



PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (WA) INC

Submission to the Charities Bill 2003

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Introduction

People with Disabilities (WA) Inc was established in 1981, International Year of Disabled People, in recognition of the need for a locally based organisation which represented the rights of people with disabilities to live in an equitable and inclusive society. From its inception PWD (WA) was managed by people with disabilities, in the belief that for the organisation to be credible and address issues faced by people with a disability they needed to be involved in the process. Today PWD (WA) is the peak advocacy agency in the state, representing and advocating the rights of all people with disabilities, physical, intellectual, psychiatric and sensory. The agency continues to be consumer driven, with the committee of management comprising a majority of members with a disability.

Social Change and Advocacy

As an advocacy agency we provide both individual and systemic advocacy. Individual issues are assessed on a needs basis in line with organisational policy, systemic issues are driven by consumers and their perceived need for societal change.

Individual advocacy is provided to people with disabilities and family members to assist them to have a better quality of life, and ensure that their rights are protected and defended. Many of PWD (WA)'s members have communication difficulties and are unable to articulate their concerns, hence the importance of the role of the individual advocacy program. Additionally many people with disabilities are subjected to abuse, neglect and exploitation, and require individual advocacy to present the facts of such abuse.

The focus of systemic advocacy is on influencing or producing changes in society in order to enhance the quality of life of *all* people with disabilities. In reflecting on the important policy changes which have occurred to enhance the lives of people with disabilities, it is clear that significant advocacy was essential in creating change. Indeed, history demonstrates that changes which have led to increased rights and freedoms for citizens have been created by strong advocacy, which has been directed at existing laws and policies. These actions have been directed towards the government of the time, but have involved advocating to all decision makers, regardless of political allegiance, to act to create change.

With regard to people with disabilities the work of a number of individuals and organisations has led to increased rights enshrined by the Disability Discrimination Act, the work of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and individual state Disability Services Acts. Advocacy has seen changes in the accessibility of public transport, greater inclusion of people within the education system and increased physical accessibility of buildings.

The effect of the removal of the power of charitable agencies to advocate would have serious consequences with regard to the advancement of social and community welfare, one of the main tenets of the Act. Indeed under the Act “advancement includes protection, maintenance, support, research and improvement.” If groups were unable to advocate for members, or affected individuals, it would be difficult if not impossible to achieve these improvements.

PWD (WA) Inc and Advocacy

It is important that there is a distinction between advocacy and lobbying. Advocacy involves acting on behalf of individuals and groups to create change which will benefit their lives; it is a non political action. Lobbying implies that an agency is targeting the government of the day based on political differences, rather than citing specific policies or laws, without permission from members who are affected by policies.

PWD (WA) takes it's position as an advocate very seriously, making sure systemic advocacy is directed by members. All systemic advocacy is addressed at a bipartisan level, with all political parties being approached. In addition to raising issues of concern and inequity, PWD (WA) approaches all parties prior to elections to request information on specific issues relevant to members. This provides all parties the opportunity to offer feedback on policies, and ensures members are properly informed of party policy. Feedback is available to be used as a reference point where changes are brought in between elections. PWD (WA) is involved with advocacy at both state and federal level, and there is no political bias in our role.

As an agency PWD (WA) has 529 individual and 30 organisational members, and in the past year we had 915 cases which involved 7378 contacts. If we were to lose charitable status as a result of the proposed changes included in the Charities Bill, 2003, the agency would have to make cutbacks, including reductions in staff. The effect of this would be disastrous for consumers, many of whom have no other avenue to provide support. At our current staffing levels (4.8 full time equivalent) it is impossible to provide a service to everybody requiring advocacy, and we operate as an agency of last resort. However, as the figures show this involves a significant number of referrals and cases.

Conclusion

In conclusion the nature of advocacy is seeking to change government policy as it disadvantages members. PWD (WA), in common with other charitable bodies, does this irrespective of who is in power, lobbying for change on the instigation of members, not for political gain.

Many charitable institutions represent and advocate for people who are too disadvantaged to advocate for themselves. Therefore these agencies play an important role within any democracy in ensuring the voices of all citizens are heard.

Finally, when considering the advocacy role of any agency, it must be remembered that while advocating for a particular group the benefits of this work often extend beyond an agency's specific consumer group. For example, changes that are made for people with disabilities, which PWD (WA) has been involved in, also benefit the wider community. With regard to changes in access, our increasing aging population benefit enormously, since many will acquire disabilities as they age. Parents with prams, or small children also find it easier to move around. Indeed it is interesting to note that many shopping centres have taken the accessible parking model, and extended this to provide easy access bays for parents with prams.

We would therefore ask that consideration be given to redefining the work of charitable bodies, to ensure that important advocacy work can be continued. This should ensure that agencies are able to advocate without political bias, at all levels, to ensure that we continue to develop a more inclusive society and make further advances in social and community welfare.