31 August 2026

Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
GPO Box 9848
CANBERRA ACT 2601

By email only: InclusiveCommunitiesFund@health.gov.au

Re: Inclusive Communities Fund

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Self Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a submission in relation to the Inclusive Communities Fund.

Please find on the following pages an overview of SARU and self advocacy, and also responses to the four consultation questions for Disability Representative Organisations, advocates and community organisations.

Should you wish to discuss this submission, please contact me via 03 9070 9034 or luke@saru.org.au.

Yours faithfully,



Luke Shein
SARU Coordinator

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SARU
Self Advocacy Resource Unit

About SARU

The Self Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU) was established by the Victorian Government in 2008 to support and resource self advocacy groups. SARU supports groups run by and for people with intellectual disability, people with acquired brain injury (ABI) and people with complex communication support needs, including people who are deafblind and people with disability who speak languages other than English. SARU's support and resourcing of these groups recognises their unique needs and the organisation employs a disability-led human-rights based model.

SARU works to support the sustainability of self advocacy groups but it does not fund groups. The support that SARU provides includes:

- Helping groups to develop strong and meaningful self advocacy plans;
- Supporting groups to become stronger and to become self-sustaining, including support to source funding and write grant applications;
- Providing hands-on support for work or projects undertaken by the groups;
- Running training;
- Building networks; and
- Developing and providing resources e.g. booklets, toolkits, videos, access to interpreters, finding meeting spaces, building relationships with community partners.

SARU is managed by a consortium that includes two longstanding self advocacy groups (Reinforce and Brain Injury Matters) and actively seeks opportunities for group members' involvement in the activities of SARU, including employment and governance of SARU, conferences and forums.

Whilst SARU is based in Victoria, SARU receives some Federal Government funding and provides services to self advocates across Australia through the Voices Together website and the Self Advocacy for Everyone Helpdesk.

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What is self advocacy?

Self advocacy is best described by self advocates in this video.

Self advocacy groups are run by people with disability for people with disability; people join together to have their voices heard, support each other and advance disability rights and interests. Self advocacy groups are often asked to share their expertise to inform changes to disability or community service provision and support policy reform. Their collective approach has the benefit of amplifying the voices of people with disability to help ensure they are heard, and provides support to individuals as they share their stories of abuse and discrimination, and change.

People with intellectual disability, ABI and complex communication support needs continue to be the most marginalised and discriminated people with disability in Australia. Self advocacy groups provide a place for people to learn about their rights, develop their skills, have their voices heard and form relationships with people outside of their family or disability service provider.

Self advocacy groups are places that foster social inclusion – they provide members with a sense of belonging, social connections and purposeful occupation which may come in the form of paid project work, lobbying and organisational leadership and management (Frawley & Bigby (2015)). Through self advocacy people also develop their identity to include 'Self Advocate' as a valued and meaningful role that is equal to the role of 'Disability Advocate'. Collective self advocacy works at the systemic level and its impact is greater than the word 'self' implies.

The self advocacy groups that SARU works alongside are able to provide true intersectional representation and advice to community organisations under the Inclusive Communities Fund (the Fund), for example:

- Rainbow Rights is a group comprised of people with intellectual disability who identify as LGBTIQA+;
- Deadly First Nations Shout Out Group is comprised of First Nations people with intellectual disability and/or ABI;
- Power in Culture and Equality is a group for people with disability from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- Powerful Positive Parents is a group for parents with intellectual disability; and
- New Wave Gippsland run three self advocacy groups for people with intellectual disability and/or ABI in the Gippsland region of Victoria.

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Some self advocacy groups are run to advance the rights of all people with a specific disability, for example:

- Brain Injury Matters advocates for the rights of people with ABI and runs peer support groups across Melbourne and regional Victoria for over 200 people each week;
- Reinforce advocates for the rights of people with intellectual disability; and
- Deafblind Victoria promotes the rights of people with combined impairments in vision and hearing.

The self advocates that SARU works alongside are experienced in engaging with the general public and government and community based organisations to build capacity to address issues of accessibility and inclusion, for example:

- The Victorian Self Advocacy Network (comprised of members from the self advocacy groups that SARU works alongside) ran their 2025 campaign on the theme of 'Disability Is Not A Target', addressing the issue of violence against people with disability; and
- The Victorian Department of Families Fairness and Housing recently engaged SARU to consult with self advocates to provide advice on the 2027-2031 State Disability Plan.

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Responses to consultation questions

Question 1: What support, resources or changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible for people with disability?

To build inclusion and accessibility, community organisations would benefit from resourcing and support to change policy and governance structures to facilitate input from people with disability.

Curreyer et al (2024) highlight the benefits of inclusive governance. Inclusive governance gives effect to the requirement to actively promote a non-discriminatory environment as prescribed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. It provides an opportunity to use the skills, knowledge and experience of people with disability to improve service delivery.

Inclusive governance is done correctly by providing genuine commitment to inclusion through providing skill development pathways to governance roles, accessible practices and individualised supports. A top-down model of disability inclusion that is not simply tokenistic promotes the visibility of people with disability and improves inclusion across the organisation as disability leadership informs, shapes and changes the organisation's work.

How could community organisations partner with disability-led organisations to achieve this?

The award winning Voice at the Table program delivers training for people with intellectual disability and/or ABI to run meetings, gain the skills required for leadership positions and be included in roles on boards, committees and advisory groups. The training is co-designed and delivered by people with intellectual disability and/or ABI and provides a referral service for training graduates.

The Voice at the Table program is available to provide inclusive governance training and leadership graduates to organisations seeking to build inclusive governance structures. Curreyer et al note that Voice at the Table is the only project of its kind to specifically focus on people with cognitive disability.

Additionally, as self advocacy groups are run by people with disability for people with disability to advocate for the rights of people with disability, these groups provide a unique partnership opportunities for community organisations. The Fund provides an opportunity to facilitate community organisations to partner with individual self advocacy groups to improve their accessibility and inclusion.

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For example, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and organisations providing services to First Nations peoples could seek consultation from Deadly First Nations Shout Out Group or community health services providing services to parents could seek input from Positive Powerful Parents. Some examples of intersectional and disability-specific self advocacy groups are provided above under 'What is self advocacy?'.

Question 2: What activities should the Fund support, given that it will not pay for service delivery? For example, staff training, advice on how to make services more inclusive, or other accessibility changes.

SARU strongly recommends that the Fund support community organisations to engage with the Voice at the Table Program to deliver training to staff of community organisations and provide advice to make their services more inclusive.

SARU also recommends that the Fund provide support to community organisations to amend their governance structures and provide both entry and development pathways (e.g. mentorships) to graduates of the Voice at the Table program.

SARU also recommends that the Fund support community organisations to establish ongoing relationships directly with relevant self advocacy groups or the Victorian Self Advocacy Network to provide consultation on inclusion and accessibility (e.g. focus groups, advisory bodies or working groups), or to engage with SARU to provide a consultation service similar to that provided to the Victorian Department of Families Fairness and Housing as mentioned above under 'What is self advocacy?'.

Question 3: What role could local governments play in supporting community inclusion?

Local governments provide a valuable opportunity to role model community inclusion. Local governments benefit from more sustainable revenue streams than community organisations and larger organisational structures that facilitate specialist job roles. Local governments often form a hub for community organisations.

This provides an ideal opportunity for local governments to take a leadership role in inclusive governance through demonstrating and promoting the value and success of inclusive governance structures. Similarly, local governments provide an opportunity to showcase the benefits of engaging with self advocacy groups directly.

An additional benefit arises from the profile given to self advocacy groups and individual self advocates, providing networking opportunities and generating as yet unforeseen opportunities in local government and beyond.

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Question 4: What is the best way for community organisations to build meaningful and lasting inclusion?

Anderson and Bigby (2025) observe that the opportunities offered by participation in advisory groups and being listened to as experts are rarely accessible to people with intellectual disabilities whose diagnosis appears to run deep in terms of social exclusion and negative perceptions. Including people with disabilities in shaping policy and services helps to break down stigmatised community perceptions that devalue people with intellectual disabilities and casts them as vulnerable and dependent.

Providing resources and support to community organisations to develop inclusive governance structures and partnerships with self advocacy groups provides an opportunity to establish such organisational relationships as a societal norm. Establishing a norm of genuine engagement with people with disability will not only benefit those individuals and organisations entering into these arrangements during the funding period, but it will benefit the broader disability community and society as a whole into the future.

Self advocacy groups and organisations already do significant and effective work to build the capacity of community organisations to be truly inclusive of people across different cohorts. Crucially, this work is led by the very people those organisations too often exclude. Because it is grounded in lived experience and directed by self advocates themselves, it carries a credibility and practical insight that generic, externally delivered training cannot match.

At present this work is funded, if at all, through short-term, ad hoc grants. The grants are project based, competitive, and are never guaranteed to continue. That insecurity means that valuable programs stop and start, groups spend scarce energy chasing the next small grant rather than doing the work, and hard-won expertise is lost each time funding lapses.

The Fund is a natural and fitting vehicle to change this, putting self advocacy-led capacity building on a secure, ongoing footing so it can be sustained and built on, rather than rebuilt from scratch every funding cycle. SARU recommends that the Fund explicitly recognise and resource self advocacy-led capacity building of community organisations as core, fundable activity, ensuring that the people with the deepest expertise in inclusion are properly supported to lead the work of building it.

Successful inclusive governance structures and partnerships with self advocacy groups are like to self-perpetuate in a similar way to Reconciliation Action Plans. Establishing this as standard practice would continue to position Australia as a world leader in the disability rights sector, ensuring that the benefits of the Fund will last far beyond the three-year funding period.

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