

Office for Disability  
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To whom it may concern,

**Re: Victorian State Disability Plan 2021-2024**

The office of the Latrobe Health Advocate was established in 2018 as part of the Victorian Government's response to the Hazelwood Mine Fire inquiries and is part of the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone.

Reporting directly to the Minister for Health, the role of the Advocate is to provide independent advice to the Victorian Government on behalf of Latrobe Valley communities on system and policy issues affecting their health and wellbeing. There are groups of people in Latrobe who experience exclusion for a range of reasons. My objective is to give those people, whose voice may otherwise not be heard, an opportunity to participate as fully as possible and to amplify their voice with service providers and governments.

In 2016 in response to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiries, the Latrobe Valley was designated a Health Innovation Zone by the Victorian government to support communities in Latrobe to improve their health and wellbeing. It gives voice to community aspirations in the planning and delivering of better health and wellbeing outcomes, and where a process of co-design with individuals and organisations is actively encouraged. Over the past three years I have undertaken extensive engagement work to understand how people in specific communities can best have their voices heard, what is important to them and what makes engagement meaningful for them. The people I met living with disability in Latrobe were clear on a common theme – that they know themselves and their needs best. It is important to them that their experience is valued and respected, and it guides the people and supports around them.

People living with disabilities in Latrobe want governments and services to think ahead and plan engagement activities that are physically and emotionally safe. People are diverse, but I have heard that systems are not. Unfortunately, people can fall through the gaps if they don't fit into the categories and eligibilities of the system.

I am pleased to submit the attached report, Engagement Inspiration, which includes insights from conversations I have had with people living with disability. Released in December 2019 it was the first of a series of reports that shares the stories of people in communities across Latrobe. Identifying themes and insights, we encourage governments and services to reflect on how they design and deliver services and consider what changes need to occur to enable people in Latrobe to experience better health and wellbeing.

I am also pleased to provide answers in response to the following questions:

- *Can you tell us about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people with disability and their families in your community?*

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic I heard that people living with disability were dependent on peers and social supports to access and understand government information. People living with disabilities said that some of their peers understood what was happening and some didn't. There was a reliance on social supports to translate complex information and provide access to technology.

Elements of food insecurity, financial stress and social disadvantage were also identified by people with disability throughout COVID-19. I heard that concerns surrounding food security were heightened and people were unable to access food, and physical distancing measures prevented some people from choosing foods that suited their needs.

There were also concerns for people who don't have the skills or technology to connect with others. Libraries and other community settings offer social connection, access to technology and resources that some people depend on for their health. Access to technologies and data continues to impact health inequities, creating divisions that may have far-reaching effects. Community groups and services have said that many people are not connected, and that no-one is checking in on them. Local services observed that some people didn't have technology or the ability to link to technology and they were really feeling it.

- *What support do people with disability need to recover from the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic?*

People with disability told me it is important they can remain connected with groups where they participate in social and learning activities. People are sharing feelings of a loss of independence; they are feeling constrained and struggling to establish a routine. They want to 'keep going' physically and mentally. They have said they feel invisible. Although COVID-19 has changed the way people in Latrobe interact with and access services, communities – including people living with disability – continue to look for understanding and empathy. There is a need to achieve an appropriate balance of responding to COVID-19, redesigning the way services are delivered without losing sight of the patient and community experience.

- *What do we need to do to make sure responses to future emergencies are accessible and inclusive of people with disability?*

Decision-makers should consider the needs of people living with disability ahead of decisions and to take into account lived experience. There is now a more universal focus on health and wellbeing as the basis of everything. This presents an opportunity to reimagine how communities can enjoy and benefit from a healthy lifestyle into the future. Now is the time to address the impact of health inequities and entrenched social disadvantage that is experienced by some people in Latrobe.

Should you have any questions about the report or the engagement model developed to undertake the work, please feel free to contact my office on 1800 319 255 or email [info@lhadvocate.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@lhadvocate.vic.gov.au)

Yours sincerely,



Jane Anderson