



Australian Government

Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

A new Commonwealth individual disability advocacy program

Program policy framework



Introduction

This document explains how the Australian Government (government) plans to fund and run a new individual disability advocacy program (new program) to support people with disability. It describes what the program aims to do, the values it's based on, and how grants will be designed. We want to make sure public money is used fairly and openly, and that it helps achieve the program's aims.

PLEASE NOTE

'Advocacy' is a broad topic. This document uses the word in specific ways. There is a glossary at the end that explains how words like 'advocacy' are used here.

The government has asked the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing (the department) to design the new program. When we say 'we', we mean the department.

Why we are designing a new program

The government is creating a new program to support individual disability advocacy, as part of its response to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission): [Read the government's response to the Disability Royal Commission](#).

Advocates play a vital role in helping people with disability navigate government systems and speak up when things go wrong. Because they work across different government services, advocates can help reduce the risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation for people with disability.

This new program will focus on funding individual disability advocacy, especially for people with disability who are at serious and immediate risk of harm. It will also promote culturally safe services across Australia.

By supporting advocates in this way, the program aims to improve the quality of government services and help prevent harm in the future.

About the new program

We also have a consultation paper about the new program. The consultation paper provides information about our approach to developing the new program. Read the consultation paper on the [Consultation Hub](#).

The new program will focus on helping people with disability who are most at risk of harm. It will make sure they get the support they need to make their own choices and stand up for their rights.

To do this, the program will bring together several existing Commonwealth-funded advocacy programs:

- National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP)
- Indigenous Community Advocates pilot (ICA pilot)
- Disability Advocacy Support Helpline (Helpline)
- National Centre for Disability Advocacy (NCDA).

The program may also connect with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Appeals program.

All governments have a role in supporting disability advocacy. This program is part of the Australian Government's contribution.

In the context of this program, individual disability advocacy would be defined in line with the National Disability Advocacy Framework 2023–2025:

Individual advocacy is a one-on-one approach, undertaken by a professional advocate, relative, friend or volunteer, to prevent or address instances of unfair treatment or abuse.

Read the [National Disability Advocacy Framework 2023–2025](#).

This definition was agreed between all governments in Australia. Using this definition helps to support consistency and better planning between governments. This definition of individual disability advocacy is different from what is used in the current NDAP guidelines.

We acknowledge that because of the Disability Royal Commission and Independent Review of the NDIS (NDIS Review), there are many conversations about disability reform occurring at the same time. These conversations include the design and implementation of Foundational Supports, and a new Disability Support Quality and Safeguarding Framework.

The different parts of government progressing this work are talking to each other to enable these new programs to work together.

We understand the role of advocates remains integral to the design of the new program and the broader disability reform underway. Change will happen over time. We are planning carefully to minimise impacts on clients of existing services.

The new program seeks to:

- Help people with disability, their families, carers, and kin get individual advocacy support when they need it.
- Promote more culturally safe advocacy.
- Help organisations build their skills to provide high-quality, inclusive and responsive advocacy.
- Support advocacy that addresses discrimination, improves policy and practice and reduces barriers to inclusion.

Draft program policy framework

Principles

Principles are the main ideas that guide how a program works. They help everyone make good decisions, even if things change along the way.

The program policy framework is based on these principles:

- **Outcomes-focused:** The program aims to achieve real results for people with disability, for example, preventing harm— not just counting how many people are helped.
- **Transparent and trusted relationships:** Government and funded organisations will build trust by being clear and open, and by working together to achieve outcomes.
- **Continuous improvement:** The program will keep learning (building on evidence) and improving to achieve better outcomes for people with disability.
- **Stability and sustainability:** The program will help organisations stay strong and reliable, so people with disability can count on them.

Funding streams

To reach its goals, the program will have three grant streams:

- **Service delivery stream:** Funds organisations to provide direct advocacy support in specific areas, including access for rural and remote communities and in segregated settings.
- **National advocacy helpline stream:** Funds short-term, phone-based support across Australia.
- **Sector strengthening stream:** Funds sector development by supporting workforce development, use of data to improve advocacy services, and working with government and community organisations to raise systemic issues in advocacy for people with disability.

A brief overview of the proposed funding streams is in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the proposed funding streams in the new program

Purpose	Length of grants	Replaces	Key changes
Service delivery stream			
Fund organisations to provide advocacy to people with disability, their families, carers and kin in specific areas.	3-6 years	NDAP (including ICA pilot)	• Offers longer funding periods. • Promotes cultural safety. • Strengthens outreach to those most in need. • Uses an open and competitive grant process.
National advocacy helpline stream			
Fund a national short-term, phone-based advocacy service.	6 years	Helpline	• Stronger referral processes in and out of the Helpline. • Offers longer grant periods.
Sector strengthening stream			
Fund sector development activities including training and development, evidence-informed improvement and raising systemic issues.	6 years	NCDA	• Refined focus. • Offers longer grant periods.

Service delivery stream

This stream supports organisations to provide advocacy to people with disability, their families, carers, and kin in specific areas. It will replace the NDAP and ICA pilot.

Key differences from NDAP:

- Offers longer funding periods for organisations who establish formal networks to deliver services within defined areas.
- More strongly promotes cultural safety in services.
- Strengthens outreach to those most in need, including those in segregated settings; facing intersecting inequalities; and those in rural and remote communities.
- Uses an open and competitive grant process targeted to those that can demonstrate experience in providing individual disability advocacy services.
- Formal referral protocols in place between organisations funded under the new program and the national helpline.

Longer funding periods to support organisational stability

Grants under the NDAP are awarded for 3 years. Extensions have usually been offered but only for 12 months at a time. This makes it hard for organisations to give their advocates job security. It also makes it hard to forward plan and build the organisation's capabilities.

We think longer funding periods would support greater organisational stability.

For the new program, longer grants could be offered to providers who:

- apply for funding to work together in a network (see below)
- are Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in line with our commitments under the [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#).

For others, a 3-year grant may be offered with a chance to extend to 6 years if they meet the targets outlined in their grant agreements.

Working together in a network

In the current NDAP, most providers work in small areas, supporting their local communities. A few providers deliver their services state-wide or across a larger region. We have heard that some providers work together as an informal network to make sure that people get the advocacy supports and services that they need across larger areas. We have heard positive experiences from organisations and their advocates that work as part of a network. We have heard it helps them share their expertise with each other; it also helps them refer people to other organisations for support when they need to.

Organisations who apply for funding as part of a network to deliver services across larger areas will be eligible for longer grants (6 years), including networks that propose to provide services across an entire state or territory.

There are different ways that organisations could work in a network. For example, a network of organisations could appoint a lead organisation and work together to make sure there are face-to-face services across a larger geographical area. Or a network of organisations that provide advocacy for a disability cohort (for example the deaf community) could agree to form a network that provides advocacy services nationwide. An example of a state-wide

network could include multiple organisations agreeing to work together under the auspice of a lead organisation while offering a dispersed network of locally based organisations with a variety of service delivery models that accommodate the diverse needs of the disability community. Alternatively, multiple organisations may choose to come together under as a new organisation that provides advocacy support across a large region/state. Organisations working in a network would need to regularly report on how well they were working together.

Stronger promotion of cultural safety in services

A pilot trialling the placement of Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander advocates in non-Indigenous NDAP organisations has been running since 2022. The aim of the pilot was to improve access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. The pilot has suggested benefits of increasing access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates.

The new program will:

- support organisations funded by the new program to hire and train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates
- give advocates training and development opportunities to learn about culturally safe ways of working
- make sure funded organisations are working with organisations that Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islanders and culturally and linguistically diverse people already trust, such as ACCOs, Migrant Resource Centres and cultural organisations. Working together will include sharing their knowledge and skills and having agreed ways to refer people for support from each other where needed.

More outreach to people with disability who need advocacy support the most

Outreach activities are essential in identifying when people with disability may be at risk of harm or need support to speak up when things go wrong. Often the people who most need an advocate have the least access. This may be due to:

- geographical location – where advocacy supports in regional, rural and remote areas may be limited
- segregated settings – for example group homes
- accessibility – for example limited disability accessible transport options
- education – knowing what advocacy is or how to get support from an advocate.

It is important that individual disability advocacy services work together with other organisations that can support outreach. The new program will support organisations to work with other groups to reach people who need advocacy the most. These groups would include:

- Community Visitors
- health professionals
- disability service providers
- community organisations.

How grants are awarded: an open and competitive grant process

The NDAP started in 1987. There have not been many opportunities for new providers to enter the program since it started.

The new program will be open for any eligible organisation to apply. This will give organisations who aren't funded under the NDAP a chance to apply for funding. It also helps to make sure the department is meeting government's expectations that public money is spent in ways that are efficient, effective, economical and ethical.

ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY FOR FUNDING UNDER THE NEW PROGRAM

Not every organisation can apply for funding in the new program. Organisations can only apply for funding if they are not-for-profit organisations that have been established for community service purposes. Community service purposes are activities that are for the wellbeing and benefit of others in the community.

The organisations would need to have a stated mission to advance the rights of people with disability, particularly under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

They would need to be able to demonstrate that they have a history and expertise in delivering individual disability advocacy supports and services and / or advocacy services for First Nations people.

They must also be compliant with the [National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse Grant Connected Policy](#).

How organisations would apply for funding

Organisations must first show they meet the rules for applying (eligibility criteria). Then, they need to show they have the right skills and resources to do the job well. We have developed a list of these skills and resources (key capabilities) based on what we have heard from representatives of the disability community and advocacy organisations. The list is in Table 2.

Organisations could demonstrate they have these capabilities by providing case studies and tangible examples of how they work and the impact they have.

These capabilities would be in addition to the requirements of the statutory funding conditions in the *Disability Services and Inclusion Act 2023*.

Organisations might have different strengths and weaknesses in terms of their capabilities. Organisations could work as networks to strengthen their capabilities together. When the grant round opens, the department will publish grant opportunity guidelines so that organisations can know what will be expected of them.

Table 2. Key capabilities that funded organisations need in the service delivery stream

Capability domain	What sound capabilities would look like
Disability-driven	• The organisation is a Disabled People's Organisation. At least 51% of the board and membership are people with disabilities. • The organisation and its activities are driven by people with disabilities: ○ They are leaders, workers and partners. ○ They are representative of the diversity of disability experiences in our society, including intersectional experiences. ○ Their unique perspectives and experiences shape decision-making and they have real decision-making power. • An exception to this is ACCOs who have a track record in advocacy, and demonstrated interest of expanding their cultural expertise to support people in their community with disability.
Independence	• Advocates act according to the will and preferences of the person they are supporting and no-one else. • This does not mean that organisations cannot deliver other services, but advocacy services must be separate from other services delivered in the organisation. • Organisations must have publicly available conflict of interest policies. Clients must be provided with information about how conflicts of interest are managed.
Governance	• The organisation's governance structures and processes are disability-driven. • Organisations follow their rules and understand how to manage government grants.
Relationships	• The organisation has collaborative relationships with other community sector organisations that support it to achieve its mission. This must include other community sector organisations that support people's intersectional experiences for example: ○ ACCOs ○ migrant resource centres ○ other advocacy organisations (e.g. women's advocacy organisations, financial advocacy organisations) ○ youth organisations.

Capability domain	What sound capabilities would look like
	• The organisation has relationships with people with disability in its community. • The organisation has a sound plan for managing its relationship with the department.
Data	• The organisation can collect and report accurate, reliable and complete data to support monitoring and evaluation of the program. • The organisation uses data on the experiences and needs of their clients and other people with disability in their community to guide its activities.
Operations	• Organisations have good systems for managing referrals and supporting advocates including: ○ A triaging, waitlisting and referral process that considers demographics and characteristics of the service area, including how they work in complement with other local services. ○ A clearly articulated and enforced scope of practice for its advocates and supports in place to manage situations where a client needs more intensive support. ○ An effective human resources function that supports the wellbeing of its advocates.
Workforce	• The organisation can recruit and train a skilled workforce of advocates. • The organisation prioritises meaningful professional development for its advocates. • The organisation's workforce is reflective of the diversity of disabilities and broader society.

National helpline stream

The national helpline stream will continue to support a national short-term, phone-based individual disability advocacy service. This service is currently delivered through the Helpline, accessible through the Disability Gateway.

The Helpline commenced operating in 2022 and has been rolled out nationally. It was set up to help address demand issues by providing an alternative way for people to access short-term, phone-based disability advocacy support around Australia.

The Helpline has had a positive impact. The new program would not make major changes to the Helpline model and would be delivered through a 6-year grant. This means that activities under the stream would complement service delivery stream organisations for the full length of their grants. It would continue to be funded through a targeted process.

The new program will make it easier for people to be referred to and from the Helpline. All organisations in the service delivery stream will have referral protocols with the Helpline. This will also help people talk to someone local if needed.

Sector strengthening stream

The purpose of the sector strengthening stream will be to support:

- training and professional development for advocates working under the service delivery stream
- use of evidence and data to improve advocacy services
- working with government and community organisations to address systemic issues for people with disability.

This support is currently delivered by the NCDA.

The NCDA started in 2022 and is valued by organisations and advocates.

The new program would not make major changes to the model. It would continue to be funded through a targeted process. We think there are opportunities to strengthen the focus of the sector strengthening stream around training and development.

Focus areas for training and development opportunities would be co-developed with service delivery stream organisations and the department. We have heard from advocates that priorities could be:

- cultural safety and intersectionality
- trauma-informed practice
- supported decision-making
- managing vicarious trauma
- history of disability rights and the UN CRPD.

We also heard that advocates want to see more opportunities for peer learning, mentoring and reflective practice.

The sector strengthening stream would be delivered through a 6-year grant. This means that activities under the stream would support service delivery stream organisations for the full length of their grants.

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Advocacy supports and services	Supports or services to: • assist a person with disability to exercise choice or control in matters that affect the person, including the provision of legal services; or • assist a person with disability to understand and advocate for their rights and to uphold and enforce their rights, including the provision of legal services; or • influence community attitudes, government policy or laws in relation to the rights and freedoms of people with disability.¹
Disability advocate	A professional (paid or volunteer) who delivers advocacy supports and services.
Disability advocacy	Disability advocacy enables people with disability to participate in the decision-making processes that safeguard and advance their human rights. ²
Individual disability advocacy	Individual disability advocacy is a one-on-one approach, undertaken by a professional advocate, relative, friend or volunteer, to prevent or address instances of unfair treatment or abuse. ³

¹ [Disability Services and Inclusion Act 2023](#)

² Commonwealth of Australia (2023) [National Disability Advocacy Framework](#), Department of Health, Disability and Ageing website, accessed 14 October 2025.

³ Ibid

Health.gov.au

All information in this publication is correct as at November 2025

