Voices from the COVID-19 frontline

Findings and recommendations about how we can minimise COVID-19's impact on Victorians experiencing disadvantage

Overview

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) sought to understand and unpack how a pandemic can further exacerbate financial and social exclusion of people who face disadvantage.

This insight series and its recommendations have been developed with the aim of informing future policy-making, community service sector delivery as well as the public debate whilst illuminating:

- How COVID-19 (C19) is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged communities;

- Ways that communities are utilising their strengths and/or how government could further harness their assets; and

- Insights we didn't expect as well as verification of themes already canvassed in the media.

This report reflects analysis of consultations with 300 BSL frontline staff that were conducted during June-August 2020 as part of our 'COVID-19 Listening Tour'.

Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

In this report

We provide an overview of the experiences of people with disability we work with during the pandemic, touching on how the digital divide impacted on their ability to engage in virtual services, isolation arising from lockdown restrictions, difficulties of home-schooling children and the positive developments arising from more inclusive employment options that opened up as everyone began working from home. We also provide policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised, as well as how they can be better supported in the recovery.

Reports in this series

This report is one of eight which explore different focal areas and cross-cutting themes. Please refer to the chapter list at the front of this document for links to each report for further reading, including our Background chapter.

Top 4 findings

1 **Whilst some people with disability appreciated not needing to come into the office, those lacking technology or the skills to use it, experienced greater isolation and delays to services given barriers to virtually engaging. Any future digitisation of government services needs to ensure it doesn't exacerbate exclusion.**

"We had feedback from some participants with autism or intellectual disabilities that it is easier to not have to maintain eye contact via a phone meeting or have time to consider a response and respond via email."
— *Lauren McAlpine, Footscray*

"Opportunities for non-face to face meetings has had positive impacts for many participants. Some experience shame at not being able to make meetings on time and so, they disengage."

Reports on the digital divide are reinforced by ABS datas from 2018 which shows that 1.1 million (28.5%) people with disability did not use the Internet. Over 250,000 people with disability lacked confidence or knowledge to use the Internet.

"Face to face interaction takes away the need for 1000 words."
— *Carl Thompson, Greensborough*

"We can't see people via their devices as the people we work with lack smartphones. They're on basic phones with limited data. We can't see virtual services as a cheap way forward. It's a warning for digitising all government funded services as it exacerbates exclusion."

"This period has really highlighted the impact of no internet access on people with disabilities navigating the NDIS. For example, I had someone who wanted visual information to show their brother, the participant, to ensure he could make an informed decision and feel included. They could not come to office and they could not use email at all, and it prolonged the planning process and put them at a disadvantage. Normally they could come to the office, pick documents up and meet me briefly. I think it's really showing how crucial it is to have access to the internet."

"Internet access is definitely a necessity and more work to support minority groups to have this access is required."

2 **C19 has made isolation, something common for many of our participants with a disability, a universal feeling. However, the isolation of lockdown triggered a variety of responses – people now comfortable to concede they're lonely and seek help to address loneliness, to Aboriginal participants for whom it triggered trauma to those who felt suicidal. There was an increased need for mental health supports, particularly as usual well-being outlets like day programs ceased.**

"C19 has been the ice-breaker – something we now all have in common. It's also lifted the lid on loneliness and isolation. People have now got permission to talk about it because we're all feeling isolated. We always knew it, now we definitely now it."

"C19 has exacerbated the emotional toll of caring for children with a disability. One participant had an acute mental health episode, referred to services. Isolation is challenging for parents who have children with behavioural issues who don't feel they can go out."

"We had an increase in people saying they might want to hurt themselves or were having suicidal thoughts. Through the telephone, people shared much more openly; they are not intimidated in front of you. We did our best to link them into mental health services. There is a massive gap in services for children under 18 in the area but over 18 is not too bad."

"Aboriginal participants are seeking mental health and carer supports, are managing increased bills due to being at home all the time, keeping connected to family and culture.
There are high levels of anxiety around seeing family. This is triggering trauma, feelings of abandonment."
— *Kendall English-Lane, Preston*

"Most people's well-being declined, given day programs and respite have ceased leading to isolation."

3 **Home-schooling children with a disability was largely overwhelming for parents, although some gained insights into the level of support they require. High anxiety also arose when there was school refusal when restrictions ceased and concern about learning gaps and the need to facilitate a transition for those with behavioral problems. The carer burden was exhausting and meant job-seeking was put on hold and their own work impacted.**

"Lots of parents found it so difficult because needed intense support, given their children had classroom assistance and/or an aide at school. They have never witnessed their children learning. It is difficult for them to home school their children as they have never done before. Many needed one on one support, watching them the entire time."

"We had reports of significant carer burden, especially for those doing home-schooling on top of caring for children with disability. Many NDIS participants who were exploring employment indicated much of this has been put on hold due to C19."
— *Catherine Neil, Greensborough*

"The second round of home-schooling was wearing. Parents are very stressed, with many struggling to do their jobs with some having to reduce hours. Even the extra week of school holidays was very stressful. Especially for kids with special needs who have trouble managing themselves."

"There's high anxiety where children are refusing to go back to school... There needs to be consideration of enabling environments and proper planning to facilitate children's (with behavioural problems) transition back to school."

"There's concern that the learning gaps will increase and grow over time for kids who disengage."

4 **More inclusive employment – the flexibility to work from home or have disabilities accommodated – has jumped light years ahead for people with disability. Now that everyone is having to work from home, accommodations are being made for employees.**

"People with disability have been able to get jobs that allow them to work from home and address their barriers which were previously not accepted."

"Whether it's the man with a hearing impairment who was struggling with all the background noise in his workplace or the woman who can't sit down all day, everyone's needs are being accommodated now that working from home has been forced on every employer and mandated for every employee."
— *Adam Huismann, Sunshine*

Tina on workplace accommodations for people with disability during C19

Now, let's hear from a BSL service user

Tina has lived on the Mornington Peninsula for nearly 15 years with her family. In the early years, her hearing impairment was minimal, so she could cope very well with the hearing aids she'd had since she was 10. Tina always wanted to be a nurse. She used to dress up and put bandages on her parents and take their temperature. However, she got a rude shock from her high school career adviser. "She told me that no hospital would take me with my deafness, as I could be a hindrance to patients getting their care and that I wouldn't hear things like alarm bells. devastated".

This led Tina to take an office job, but she hated it. After a couple of weeks, she contacted the nursing board and asked them if her deafness would be a problem. They told her that they didn't discriminate and welcomed her application. Tina has gone onto work as a nurse over the past 30 years, proving her career adviser wrong. She's brought that experience into her current role overseeing quality, risk management and patient safety for a public healthcare provider.

Throughout her life, Tina has carried a lot of shame about her disability, reluctant to tell anyone about her hearing impairment. "After lots of advice and support from my husband and kids, I started to tell people about my disability. I was surprised how many were supportive. Now, I shout it from the rooftops! I wear a badge out and at work that says, 'I'm deaf and I lip read'".

However, when C19 hit, it had a massive impact on Tina's work. During the first lockdown, when meetings moved to video conferencing, but the bandwidth didn't allow so many users at once, the switch to audio only meetings became an issue due to Tina's deafness. "Not being able to lip-read was dreadful. Not being able to stream my phone calls to both hearing aids, I also couldn't make out 80% of the dialogue and had to ask colleagues to reiterate what had been said.

My confidence plummeted as I didn't want to be involved in meetings and would make up excuses to miss a meeting (or not answer a phone call). Luckily, many staff were more than happy to do the shorter review meetings by email, which was helpful, but I again felt I couldn't do my job and was being carried by my colleagues, which further dented my confidence. My colleagues saw this and did everything possible to help me do my job. They (and the organisation) have been amazingly supportive".

Tina has always been able to work from home if she needed to, but was asked to consider doing so more often when the second lockdown was mandated. "Working from home was never an issue pre-C19, but the preference was to have the team onsite. When we moved to working from home more, I spoke to the relevant people about my struggles with the WebEx video-conferencing system. They told me that they were trialing MS Teams and this might work better for me, given it had closed captions. We now use this for most meetings and I have found it to be so much better. I am always being asked if there is anything else that the organisation can do to accommodate my deafness and to make me feel more comfortable. In meetings, I'm asked prior if it's ok to share that I am deaf and lip read, and participants are also asked to turn on their video when talking so that I can lip read. Everyone is always happy to do this".

Tina thinks that C19's silver lining could be greater workplace flexibility and organisations being more aware of how to support staff with disabilities. "I see this as a positive move for the flexibility of workforces, for thriving economies and happy, efficient staff. But will organisations continue to embrace this concept after this pandemic? Hopefully, we can continue to learn from and build on this for the future." She also sees a role for governments. "I think that many employers do not know of government schemes that assist both the employer and employee. There should be so much more advertising to organisations of the many things available to support employees with disabilities".

Other key themes

1 **Lack of clarity or inconsistent information was common on a number of fronts – from the laptop provision for kids with a disability, to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for disability workers.**

> *"There was confusion as whether students with a disability would have their home-schooling devices covered by their NDIS funding and/or the Victorian Department of Education. It caused a lot of stress and delays."*

> *"There were inconsistency practices in disability services and their service formats and safety precautions depending on who they were funded by. The confusion on the rules, for example on the use of PPE, coupled with limited equipment, meant some people withdraw from services earlier and this impacted their mental health."*

Recommendations

Leveraging existing resources:

- To minimise the chance of exacerbating inequalities and disadvantage, in-person contact needs to remain an option during the digitisation of government services, given the digital divide is pronounced for people with disabilities

- To minimise people feeling unsafe and unnecessarily withdrawing services, ensure consistency of PPE messaging to assure people having the choice to remain engaged with services.

- Where people receive funding from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), communication needs to be clear about who has carriage to meet educational needs e.g. laptop provision.

New funding:

- Provide access to a tutoring fund as recommended by the Grattan Institute and/or catch up programs in schools to allow for working with kids in small groups to bring them up to their required level and get their confidence back up. Particularly important for kids with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Further themes as well as recommendations are detailed in our COVID-19 Insight Series on People with a Disability.

Acknowledgements

Further reading

Visit bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/ to continue reading.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage.

Our mission is to pursue lasting change; to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive.

To learn more please visit **bsl.org.au**

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