

Vision Australia submission

Royal Commission into violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability

Submission to: Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Emergency Planning and Response Issues Paper

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# Introduction

Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Royal Commission’s review into violence, neglect, abuse or exploitation of people with disability: Emergency Planning and Response issues paper.

Vision Australia provides services to more than 26,000 people who are blind or have low vision every year. We work in partnership with Australians who are blind or have low vision to help them achieve the possibilities they choose in life.

2020 has seen unprecedented events unfold in Australia, and around the world, with both the Black Summer bushfire crises and the global COVID-19 pandemic. These crises have presented extremely difficult challenges for the Australian Government and the entire Australian community.

During both these unparalleled emergencies the blind and low vision community have experienced a unique set of challenges.

Australia has signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and, as such, is bound to promote, respect and uphold the rights it asserts. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms people with disability have the right to life on an equal basis with others (Article 10), and governments have a duty to ensure people with disability are safe and protected in situations of risk (Article 11).

To inform our response to the Emergency Planning and Response issues paper and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced by the blind and low vision community throughout 2020, we conducted a survey.

We asked for feedback on the Federal Government’s response to both COVID-19 and the Black Summer bushfires and sought their thoughts on what could be done better. The survey was sent to Vision Australia clients across the country using a variety of communication channels.

We received 84 responses to the survey.

The responses detailed how the blind and low vision community have been directly impacted by the emergency events of 2020. We were pleased to receive this level of response given the many competing challenges and stresses people are currently dealing with. Both the quantity and quality of the responses painted a very clear picture of just how significantly the blind and low vision community has been affected by the recent emergencies.

Common themes emerged involving areas of particular difficulty for the blind and low vision community. These included:

* issues around feelings of increased isolation and loneliness;
* difficulty accessing information;
* inability to access COVID-19 testing; and
* extreme difficulty accessing groceries, medications and other essential supplies.

This feedback will be discussed in depth throughout this submission.

Both the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic present an opportunity to discuss inclusive emergency planning for people with disabilities. It is essential that we take this opportunity.

Once we are in the midst of an emergency, it is simply too late to address and respond to the needs of people who have a disability. As put by one of our clients,

*“If we do not fundamentally re-configure the national conversation about the needs of people with disability, then the impact of the next emergency will be even more dehumanising then the present one.”*

## What needs to be done by governments to increase the safety and wellbeing of people with disability during an emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Black Summer bushfires?

People who are blind or have low vision face unique challenges during emergency situations.

We know people who are blind or have low vision are already at increased risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation[[1]](#footnote-1), which has only been heighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, people who are blind or have low vision often experience challenges in accessing information. This is due to the conventional ways in which information is shared, which often is inaccessible. Unfortunately, we know this was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic and to some extent, the Black Summer bushfires.

During COVID-19 accessing essential items at supermarkets and certain medical supplies has been particularly challenging for the blind and low vision community.

Online shopping, one of the main ways people who are blind or have low vision access groceries and other supplies, was briefly paused by the major supermarkets. There was no other way for blind and low vision people to get their groceries without going into the store.

Even though a dedicated shopping hour in the morning for the elderly and people with disability was established, this was of little help to people who are blind or have low vision as it proved near impossible to access a support person at 7am.

Due to social distancing requirements, staff at supermarkets were not always willing to assist blind and low vision shoppers to navigate around the store and locate the items they need. We had reports from clients who said they were not able to get the supplies they needed for over two weeks causing them extreme distress.

What is clear is that better forward and inclusive planning for the needs of people with disability during emergency situations needs to take place. From one of our clients:

*“It was scary and insulting to find that they didn’t do anything about planning for people with disability during the shutdown and only started planning for us as things started to reopen.”*

We have heard directly from our clients that the difficulties they experienced in not being able to access the bare essentials, or information regarding COVID-19, caused them extreme distress and anxiety and had a detrimental impact on their general wellbeing.

## An inclusive, person centred approach to emergency planning based on the needs of people with disability needs to take place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people with disability are protected when future emergency situations occur. What supports are required to ensure people with disability are not at risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation during an emergency?

During the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic, people with disability, including the blind and low vision community, struggled to access their usual supports.

We heard from many clients who said they were unable to access support workers when restrictions were first put in place across the country. This presented a significant challenge for all people with disabilities, including those who are blind or have low vision, as they often rely on these supports to live the life they choose.

It is critical there be a focus on ensuring people are still able to access the supports they need during emergency situations including support workers to assist with daily tasks such as grocery shopping and accessing essential medications.

Organisations that supply support workers had great difficulty in accessing PPE during the initial phase of COVID-19, impacting people getting access to support workers. It was only after significant disability sector lobbying to the Commonwealth Government improved access occurred.

For people who are blind or have low vision and live alone, once online delivery was suspended, accessing basic essential items was impossible without the assistance of a support worker, causing immense stress, anxiety and fear, which could have been avoided.

It is essential appropriate supports and support workers are available when future emergencies occur, to ensure people who are blind or have low vision are able to access groceries, medications and other essential items.

## What is the experience of people with disability in getting assistance and information in an emergency? How does a lack of assistance and information expose people with disability to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation?

### Accessibility of information

Online accessibility is essential in making the internet usable and information available to everyone.

For users who are blind or have low vision, websites are commonly accessed using a screen reader or technology such as Zoomtext. Programs like Zoomtext magnify screen content for people with low vision, while screen readers like JAWS read out the elements of a website as words. Accessible websites will also have text descriptions for any important images on the page, so they can be narrated by a screen reader.

COVID-19

Although significant progress has been made in recent years for the blind and low vision community, much of the way information is shared is still relatively inaccessible.

As is even highlighted in the issues paper, information and news broadcasts provided during emergencies can often be inaccessible to people with disability. Unfortunately, although there may have been the best intentions, a large portion of information being released by Government regarding COVID-19 has been inaccessible. A quote from a survey respondent highlights just how distressing this can be:

*“Preventable accessibility barriers are inconvenient and humiliating at the best of times, but during times of emergency they can become – quite literally – soul destroying.”*

A vast amount of information regarding COVID-19 in relation to hand hygiene, social distancing practices, various movement restrictions/lockdowns and the state of the pandemic in Australia was released in the form of graphs, charts and pictures/graphics without descriptions. For people who are blind or have low vision, all of these formats are essentially impossible to access. Our client survey produced the following results regarding access of information:

* Over 26 percent of respondents said they couldn’t access information regarding travel, shopping and other restrictions.
* Over 20 percent of respondents said they couldn’t access information regarding the Federal and State Government’s response to COVID-19.
* Over 30 percent of respondents said they could not access information regarding how to get tested in the event of experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.
* Over 36 percent of respondents said they could not access information on how to access emergency services during COVID-19.
* Over half of respondents said they did not know about the Government’s dedicated COVID-19 hotline.

What is clear, is the blind and low vision community have been struggling to access essential information regarding COVID-19, including over half of respondents not even knowing about the Government’s dedicated COVID-19 hotline.

Difficulties in accessing information is even more heightened for the blind and low vision community, as it is an ageing cohort. This generates even greater barriers, for an already high-risk group, including accessing information online or on smartphones, which simply isn’t an option for many of our older clients.

*“For those who can easily access everything online, information is very much readily available. It is not so readily available for those who do not have these skills or a computer. More thought needs to be given to this group of people.”*

The following quotes are taken directly from survey respondents regarding access to information generally during COVID-19 and provide a snapshot into how they felt and the barriers they confronted:

* *“We needed clear, simple information widely available in all mediums including large print and audio messaging.”*
* *“There is still a lack of information. Most of the information around social distancing, hygiene, and any other messaging has been done through pictures which are inaccessible. Increasing information in other formats would be useful, and making sure it is placed in easy to find locations.”*
* *“The Government needs to improve the accessibility of their websites and presentations so they are easier to access with screen readers.”*
* *“So much information coming out of the national cabinet has been posted in inaccessible formats. One example is the absurdly complex flow charts that have been posted as image files on social media. The Governments COVID-19 public awareness campaign told me to practice hand and respiratory hygiene without providing verbal information on how to do that. I can only assume the information was provided in visuals, it is very frustrating.”*

COVIDSafe App

When first released, the COVIDSafe app was not fully compliant with Apple’s accessibility guidelines.

We heard from many clients who experienced accessibility issues with the app. Over 40 percent of our survey respondents indicated they did not download the COVIDSafe app, with many commenting they heard the app was inaccessible for people who are blind or have low vision.

While the app did not comply with the Apple accessibility guidelines, experienced iPhone users who are blind or have low vision were generally able to download and install it, but less experienced users were unable to do so.

We believe a significant number of these less experienced users are in older age groups, arguably the most in need of the potential benefits of the app. Whilst the accessibility of the app was initially essentially usable, particularly for confident and experienced assistive technology users, less experienced smart phone users found it difficult and frustrating to install.

As an organisation, Vision Australia encouraged all our community and staff to download and use the app. We made representations to the Federal Government regarding the accessibility issues with the app and subsequently responded by completing an access audit of the appp.

Pleasingly, the app has now been updated with a variety of new features that has made it more accessible.

While we understand the extremely tight time constraints in releasing the app, it would have been preferable to ensure the app was entirely accessible from the outset.

This again highlights the importance of an inclusive and person centred approach to emergency planning for the needs of people with disabilities.

Black Summer bushfires

We received feedback from clients around accessibility issues for information relating to the Black Summer bushfires. One third of survey respondents said they were not able to access critical information they needed during the emergency especially in relation to the interactive maps of were the fires where and what the current emergency warning level was. *“Expecting people with low vision to determine where a fire is by looking at a map on their phone is totally unrealistic.”*

This leaves people who are blind or low vision who lived in fire affected areas extremely vulnerable.

Many of our survey respondents said they would have been greatly assisted by more verbal information during the Black Summer bushfires. We understand visual and pictorial methods of distributing information are extremely useful and we are not suggesting they be abandoned. Rather that they must, in all cases, be supplemented by alternatives accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.

### Access to COVID-19 testing

Another concerning trend that emerged from our client feedback was the inability for people who are blind or have low vision, who were experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, to get tested for the virus.

This has been a very real problem particularly for those who live alone.

People who are blind or have low vision are unable to drive themselves to testing centres and don’t want to burden or put at risk family or friends who live in separate residences.

*“For those of us who live alone, accessing testing without exposing friends or family was impossible.”*

People who are blind or have low vision often rely on taxis and public transport as their main way to get around, however, with suspected COVID-19, catching a taxi or public transport to a testing centre was not an option, nor was asking a support person to drive you.

We had several reports of clients in this situation who ended up calling an ambulance only to be told they were not sick enough to be taken via ambulance.

*“I had travelled overseas and on return was suspected of COVID-19 and told to go to the hospital for testing. I was advised by my doctor to ring an ambulance, however, was treated as if I was wasting the ambulance services time.”*

 *“I had a telehealth appointment with my GP and was told I needed to get tested for COVID-19. I was told my nearest clinic was a drive through clinic however I cannot drive because of my vision. Government advice is that you do not take rideshare taxis or public transport if you’re suspected of having COVID-19. I didn’t want to expose my friends or family who don’t live with me by making them drive me to a testing centre.”*

To remedy this issue, home testing, similar to the door to door testing currently occurring in Victoria, should be made available to people with disability who are unable to independently travel, without exposing others, to a testing centre.

## Will an emergency hotline service help people with disability keep safe and informed during an emergency? What other communication measures might be helpful?

As has been discussed, people who are blind or have low vision have struggled accessing all the information they have needed during the pandemic, with many not even being aware of the Government’s COVID-19 hotline.

We polled our survey respondents on using an emergency hotline service specially set up for people with disability, with over 90 percent saying they would. We believe a dedicated hotline service for people with disability during emergency situations would help to remedy some of the issues around accessing information and advice from the Government experienced by our community. Due to the issues around many people who are blind or have low vision not knowing about the general COVID-19 hotline, it would be essential that the advertising and promotion of this hotline be specifically targeted to the audience.

It would also provide an avenue for people with disability to voice concerns over unique challenges they might be facing during a time of crisis.

Vision Australia responded to this unmet need by developing a dedicated COVID-19 hotline for our clients that provided them with a range of COVID-19 specific information and links to Vision Australia supports, in addition to making referrals to other community agencies, if required.

## How can people with disability be included in emergency planning and responses to ensure strategies that reduce risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation?

Emergency situations, such as those 2020 has brought, often strike suddenly and without warning, forcing people to quickly leave or be confined to their home, or be cut off from necessary goods and support services unexpectedly.

For people with disabilities, this presents a very real and unique challenge.

As we have seen with COVID-19, the situation has become very serious in Australia, very quickly, highlighting gaps around emergency planning for people with disability.

From the outset of the pandemic, a voice for people with disability was missing

It was many weeks after initial restrictions were put in place that the unique needs of people with a disability were considered.

To avoid situations like this in the future and reduce the vulnerabilities and challenges of people with disabilities during emergency situations, it is crucial that these people, as well as the organisations that represent them, are involved in emergency planning from the outset.

The Australian Banking Association (ABA) provides an example of proactively planning for the needs of people who are blind or have low vision. Due to the concern around utilising sighted guide techniques during COVID-19, the ABA approached Vision Australia in the early stages of the pandemic seeking advice on the most appropriate forms of assistance they could provide to people who are blind or have low vision.

This resulted in the distribution of guidance to ABA members (including major banks) that provided clarity and consistency for banks and customers alike around sighted guide. This demonstrates the positive impact proactive planning can have.

An inclusive approach to emergency preparedness must include members of the disability community in all aspects of emergency management. This needs to occur by way of a multi-pronged person-centred approach.

National Response Group

Proactive planning for the needs of people with disability in emergency situations needs to be a national approach.

Vision Australia recommends a National Response Group is established.

It is critical people with disability be included in the response group as well as members of the peak bodies that represent them in order to develop best practice policy and procedure.

No one knows more about the needs of people with disabilities in emergency situations, than the people themselves. Any type of planning without their input would be planning for failure.

A centralised response group would allow for a streamlined point of contact for both people with disabilities, and the organisations which represent them, to voice and represent the needs of people with disabilities during emergencies, and provide feedback and advice on emergency planning.

Disability register

A comment we received from many of our clients is they see great value in a disability register being established that can be used to check on them during a crisis.

Vision Australia supports this idea, whether it be a dedicated register or better use of NDIS and Aged Care lists to communicate and check on people with a disability during emergency situations.

This would also provide an avenue for people with disability to be able to voice their concerns and highlight key challenges they might be facing, which could in turn be fed back to the National Response Group.

Disability Consultative Groups – emergency services

Vision Australia supports the idea of each emergency service having a comprehensive Disability Action Plan that includes the service having in place an active Disability Consultative Group.

This would not only help them when responding to the needs to people with disabilities during emergencies, but also aid in a proactive forward planning process.

## How effective have initiatives by businesses been in supporting people with disability through the pandemic, such as dedicated supermarket shopping hours or home delivery services? What else can be done?

People who are blind or have low vision often significantly rely on online delivery services both during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also in normal life.

During the initial stages of the pandemic, it became increasingly clear major Australian supermarkets were under increasing stress and pressure due to panic buying.

When Coles and Woolworths suddenly halted online delivery services, it left many people who are blind or have low vision with limited access to groceries and essential supplies.

Over 40 percent of survey respondents reported experiencing difficulty in accessing groceries, medication and other essential supplies. This was experienced for a variety of reasons, such as the temporary halt in online delivery, followed by limited access to online delivery and difficulty in making use of the dedicated shopping hour.

Of major concern was the six week delay in addressing issues being experienced by people with disability in accessing the goods they needed.

Had there been a more coordinated and inclusive approach this could have been avoided.

Vision Australia clients reported that even once online delivery was up and running again, they struggled with lengthy delays receiving orders.

When orders did arrive, often only part of the order was delivered.

Although this was an issue experienced by the entire Australian community, it poses more of a problem for people who are blind or low vision as physically visiting the shops without a support person was near impossible due to social distancing requirements, and with supermarket staff not able to assist navigating the shop by sighted guide.

 *“My normal way to shop is online. This was stopped and I needed to use other supports such as support workers and neighbours to access needed supplies of food. Support workers were more difficult to obtain during the initial COVID period.”*

*“Until Woolworths started deliveries, we just ate what we had, we also have a disabled son. It caused us anxiety that we might run out of supplies.”*

Further, as mentioned above, while the dedicated hour shopping window for the elderly or people with disability was an excellent initiative for some cohorts, it wasn’t of great help to our community, especially those who live alone.

Getting access to a support worker to assist someone at 7am was near impossible and attending alone was not an option due to not being able to access assistance from supermarket staff.

Some clients also highlighted that Woolworths made a change to its iOS grocery shopping app during the pandemic, an effect of which made it impossible to enter credit card payment information using VoiceOver, which is the text to speech software used on Apple iOS devices.

For someone who is blind, if they did not have access to a computer and relied on doing online shopping solely on their phone, this would have posed a significant challenge.

When online delivery was abruptly halted, the major supermarket chains had no way of contacting or making priority delivery available for vulnerable customers, this was only something considered weeks later.

By the time Coles and Woolworths had set up an online registration system for vulnerable customers, it had been over three weeks of no online delivery. This period of time is too long for people to not be able to access basic items. Further, we had many reports of people struggling to register with the supermarkets as vulnerable, thus unable to make use of the priority service.

Vision Australia recommends that major Australian supermarkets be required to develop emergency response plans for addressing the needs of vulnerable customers.

This could include linking in to the Disability Register we recommended above to be able to easily access priority delivery in emergency situations.

## How can people with disability, including those in closed and segregated settings, be supported to maintain social and community connections during emergencies?

As already mentioned, people who are blind or have low vision are already at an increased risk of loneliness and social isolation, heightened by the necessary restrictions brought about by COVID-19.

In response to this, at the beginning of the pandemic, Vision Australia launched a number of initiatives to help support them during the pandemic.

**‘Check and Chat’ webinars**

A series of free, twice weekly webinars covered a wide range of different topics such as health and wellness, tips for online shopping and keeping up to date with news. They have been a critical social outlet for much of our community.

**Telehealth**

Vision Australia was well placed to quickly implement tele-service delivery using mainstream video conferencing technologies in order for people who are blind or have low vision to maintain access to important services, particularly focusing on services that enhance safety and wellbeing during the pandemic.

**Dedicated hotline**

A dedicated COVID-19 support line was set up, designed to help blind and low vision people find and access information as well as trouble shoot COVID-19 related issues.

**Emergency Response Service**

An emergency response service was set up to address any needs of our clients, such as the inability to access medication when we could see that other community supports were not in place to assist

**Welfare checks**

Vision Australia identified clients at greater risk and contacted them by telephone to conduct welfare checks and to activate emergency services in response.

The majority of these activities were unfunded with governments relying on NFP organisations to identify and coordinate such vital activities.

All of these initiatives were established with our community in mind, knowing they would face unique challenges during the pandemic, as well and increased loneliness and social isolation.

Clearly the not-for-profit sector play a key role in delivering support services to the disability community to ensure they are able to maintain social and community connections. With a more proactive planned approach, government funding could be more readily available to support these services at short notice. This would ensure not-for-profits are not overly financially impacted and are actually able to provide these services.

## About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia’s most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include:

* Registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment;
* Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support;
* Seeing Eye Dogs;
* National library services, early childhood and education services and Feelix Library for 0-7 year olds;
* Employment services;
* Production of alternate formats;
* Vision Australia Radio network including a national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped;
* NSW Spectacles Program; and
* Government advocacy and engagement.

We work collaboratively with governments, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and including fully exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation.

Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision as well as they support they require to fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, comprising of people with lived experience who are representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia, to strengthen the voice of the blind community.

1. Holloway, E., 2016. *Improving Depressive Symptoms In Adults With Vision Impairment: A Trial Of Evidence-Based ‘Problem-Solving Treatment' Integrated Within Low Vision Rehabilitation Services*. Ph.D. University of Melbourne. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)