

Committee Secretary  
Economics and Governance Committee  
Parliament House  
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30 June 2020

Dear Committee

Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Economic and Governance Committee's (the committee) Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19.

QDN is an organisation of, for, and with people with disability with over 2,000 members and supporters across Queensland. QDN operates a statewide network of members who provide information, feedback and views from the lived experience of people with disability to inform systemic policy feedback to government and peak bodies.

People with disability continue to face unique challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are many people with disability at higher risk from COVID-19, but the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and barriers for people with disability.

QDN acknowledges COVID-19 has created an unprecedented health crisis and that all parts of the community, including government, business and the community sector, have had to adapt rapidly during a time of global uncertainty.

QDN also recognises the Queensland Government's efforts across multiple departments to bring together and rapidly respond to the needs of key stakeholders. Throughout the pandemic, QDN representatives contributed to many government committees and working groups, including:

- Human and Social Recovery Committee
- Queensland Clinical Senate
- Ministerial Housing Council
- Queensland Disability Advisory Council
- Queensland Transition Advisory Forum
- Queensland COVID-19 Working Group
- Department of Housing COVID-19 Homelessness Housing Group
- Queensland Transition Advisory Group
- Domestic and Family Violence Disability Consultative Working Group

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The issues and recommendations outlined in this submission have been developed to assist the Queensland Government to be better prepared and respond, should Queensland face 'second wave' of COVID-19 infections or a similar health crisis into the future.

### **Access to essential goods, cost of living and employment**

QDN members reported a significant increase in their cost of living as a result of COVID-19. This has only exacerbated the financial disadvantage many people with disability already face. Even before the pandemic period, 45% of people with disability in Australia lived in poverty, which is more than double the OECD average (22%).

From delivery fees, shortages of and access to everyday groceries and increased prices for personal protective equipment (PPE), the cost and availability of vital goods became a major issue for people with disability during the peak of the crisis.

The public 'panic buying' of essential items like toilet paper, flour and non-perishable goods, including pasta and rice, left many people with disability without access to affordable items that they rely on to ensure they have enough food within their budget. Additionally, public stockpiling of items like hand sanitizer and masks, left people with disability without critical PPE they use regularly. QDN members reported instances where the price of hand sanitizer more than tripled during the peak of the pandemic. For people with disability, these items are essential to manage basic daily tasks like eating and personal hygiene practices.

QDN recommends that the Queensland Government works in collaboration with the Commonwealth Government, major retailers and people with disability to develop plans to ensure people with disability have priority access to essential, affordable food items and PPE in a crisis environment. Developing these plans will give people with disability greater certainty and reduce confusion in the event of a future health emergency event.

Many QDN members reported that the financial impact of increased costs for essential goods was compounded by the emotional and social impact of a significant reduction in their contact with formal disability supports. However, both the Carers Payment and the Disability Support Pension (DSP) were excluded from the Commonwealth Government's Coronavirus Supplement of \$550 per fortnight.

Currently, less than 10% of the population of people with disability in Australia are supported by the NDIS and are therefore unable to access and pay for the additional supports and services they may require during this unprecedented crisis.

QDN received a large volume of calls and emails from members who are confused and distressed by the exclusion of DSP recipients from the Coronavirus Supplement, which was given to recipients of the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance Jobseeker, Parenting Payment, Farm Household Allowance and Special Benefit.

While the federal government's two \$750 economic stimulus payments provided much needed financial relief to people on the DSP, the lack of ongoing financial supplements made many people with disability feel "forgotten" or "left behind", adding to the feeling of

isolation during an already difficult time. QDN recommends that in the event of a future outbreak or health crisis, the Queensland Government lobby the federal government to ensure that people with disability are not financially disadvantaged and have access to additional support.

Many QDN members, including those on the DSP, also report losing work during the COVID-19 crisis, which had previously supplemented their income support. This has led to difficult decisions between purchasing food, medication or accessing health services. These workers will require additional support to find employment in the COVID-19 recovery phase. QDN recommends the Queensland Government develop and implement a dedicated disability COVID-19 employment strategy with direct input from people with disability and disability advocacy organisations. The strategy should specifically look at ways to promote the benefits of hiring people with disability and address some of the outdated attitudes that lead to greater unemployment for people with disability.

### **Housing support**

Accessible and affordable housing is a significant issue for people with disability that was made more challenging during the COVID-19 emergency period.

QDN broadly supported the Queensland Government's *Renter Protection Package*, which included expanding access to rental support grants and bond loans; rent deferrals; a moratorium on evictions for those impacted by COVID-19, and; the ability for tenants to refuse entry for non-emergency repairs and inspections. These measures assisted in keeping many people with disability safe in their private rentals, particularly for individuals who had lost income or were self-isolating for health reasons.

QDN understood the need to ensure all rental relief measures were balanced, particularly as the financial impact of COVID-19 was felt by both tenants and landlords. However, some QDN members expressed distress, anxiety and confusion when required to communicate or provide documentation directly to landlords or real estate agents. There is a significant power imbalance in the relationship between a tenant and landlord. People with disability can be particularly vulnerable if forced to negotiate a reduction in rent directly with landlords.

Community organisations, including Tenants Queensland and QShelter, have been offering critical support and advice to many renters who are in insecure housing or are having to negotiate a rent deferral as a result of COVID-19. However, QDN members have reported that advocacy services are over capacity as a result of COVID-19, meaning they have had to navigate these difficult situations without support.

QDN recommends that if the Queensland Government was to implement similar rental support measures in future, it is done alongside additional funding for advocacy support to help protect vulnerable renters.

QDN acknowledges the Department of Housing and Public Works (DHPW) has done significant work to develop a *Residential Tenancies Practice Guide* to communicate to tenants and landlords what rental support is available and their rights and responsibilities

during the COVID-19 environment. QDN is currently partnering with DHPW to develop a user-friendly version of the guide to specifically meet the communication needs of people with disability.

QDN recommends that the Queensland Government commit to ensuring all documents released during a public emergency are in a format that is accessible and meets the communication requirements of all people with disability.

QDN applauds the work of the Queensland Government in rapidly responding to ensure people experiencing homelessness were safe and had priority access to emergency housing as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The success of these measures shows that addressing homelessness requires more than just bricks and mortar but wrap around social services. QDN and our housing and homelessness allies strongly urge the Queensland Government to keep in place specific, targeted measures to address homelessness as has been implemented during the COVID-19 event. QDN and our housing allies look forward to working with government to see how these measures can continue post COVID-19, keeping people safe and off the streets.

As Queensland moves into the recovery phase, QDN calls on the State Government to ensure that the people who have been identified and supported during the pandemic are not forced back to homelessness or insecure housing.

### **Protections for people in congregate settings**

As we continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation nationally, people with disability in group homes and supported accommodation facilities remain particularly vulnerable. If a resident in one of these settings contracts COVID-19 there could be an urgent need for alternative accessible housing, which is currently in short supply across the country.

Moving forward, QDN recommends that the Queensland Government continues to undertake transition and outbreak planning on how to best identify and locate short-term housing options across social housing, private rentals, specialist disability accommodation, respite facilities and supported accommodation facilities to accommodate people with disability during a public health emergency.

Throughout the COVID-19 period, QDN received numerous reports of congregate housing settings, including supported accommodation facilities and group homes, restricting the rights of people with disability beyond what was required under public health directives. This included not allowing outside support staff to enter and only allowing residents to have one or two family members approved to visit for less than an hour. Of concern to QDN was that many of these conditions were being more strictly enforced even as COVID-19 restrictions for the general public were being eased.

It is essential that people with disability continue to have some level of choice and control in their homes during an emergency, particularly when it comes to the services they can access. Severely restricting people's ability to see others, access supports and leave the

home not only erodes people's basic rights, but also has the potential to increase the risks of challenging or harmful behaviours.

QDN members reported significant inconsistencies in how public health directives were being implemented in congregate settings and more broadly what was considered an 'essential service'. People with disability received different advice on what support workers were 'essential' depending on which service providers they spoke to. In extreme cases, this left some people with disability without any formal disability supports during the peak of the pandemic.

QDN recommends that the Queensland Government look at specific and detailed scenario outbreak planning to better inform how public health directives should be implemented in congregate housing settings and what services are considered 'essential'. It is vital that the development of these plans includes people with disability and their families.

## **Conclusion**

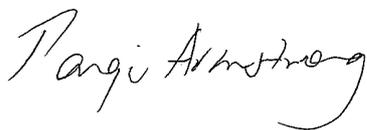
Notwithstanding the recommendations outlined in this submission, QDN acknowledges and respects the efforts of the Queensland Government to seek out the lived experience of how this unforeseen pandemic has impacted the everyday lives of people with disability.

QDN and its members will continue to contribute solutions and recommendations through the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Working Group established by the Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors during the peak of the pandemic.

Many people with disability require a more considered and gradual return to the 'new normal'. Many QDN members have reported that they will not consider resuming their routine community activities until a vaccine is made widely available, it will be important to ensure that their voices continue to be heard and they are not left behind.

QDN looks forward to continuing to provide a platform for the voice of people with disability to be heard.

Yours sincerely



Paige Armstrong  
Chief Executive Officer  
Queenslanders with Disability Network