about what disaster management or preparedness plays...”

Responder Capacity

The lack of capacity within the current system, and volunteers and staff becoming overwhelmed was raised as an issue.

“But I also like to emphasize that when we have big disasters like floods or cyclones, and bushfires. They become overwhelming and there just aren't enough...volunteers firefighters SES to... help make the situation better. And we run out of people. Sometimes that is a very scary place to be, but... You know, it's just that it's the nature of these huge disasters.”

Person Centred Emergency Preparedness (PCEP)

The issue of Person Centred Emergency Preparedness (PCEP) and individual PCEP plans was discussed. Some had heard of them, but for others they were not well known, not known at all, or there were other barriers to engaging with the PCEP process. Concerns were raised that even with a plan, a person may not be able to execute it on their own with the resources available to them in an emergency.

“I don't know whether it's been used by our members and I don't know whether they've heard of it...I'm new into the role and I haven't had a chance to research that with our members. So it's quite possibly some of them are aware of it and some of them aren't. And that may just depend on where they are. How often disaster management becomes an issue for them I'm assuming that some people in some parts of the country where that's more common that they might be aware of it.”

“Yes, it [PCEP] is something that I have heard of, but I'm thinking about how well-known person-centred emergency preparedness is among people with an intellectual disability and families. And my answer is I don't know. However, I would say I would guess that it is not well known because what we know certainly from the pandemic and many emergency and like localized disasters that have happened in recent years is that there has been such a lack of accessible information and communications for people with an intellectual disability.

We also know that many people with intellectual disability (ID) reside in what we sometimes call closed settings or group homes where that access to information is further kind of hindered...because many SIL providers, for example, are currently unregistered and that, you know, the regulatory environment is of course changing at the moment. But there has been such a lack of visibility about where actually people with an intellectual disability are and how to reach them from a government perspective and so how to enable those accessible communications and timely communications, particularly I'm thinking about the vaccine rollout where we really saw that. So yeah, I would say that this is not yet a well-known

concept among people with ID because of those barriers that exist. So certainly I think that's part of our shared advocacy to improve the accessibility and timeliness.”

“...I have heard of person-centred emergency preparedness or planning in the context of being a member of the City of Sydney's Inclusion Disability Advisory Panel and so in the context of the work that the city has been doing around Emergency preparedness that is one of the things that they are looking at in how to better implement for people within the environs of the City of Sydney person-centred emergency preparedness but I would have to say that I cannot say what the level of knowledge is throughout Australian Federation of Disability Organisations...”

“I would say it's not well known amongst our client group that this exists and it's a can be a self-assessment tool. The challenge is also people's digital literacy as well amongst our group of people. And probably the support that we can provide people to access navigate, assess themselves as an organisation. I mean. Obviously moving to funding associated with the NDIS, where does that sit? You know, can we provide that under their package? I mean, we do have access to donor funds, which is great. But yeah, how do we support those people who have difficulty on accessing it from a self-assessment perspective? You know, I think we've had conversations in the past about whether or not ... this [is] something that can be added on to everyone's NDIS plans um you know for you know my aged care packages to provide some funding for agencies to help with their preparedness but um Yeah, at the moment, not well rolled out across our organisation.”

“...For our mob or our families, it looks quite different again. So although, you know, professionals may have heard of the planning, the accessibility for our mob or the likelihood of this even being leaned into...as a...safety measure...is extremely unlikely...I've sat on the state emergency management committee there is a very, very high level of disconnect in particular when it comes to Aboriginal people living with a disability and of course then we have the infrastructural issue.

“I have not heard of this person-centred emergency preparedness thing. And when I just did a quick Google apparently it's to do with a booklet that you work through. As an individual to ascertain what your needs will be in case of an emergency. So it seems to me that it's very much a devolution of responsibility right down to the individual.

Our concern is if we fill in the resource, let's say an older woman. Where are the places where she can hook in to let them know that I live here, I have a wheelchair, I live in a wheelchair...And if something happens, you need to come and get me out quickly. And I have a whole list of medication. If you're going to repatriate me to an emergency situation.

You know, is that going to be taken care of? You know, I cannot sleep on a bed that is like two inches off the floor because I can't get up and off the bed. I mean, it's all of these things that worry me that if you fill in a booklet.

You know what you can do and you can't do. But will the authorities who are responsible for so many of the other things involved in the national disaster...what they do is they just send out these booklets and say, all right, you just fill these in and you'll be ready for a disaster. So it sounds...[like a] cop out to me.”

Transport

The issue of the lack of accessible transport was raised, at the level of a lack of wheelchair accessible transport in communities for ordinary use, let alone evacuations. In addition, the vehicles emergency services staff and volunteers use during evacuations may be inaccessible.

“One of the things that I know is obvious for us, and I'll give a direct example, but the Shoal Haven, for example, you know, we've got over 27,000 people in just that one LGA and I recently met with the transport I met with Joe Halen [previous Transport Minister] I also met with the point-to-point commissioner and one of the very obvious barriers I think that we've seen and that we likely all are aware of is that any accessible transport by way of taxi has declined so much so, right? So the Shoal Haven alone has one disability taxi that is very close to needing to

withdrawn from the market. So I think that's there's going to be a really big barriers. So for those who don't actually have their own transport and rely on those public measures, that's going to be a key issue right now."

"As a practical matter. The RFA is certainly the RFS in this community does not have any facilities to be able to transport a person who cannot go up several steps into a fire appliance or even four-wheel drive. So, you know, or God forbid the tray of a Ute but um you know so there are real practical resource limitations of what local community responses can offer in a small regional or rural community.

Councils

There is a need for councils to play a more substantial and consistent role in emergencies, especially considering the rising rates of poverty and homelessness.

"I've already walked down this road through the Coalition of Peaks and actually put a proposal to our ministers that all councils actually play a part in this...We have seen in particular with the rising rates of poverty and homelessness, displacement, disadvantage to families right across the board. I think the council certainly has and could play a significant role here in that early warning system [but] every single council has independent autonomy to decide whether they actually want to buy in or not...Even if there is an inclusionary piece in a DIAP or a reconciliation action plan...the willingness to actually identify with the fact that they have a critical role to play is just non-existent.

We have seen success is obviously in those more proactive councils, perhaps, you know, the bigger councils like Eden. Blacktown, but usually that's based on one person pushing and driving that agenda...I have raised these issues after the bushfires... mobs like Cabbage Tree Island who've been displaced now for the better part of three years and, you know, yet we still cannot even get clarity [about what is happening] from a LAC [Local Area Council] or the MPs based in those regions."

Communication

Communication accessibility was a big theme and it included:

- people with intellectual disability needing Easy Read,
- 1. the lack of knowledge of where people with intellectual disability are to ensure they receive accessible communication and barriers to sharing this information due to privacy concerns, and
- the issue that some culturally and linguistically (CALD) groups may not identify with terms like disability, so information targeting people with disability may not reach them.

“I think I was just chatting to one of my colleagues...and we were talking about how for people with intellectual disability ... accessibility of information is really important having easy read information is really important and having it easy to find.... there's no point in developing easy read resources if you have to wade through a million steps on a website to find them.

We were also thinking localized easy read info is really important...Information up in the mountains for disaster management is going to be different most of the time to information just down the hill in Hawkesbury, where they are battling a lot more floods you know we're fires they're floods.

Same federal electorate. But different issues. Also, we were talking about the time pressures involved with getting information out into communities, they don't always allow for that long-term development of easy read information. So having some kind of glossary, an easy read glossary that can be easily accessed by people with intellectual disability and their support network. And also maybe some templates for easy read documents So that when emergency information comes out or anything related to that? That people can kind of plug it in to those templates and it won't take the weeks translations can take.

[There's also] that problem of actually knowing where the people with intellectual disability are and how to get the information to them, I think that's a massive thing. ...Up in the mountains here we've got... you know it's quite difficult sometimes to get around you know we have trains, but they come once an hour or you know we've got buses, but they come once every two hours. So having some kind of local network So we've got a bit of a phone tree of people getting to people with intellectual disability and helping making sure that they've got that emergency information is really important."

"I live in a small rural village in regional New South Wales and I am the president of our community association and we have as an association have been trying to put in place some community-based responses for vulnerable people, including people with disability but also older Australians and others in our community in the event of an emergency response.

Some of the practical barriers that we come across is that there is either a lack of understanding or buck-passing if you wanted to look at it more cynically, between the local authority and the RFS. So that in...trying to implement a community-based response to an emergency and to assist vulnerable people who so an older Australians or a person with disability who might be living alone.

We get told there are significant privacy concerns with that information being passed to the community association, which I would have thought would be easily overcome by consent by the person involved when they say to the RFS or to the Minister Shire Council that they'd be happy to participate if someone's going to come and get them out of their home in the event that a bushfire is on their back doorstep. But that is the bureaucratic response that is received to community-based responses.

"...It is quite true. I've come across that excuse of privacy...It's like coming up against a brick wall. I think it would only require consent from disabled people if they consent to ... being known to emergency services that they could be better helped If they need it. But I know that in New South

Wales... I've checked it on the internet that... Fire and Rescue New South Wales have some sort of legislative requirement that group homes, [to] notify Fire and Rescue New South Wales where they are and who lives there, or how many people live there. [but that's not the same for other services] ... there's no information on ...[where] disabled people who would need extra help would live. Well, I was told, oh, it's privacy...

...Now, with the training of emergency service volunteers Diversity training is happening, but it's not specific enough about disability. So things are on the move and there is a top-down approach to changing things, but it's not happening very fast. I'm pretty passionate about disability be very much at the forefront of people's minds when it comes to undertaking emergency training.”

“In terms of culturally and linguistically diverse groups, I guess I just also wanted to share a little bit about how some cultures and communities will not necessarily have language for disability. So that might not be a word in their own culture or in their own language. It doesn't translate directly. There might also be stigma associated with language about disability.

I just wanted to highlight that the importance of making sure that explanatory documents are in language and also considered from a cultural perspective so that they can be received, particularly if we're talking about planning and people don't identify as being disabled. So The resource then might not reach them and the people that you need to reach [if it's not written in] language that their family and community use. It's important to reach people as community leaders as well...it's not just about going to try to identify necessarily the families or the individuals.”

Trust in emergency logistics

Recurring themes of the discussion were the inadequacy of emergency processes, facilities and support for people with disability, and a lack of trust best captured in the quote "...you know no one's coming back to get you. Because it's [in] a too hard basket..".

"...One, [is] how are you evacuated ...going to be accessible for you if you use a mobility device, if they do manage to do that?

Somewhere that is accessible, that has the things that you need there. Basic things and we all know this you know oh do we have accessible bathrooms do we have access to that premises? And plus, if you're a person that requires on support, and you get somewhere and there was nobody there that can provide you with that support in relation to whether it be showering or feeding or, you know, your everyday life then are you wanting to go there anyway? Because what happens to you when you get there?

...I'd be one of those people that would think, well. Am I better off staying with where I am because I've got what I need here and I know what I can do here? Yeah, if I go somewhere, what's going to happen to me when I get there? Am I going to be able to get there? Is it going to be safe for me? You know...they're all real issues.

...When we talk about any of these types of disasters if you've flown an airplane... when you have a disability, and they talk to you about their disaster management plan if something happens to the plane. You're left till last.. You obviously have to stay where you are, can't you move. And you know no one's coming back to get you. Because it's [in] a too hard basket.

...You kind of think when it comes to disasters, providing reasonable evacuation systems and priorities for people with disabilities, again it feels like it's in that too hard basket So we'll get to it later because we'll get the people out that we can. And then if we can, we'll figure out a way to assist you."

“I think there are many barriers. If we are going to look at a natural disaster, there is the ‘pre’, there is the ‘during time’ and then there is the ‘after time’, and there are enormous barriers in all of these three different phases. People don’t look at it as an entirety, and there is no you know coordination there is no understanding that the population is more than a white male who is 45, who is fit, and who is able to swan through a natural disaster compared to a woman who is 80 and confined to her house. So, you know, I completely feel for and understand, you know, the urgency to do something about this.

I think one thing we can put in the mix is for the barrier is violence. The perpetration of violence on a person with disability or an older woman, a fair whack of them live in that situation and they have even less access to safe evacuation or an understanding or any agency of the role that they can play. I wish that, you know, in addition to the person-centred emergency, whatever it is that they’re calling it, that we also have a government response to a disaster which is inclusive. And have a booklet for them to fill out. And not just individuals.”

“I guess what we’re hearing a lot from our clients. I mean, our clients face many barriers just accessing the community day to day. As you probably know, you know, things like rideshare refusals, you know, access to cafes and restaurants, so we’ve been hearing a lot about reporting fatigue, advocacy fatigue, and people are almost stopping reporting and asking for support because they don’t see action.

With things like the NDIS, which has been great ...in a lot of ways it’s put more of a workload on the person to you know ask for processes that again, going through another planning process where you’re asking for more, [it] is overwhelming.

Just the thought of having to go through another process where you’re asking for something is exhausting and maybe not everybody’s priority when they’re thinking about the chance of an emergency, it might be low. So they’re going to spend their time...reporting their refusals to try and make change there or you know trying to make their way into the you know

onto the bus or you know into their local services. I think it wouldn't be on the high priority list because of the other things that our clients are trying to advocate for day to day. And I think because of the lack of trust that a lot of our clients have in places like government to make change after a rideshare refusal is reported. They're not seeing enforcement happening, or change happening within the system, so that's just something to consider.”

“...Just to share a bit as well from a discussion I had with one of my colleagues when we were talking about this particular roundtable, they were saying it's pretty terrifying, even if they were to have plans in place and things like that. If you're a person who needs assistance to get out of bed and into a wheelchair and the carer isn't there with you at that time, you might not have 24 hour care. Then you might not have people in your home who are able to assist you with that. And another example they cited was being in a wheelchair but not being able to actually open the door to get out of the property, and what that might entail.

[The person] might not need significant amounts of support, but just getting the door open in order to get out will be the barrier of itself. I guess I'm not sharing with you anything you don't know, but those are the kinds of things that are popping up and also the remote community issues that there just aren't services or supports for people.

“...The point [made] about evacuation centres being open a lot earlier- That's absolutely critical because if we tell people with disability they are to evacuate early. Frequently. There's no plan to open the centres at the point where people with disability would evacuate according to their plan. So that really needs to be thought about and planned for...”

“...I think the risk as so many others in the room have highlighted is that ...it's one thing to plan, but if you know your plan really means that you're going to end up alone, without any support, then that's pretty terrifying. As a whole so just looking at some of those broader systems issues that can help support people not only with the planning but what the impact will be should there be a disaster.”

Ways forward

To keep improving disaster and emergency management processes, recommendations were made for:

- specific research to be conducted and advice given about what should be provided in emergency evacuation centers,
- the sharing of positive stories of people with disabilities in emergencies, and
- greater involvement of people with disability in emergency services and planning.

“...what about money for your organization to do some research around what an evacuation centre generally looks like, and what are the experiences of people using the evacuation centre is? And it could be a broader piece of research looking at the lifespan approach, you know, from babies through to Nonas and Tatas, and people with disability, and then come up with what should the most basic evacuation centre look like you know it should maybe have three adjustable beds you know it could it should have a little crib et cetera...”

“...it's important to highlight and share in media positive experiences of emergency management disasters from people with disability...[It's] about building that trust and helping members and people who might be quite stressed about the idea of emergency and planning. To help them build confidence so that the idea of having a plan is a lot less stressful. I think that's really important...”

“...the importance of involving people with disability as employees and volunteers in all of these agencies to get that lived experience and to help provide... fundamental policy, training and action so that all of those services can do a better job.

Conclusion

When we prepared and published the [Roadmap for Improving Outcomes for People with Disability in Disaster Management](#) PWDA knew that many of our peer disability representative organisations (DROs) were under huge time pressures, so reading all of this and contextualising it for their work would be challenging. The roundtable was important to explain the resource, to check whether we had missed anything, and to help us understand where DROs were up to with respect to emergency planning.

The insights, reflections, explanations of problems and barriers, and recommendations for change enhance the work of the roadmap. They also provide an opportunity for National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), combat agencies, Federal, State and Local Governments to reflect on what people with disability and their representatives are experiencing and need, to make disaster and emergency management accessible for the 1 in 5 Australians with a disability.

Appendices

Appendix A

[PWDA Emergency Management Roundtable slide deck.](#)



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