

ANNUAL REPORT

2019-2020

riac
your rights, your voice



RESPECT

Valuing Lived Experience, and listening with an attitude of humility.

INDEPENDENCE

supporting individuals' capacity-building, and helping people thrive; an organisation that is separate from governments and which is diversely-funded

ACCEPTANCE

everyone validated equally, and as their authentic selves

COLLABORATION

user-led, teamwork within, partnering externally

Better Together

This year's Annual Report is based on our fourth value: Collaboration.

We would like to thank each community member, staff and board members that have contributed to the creation of this year's annual report.

We hope that you enjoy reading about what RIAC have experienced and achieved during this extraordinary year.



Art Work by Nicole James



Health
and Human
Services

Leadership⁺
Plus



Villamanta Disability Rights
Legal Service Inc.



MJB Consulting
@MJBConsultingServices
Professional service



Australian Government
Department of Social Services



ellis
creative
A DIGITAL DESIGN & PRINT AGENCY



MOORE



MGR
ACCOUNTANTS
YOUR BUSINESS ADVISERS FOR LIFE



RIAC acknowledges all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Elders and respected persons (past, present and emerging) and recognise their connection to country, water and community.



RIAC is committed to: ensuring diversity and equality in regard to disability, gender, race, religion or belief, ethnic origin, marital status, sexual orientation or transgender status.





FROM THE CHAIR

Edmund Wong



On behalf of the RIAC Board, I am pleased to present this year's Chair report. The past year has been an extremely important one for RIAC, with changes on the board, senior executive team, the disability sector, and then to top it off, the global pandemic that has changed our way of life and that of the people we serve.

Firstly, the Board would like to thank Sarah Noel and Brooke Down for their service as board members and also welcome Michelle Church, Albert Amadei, and David Wu whose expertise and contribution have been invaluable to the organisation.

This year there have been several notable achievements including developing RIAC's strategic plan for the next two years and refining our governance structure thanks to the work of the senior executive team and the board through the guidance of Megane Buntine at MJB Consulting.

Additionally, we have developed and fine-tuned our financial reporting and project management through the guidance from our accounting partners at Moore Australia.



It was the first full year with Karryn Goode as our CEO and what a challenging year it was! However, when you take look at the achievements of Karryn, her executive team, and all the staff at RIAC, they have shown the ability to innovate and deliver outcomes in an ever-changing environment:

- To achieve an increase of over 40% in income through additional government grants is exceptional. This further solidifies RIAC's financial position with a 20% increase in retained earnings which will enable us to reinvest and enhance our offerings to the people we serve.
- The executive team was able to consolidate the RIAC brand and expand outreach and awareness through digital and social media.
- Early planning and preparation through technology and digital readiness enabled RIAC to adapt and still be operational, continuing to provide our services through Victoria's lockdown periods.
- Karryn and the team showed how selective partnering with multiple organisations provided synergies to enable the delivery of vital services in regional areas.

This year has taught us all to be more resilient and innovative through adversity. Our passion and commitment to advocating for people with disabilities across the region remain strong and the board would like to thank and acknowledge RIAC staff and volunteers for embracing this on a daily basis.

Edmund Wong



FROM THE CEO

KARRYN GOODE



As I write, the world is in the middle of an extraordinary crisis. It is undeniable that people have shifted their priorities during these unusual times. And this is more so for people with disabilities, their families and carers who are concerned for their own health and safety before anything else. All RIAC staff commenced working remotely from March 2020. Remote work was enabled by technologies including VPNs, virtual meetings, cloud technology, work collaboration tools and virtual backgrounds to preserve the privacy of our homes. In addition to preventing the spread of the virus, remote work also saved commute time and provided greater flexibility.

Yet remote work also imposes many challenges. Employees have experienced loneliness and a lack of work/life balance. As an organization, RIAC needed to ensure we have the correct policies, procedures, and tools in place to continue our great work remotely. Almost daily, our staff discuss updates on restrictions on movement that governments have announced and make many phone calls to clients to reach out and check on their welfare. Many of the staff have noted it is difficult to achieve a full understanding of complex situations during a video or phone call.

Often, it is not until they observe someone in their own environment that they can ascertain that person's will and preference and accurately assess any risks. Everyone is worried.

Where will it go? How long will we be in lock down? Will there be another wave of infections? How are our loved ones? People with disability represent some of the most excluded of all Australians in relation to the impacts of the COVID-19.

At the same time, many people with disability are particularly at risk from COVID-19, because of barriers that exist to their inclusion, and need for ongoing support. Many people with disability have seen changes in their lives from the current public health emergency. These include increased expenses, changes to supports and changes to healthcare. Some of these changes have been positive, with increased access to services online or on the phone. But many of the changes have had a negative impact on people where access and inclusion were already an issue.

For many of us, the lockdown will continue for many months, and so will these effects. So, it feels odd to take you back to what we achieved and learned last year. But life also goes on in a funny kind of way. So here goes. Our services still remain free and available to anyone who identifies as having a disability, family members and carers across 22 local government areas, spanning Regional Victoria and Southern New South Wales. RIAC is not a service provider under the NDIS which allows us to remain independent and act solely on behalf of community members without a conflict of interest or fear of retribution.

The 2019-2020 year has been a period of growth in the work of RIAC. Thanks to the great work of the staff, with the help of the board and our volunteers, we have continued to strengthen our foundations, increase our impact of both individual advocacy and systemic advocacy. The Shepparton and Bendigo sites have had to relocate to larger offices to accommodate the additional staff and projects.

Our individual advocacy cases continued to experience a significant increase in requests for support, and at one point we made the difficult decision to close the wait list for several weeks to focus on existing clients.



In June we wrapped up the very successful National Disability Insurance Scheme - ILC Capacity Building Project in our Wimmera location. A project like this naturally raised the profile of RIAC and our expertise in disability advocacy. This project in partnership with Woodbine Inc. identified a significant lack of services for people with disability, their family members and carers in the Wimmera area. As part of the project, the two organisations came together and undertook a workshop on how to be a 'user led' organisation. The day was facilitated by Megan Buntine from MJB Consulting Services and each organisation came away from the workshop with an action plan on becoming more user-led.

Our Wimmera project worker facilitated meetings with our Advisory Committee, which consisted of community members, family members, people with disability and carers who provided feedback and advice to the Executive Team on a range of matters.

The evaluation of the project has been forwarded to the Department Social Services to advocate for further disability advocacy funding in the area. Time will tell if any of the recommendations work into the 'real world' experience.

We welcome the Australian Federal Governments announcement of a Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. RIAC expressed its support for the inquiry and committed to supporting community members and employees to engage with the Commission. It is RIAC's intention to make a submission to the Royal Commission, focusing on its commitment to upholding the human rights of people with disability.

In December RIAC underwent a surveillance audit on multiple sites, which is essential for us to continue our continuous improvement in service delivery and to ensure that we are aligned to the current standards.



RIAC is now in readiness to undertake our recertification in March 2021.

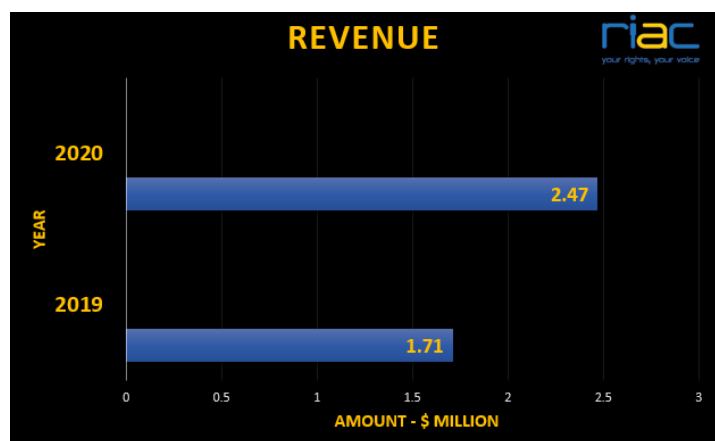
One of our values is 'collaboration' – user-led, teamwork within partnering externally. This year saw collaboration remain a core element of our work.

Our sincere appreciation to the many families, supporters, donors and sponsors who generously provided assistance throughout 2019-2020

- **Woodbine Inc**
- **MJB Consulting**
- **Ellis Creative**
- **Moore Australia**
- **MGR IT**
- **Our Ambassadors – Carol Cooke and Nartarsha Bamblett**
- **WMC Accounting**
- **Quality Service Improvement**
- **DJ Fuzzy Logic**
- **Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Services. Inc**
- **Leadership Plus**
- **Mark Humphrey (IDPWD 2019 compilation video)**

Our major fundraiser for the year saw RIAC host 'Rock In And Celebrate' which coincided with International Day of People with Disability activities. The event held at GMHBA saw staff, board members, community, family and carers dress up, wear face masks and dance the night away from the tunes of DJ Fuzzy Logic, followed by a silent auction of generous items donated by the community. This event could not have been undertaken without the support of the committee (Geelong RIAC Staff) and the generosity from business and community.

Throughout the year we continue to influence the policy environment collaborate with peak bodies and other disability advocacy organisations by lodging 33 submissions to National inquiries and reviews. These submissions focus on making a more inclusive community through changes to legislations, policies and practices that ensure the collective rights and interests of people with a disability are served.



RIAC is currently:

- An active member of Disability Advocacy Victoria
- An active member Greater Shepparton Disability Advisory Committee
- An active member of VICDAN
- A member of DANA
- An active member of Horsham Special School Board
- An active member of NDIS Reference Group for Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee Member



It was a year that saw us reassess how we can continue to deliver our services, despite the crisis. Turning to technology to support the delivery of our service has meant for some staff members, upskilling in Information Technology. Using platforms such as ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Messenger and hearing those dreaded words.....

"You are on mute"

I wish to acknowledge and pay tribute to those who have stood by us this year. Our board members and staff have contributed to the ongoing management of the organisation, and to acknowledge their commitment and professionalism in undertaking and guiding the work of RIAC.

We thank our advisors, funders, the encouragers, and our partners.

Thank you.



Art Work by Troy Firebrace




KARRYN GOODE

FROM THE OPERATIONS MANAGER

2019-2020 has been a great year for continuous improvement and change for RIAC. Many challenges have been thrown our way this year, however RIAC has stood its ground and continued to provide exceptional service to our clients.

A worldwide pandemic threw everyone off track unexpectedly however, operationally RIAC was in a great position to manage these unique challenges with great IT and staff.

One of the major operational projects for 2019-2020 was to review all RIAC's programs. This was to ensure that all programs were delivering outcomes efficiently and line with Government standards and reporting procedures. Increased demands with limited to no increase in funding meant that we had to rethink service delivery to meet on-going targets while having increased operational costs.

Submissions to funding bodies enabled RIAC to alert the Government to the lack of funding in Regional Victoria to support the communities most vulnerable. Unfortunately, the submissions have been noted however there has been no increase to funding at this point. RIAC continues to lobby Government systemically to advocate for changes to the sector and funding increases.

Networking and branding played a major role within RIAC's operational advancement over the past year. Building and developing working relationships has enabled a stronger voice across the sector and increased brand awareness within the communities we service.

We have also introduced new additions to our Client Database (CDS) to ensure that we are on track to have a paperless system and we are meeting all standards and guidelines set by our funding bodies. This has also enabled better tracking of client data and progression of matters over all our programs.

Through the diversity and change of 2019-2020 our staff have managed to think creatively to continue to support our clients. RIAC has also shown that we are a respected service within our communities and the sector and will continue this path into the 2020-2021 financial year.

The new financial year begins with some uncertainty however, with funding cuts on the horizon, legislative changes within the sector and the NDIA, budget changes due to the Coronavirus and an ever-growing need for advocacy assistance. RIAC will need to continue to be innovative to be able to sustain the high-level service delivery we are known for.

Well done to an amazing and supportive team.

Nicole James



DISABILITY ROYAL COMMISSION MANAGER

Amanda Robinson



Advocacy support for Disability Royal Commission is now available in all of Regional Victoria, in particular, Bendigo, Geelong, Horsham, Mildura, Shepparton and surrounding areas.

People with disability living in these locations or nearby areas and who have experienced violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation can now access free and independent advocacy support from RIAC.

Around 4.4 million Australians have disability and research shows they are more likely to experience violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation than people without disability.

We are one of 50 providers to receive additional funding from the Australian Government to provide individual advocacy support to help people engage with the Disability Royal Commission.

I was fortunate enough to be given the role as Manager of the Disability Royal Commission Advocacy Team, in conjunction with my appointment in Quality Assurance. Late last year, I started engaging other advocacy services across the Victorian and Tasmania region, and established a network of support services, who now meet on a monthly basis to share resources, referrals, and make systemic submissions.

We feel privileged to work collaboratively with advocacy services, , Commissioners, and Legal and Counselling services, who are also funded to provide support to people with Disability who wish to make a submission.

We further have had the privilege of people with a lived-experience presenting at our meetings after they have made a submission at a public hearing. They were able to share their experiences, what to expect, and advise us how we can best support people during their submission.

Earlier this year, we welcomed a new staff member- Rusi Varani, who joins us from Brisbane, QLD. Rusi has a law background and was employed to assist our community members to make their submissions to the Disability Royal Commission, which is open to receive submissions until April 2022. Rusi is also assisting people with Advocacy and NDIS Appeals matters.

Felicity Grosse's, a valued current NDIS Appeals advocate, role has expanded to support people to make their submission.

18

Submissions made to the Commission

12%

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community members made a submission



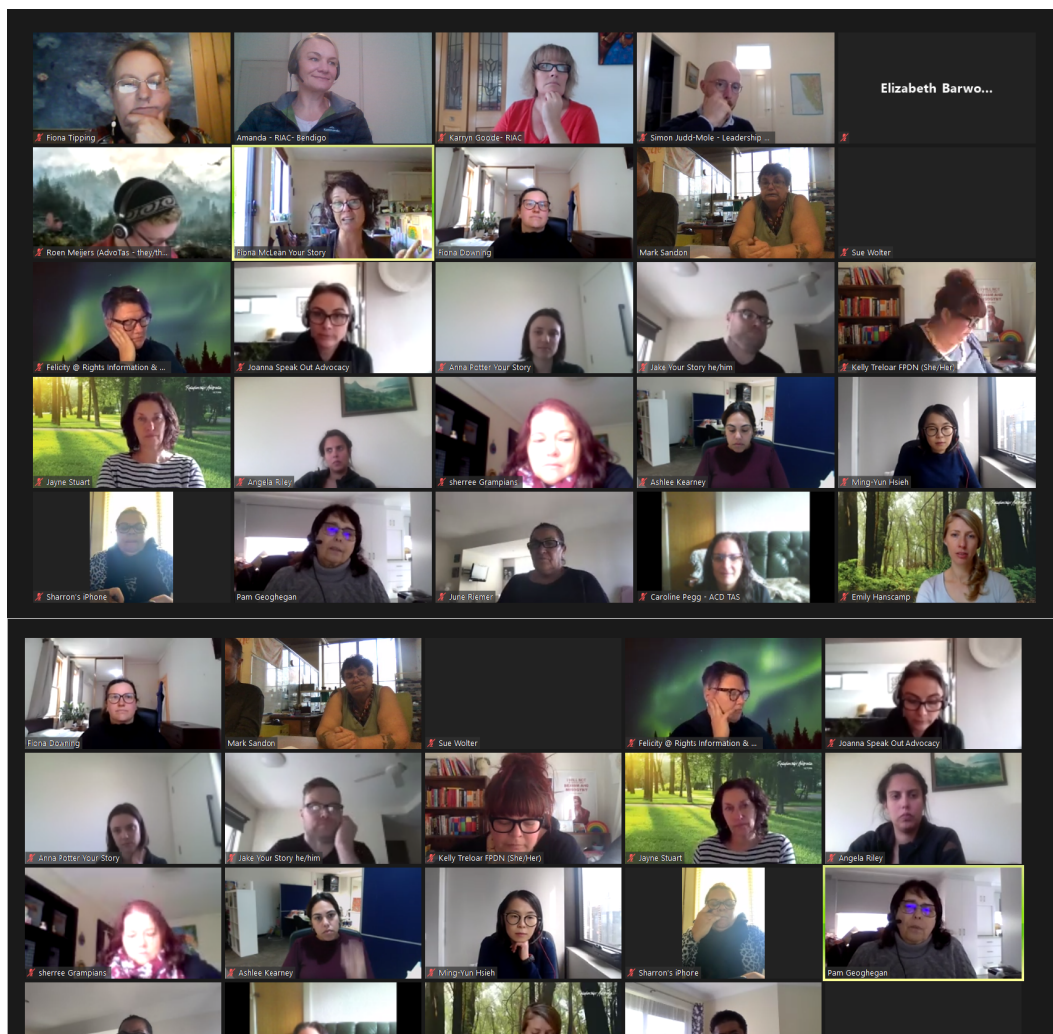
Written by Amanda Robinson Photo by Amanda Robinson.

Unfortunately, with the current pandemic, our ability to meet with individuals, enter facilities, group homes, prisons and other regions has been impeded.

In spite of this, our advocates have been extremely creative and accessed country radio stations, emails, calls, joining other internal service provider meetings and actively networked and provided education in regional, rural and remote communities to *spread the word* about the Disability Royal Commission. They have drawn on multiple technological resources and platforms such as phone recording apps, text and video recording and conferencing, all to safely capture people's stories to have their voices heard.

Whilst this does not replace the *very* important face-to-face experience of advocacy support, the team have worked diligently to ensure the experience for people is accessible as possible, inclusive, culturally sensitive and trauma informed.

We do look forward to the return to COVID 'Normal', and providing our support, sharing information and resources with as many people as possible.



The DRC Monthly Network ZOOM meeting

OUR TEAM LEADERS

Team Leaders play a very important role within RIAC. They oversee the day to day operations of the programs and staff. Reporting to the Operations Manager they provide information on challenges, successes and well-being of the staff they lead.

Rachael has been in her role as Advocacy and NDIS Appeals Team Leader for her second year and consistently leads her staff in manner that builds respect, confidence and drive. She has developed a presence within the Geelong region and is known for her systemic work and lobbying.

Terri-ann was promoted into the role of Access and Support Team Leader this year. She leads the HACC and CHSP team. This role utilises Terri-ann's skills and experience and will challenge her to develop her leadership skills. Terri-ann is well respected by her team and has developed passion in her team to build on performance.



Rachael Thompson



Terri-ann McGill

ACCESS AND SUPPORT PROGRAM

It has been a busy and innovative year for the Access and Support Program, and we have been privileged to Welcome our new Staff member, Cyndie Fox to our Mildura Office. Cyndie has qualifications in Social Work and has contributed a significant amount of hours to the program. Cyndie is well connected with the community in Mildura and has joined many of RIAC's subcommittees, namely the Reconciliation Action Plan group. (RAP) for the development of a RAP for RIAC.

Especially since March this year, the Access and Support program have been looking into using technology to assist with providing support at assessments, and to start up some Home and Community care (HACC) groups.

Access and Support program have linked in with RIAC's New Community Engagement Officer to look for gaps in groups for people under 65.

We continue to provide our Community Home Support Program for those aged over 65 years, where we provide support linking this age group into support services and to gain access to My Aged Care packages,

We have begun to develop some workshops that will provide information, and allow the participants are able to join a peer- led peer support group with the initial support of RIAC.

The Access and Support Program have developed a strong working relationship with MIND (Bendigo) and MASP (Mildura) to link our clients into mental health support via the Psychosocial Recovery Program.

Unfortunately the second half of this financial year of this year has not come without its challenges.

Working from home without face to face consultation with clients has been extremely challenging for both our staff and clientele. A large portion of the Access and Support Programs work is based of visual clues to assist with knowing what services to offer a client to be linked into. People that have cognitive impairment/memory loss or are illiterate are more disadvantaged during the COVID-19 period.

Further, there continues to be limited affordable housing options within the Local Government Areas where Access and Support Program offer support, and an increase in homelessness. Housing services are stretched and have some initiatives in place to assist people that are able to afford private rental properties. Those people that are not able to afford the private rental market are becoming more financially and socially isolated.

Many of our clients that are applying for access to NDIS are financially disadvantaged and are not able to afford the cost of services to be able to gather supporting evidence. For example, clients that have psychosocial disabilities that are not able to afford the gap fee to access psychological reports and assessments to submit with the Access Request Form.

In 2019 RIAC completed assertive outreach to service providers about RIAC and the services offered in the Swan Hill region. RIAC Access and support Program has also provided Case Studies to the diversity officer and had interactions with the Sectoral Development Officer to assist with systematic advocacy for Swan Hill residents. This was is that more community members and services are aware of; and can be referred to Access and Support program.

Unfortunately, not many referrals have eventuated from this process as many community members are deciding to not engage with services, due to fear of COVID-19.

Overall, this year has been one of both challenges and achievement. The team have achieved some great outcomes and our highest yet level of engagement in the community.

We are hoping that as the return to the new 'normal' that we have become more resilient and creative during this time as we try to look at this time through an optimistic lens.

We will continue to provide services to ensure the safety and well-being of those that we support is of the highest priority.

2384

**HACC hours recorded from
July 1st 2019-June 30th 2020**

1570

**CHSP hours recorded from
July 1st 2019-June 30th 2020**

CASE STUDY: ACCESS & SUPPORT PROGRAM

A Day in the life of an Access and Support Officer

RIAC Access and Support Officers can provide support to between 15 and 30 clients at a time. They often receive referrals that indicate that a client is only required to be linked to a couple of supports or funding.

This case study is a demonstration of how a referral that has been received is not always reflective of the carer/client situation.

What is often one issue can end up being several, and the premise that the referral is made, is not always the most pressing issue for the client or carer.

Referral

A 76 year old Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) man living in regional and remote Victoria was requiring assistance to understand the My Aged Care service system, and apply for a Community Home Support Package. Consent was obtained to gather required information, and make contact with services and supports on the Client's behalf.

Issues identified from Initial assessments

- Carer has mental health challenges
- Client requires an operation in Melbourne and requires his carer to attend.
- Carer is not in frame of mind to be able to support client.
- Client has the added barrier of not being able to afford the cost of transport.
- Carer is concerned about clients memory loss
- Client is socially isolated from the community
- Client depends on carer to complete household tasks
- Client has a history of denying services preferring to depend on his carer



Outcomes

- Conversation with carer about psychosocial services in their local area. Referral to National Psychosocial Support Measure for 6 months of case management to address the carer's support needs.
- Discussion about NDIS for the carer to be able to receive long term support to address their mental health concerns.
- Conversation with carer about Carers Gateway - the support and funding available that can support them in their caring role.

CASE STUDY: ACCESS & SUPPORT PROGRAM CONTINUED....

Throughout this process, the Access and Support Officer:

- supported the carer to contact Carer Gateway and self-refer to Carer's Support Services.
- researched transport and support options for client to be able to travel to Melbourne for the operation he requires without the direct support of his carer.
- contacted Hospital door to door patient transport to investigate eligibility and referral process.
- contacted client's GP to initiate referral to this fully funded program.
- supported client to attend his GP to be referred to the memory clinic to get his memory assessed.
- supported client and carer to refer to Dementia Australia for support and information about memory loss.
- supported client to make inquiries into joining a local cultural club. COVID-19 impacted on groups being able to meet.
- will look into this further when restrictions ease.
- provided information and support to access Commonwealth Home Support Program funded social activities. COVID-19 has impacted on groups being able to meet and will follow this up after restrictions ease.
- provided information to the carer and client regarding home care packages and a list of providers in the region for the client to choose from once he receives his letter of offer for a package.
- supported the client to go through the assessment process to ensure that his needs are taken into consideration when being offered a package.
- monitored current supports client has been linked into to ensure all the client and carer care needs are being met. If required, The Access and Support Officer will support client and carer to access the services they have been referred to.
- When COVID-19 restrictions have been eased Access and Support Officer will follow up with social groups for client.
- Once the client has been notified by My Aged Care (MAC) that a Community Home Support Package (CHSP) has been allocated, the Access and Support Officer will assist the client to get signed up to a package provider before closing the case.
- After referrals are made and issues resolved, the Access and Support Officer will follow up with the client a few months later, to see if they are still engaged and receiving supports.

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR CARERS

...AND THE NEW COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFFICER ROLE



It has been a great year for the Strengthening Parents Support Program (SPSP). Our group facilitator, Christine, walked alongside parents, carers and families over the year, with at least half of this year, she spent remotely supporting these groups via phone and teleconferencing.

This year we sadly farewelled Christine from the role, and have welcomed our newest staff member, Ellen Kelly.

Ellen is a passionate and enthusiastic innovator, and has been employed as the Community Engagement Officer. Ellen will facilitate our Support Groups for Carers (SGC) program and will also assist our HACC program with the development of educational, support and peer groups for people and carers aged 18 – 65 years old.

Ellen holds qualifications in childcare and a degree in Advocacy and Mediation. She is dedicated to building a career advocating for the acceptance and social inclusion of marginalised, disadvantaged, and vulnerable people in our communities.

We believe that the remainder of 2020 and into 2021 will see a lot of changes in this space as we have been forced to be creative with our group work during these challenging times.

We continue to embrace these changes, and are always looking to our community members to inform us of the best possible ways to support our community now and into the future.

Inglewood & Surrounds
Support Group for Carers

Bendigo & District Support
Group for Carers

Kalianna Kinship
Support Group

Wedderburn & District
Support Group for Carers

Maryborough Support
Group for Carers

Kerang Support Group
for Carers

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR CARERS

...AND THE NEW **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFFICER** ROLE

Our Groups can be in the following regions:

- The City of Greater Bendigo
- Loddon Shire
- Gannawarra Shire
- Swan Hill Shire
- Mildura Shire
- Buloke Shire
- Campaspe Shire
- Mount Alexander Shire
- Macedon Ranges
- Central Goldfields Shire



If you are aware of a need for a group for either People with Disability or their carers, located in any of these regions, please contact Ellen Kelly on 5222 5499 to discuss.



ADVOCACY AND NDIS APPEALS

Written by Rachael Thompson

It is commendable how the team has adapted to the challenges of delivering advocacy support for NDIS Appeals during COVID 19. Despite being unable to provide outreach support to our clients the team has maintained positive Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) outcomes for our clients appealing NDIS decisions. The team are required to work collaboratively with clients and their support team, tribunal registrars, Victoria Legal Aid Lawyers, NDIA Lawyers and delegates. Advocates have been able to build rapport with clients using virtual meetings phone calls and have achieved successful outcomes for clients.

Our team has also had successes settling matters through the NDIA's Early Resolutions Team without requiring Legal Aid assistance. The NDIS Appeals National and State Teleconferences are a chance for disability advocacy organisations to meet monthly to discuss concerns, share ideas and initiate systemic action relating to NDIS Appeals nationally and within Victoria. RIAC has provided valuable monthly representation for every teleconference.

Prior to COVID 19, Geelong hosted several NDIS Appeals and Reviews workshops in the community with the funding of grant received from the Geelong City Council. Bill Shorten, NDIS Shadow Minister and Libby Coker, member of the Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on the NDIS featured at one of these workshops. The team also collaborated with Wathaurong the local Aboriginal Co-operative and local NDIS partner Latrobe Community Health to host a successful workshop. The workshop was also recorded and is available on the RIAC website as a community resource.



RIAC and Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) have partnered to prepare a mutually beneficial workshop to build the capacity of both organisations in NDIS Appeals. Our NDIS Appeals advocates have prepared a workshop to build the capacity of VLA to support people with disability and VLA will upskill NDIS Appeals advocates with their legal expertise. This partnership ultimately benefits our clients and builds our important relationship with VLA. COVID-19 has postponed the completion of this project, RIAC and VLA are in discussions to present this workshop virtually.

Melbourne University have a dedicated NDIS Legal Clinic where law students are supported to complete projects for organisations within the sector. RIAC has partnered with Melbourne University for a project relating to the creation of an Administrative Appeals Tribunal decision database to be embedded on the RIAC website as a unique resource to benefit the community.

620

**Advocacy Cases opened from
July 1st 2019-June 30th 2020**

ADVOCACY AND NDIS APPEALS

It has been an excellent yet challenging year for our Advocacy and NDIS Appeals programs.

I will speak to our challenges, and keep in mind that many of these challenges gave rise to our systemic advocacy submissions and provided the much needed evidence to create change in the system.

Increased demand of AAT matters

NDIS decisions for access, funding in plan and review of access can often be applied strictly, inconsistently and rushed. This has resulted in an increased demand for participants and prospective participants seeking reviews and appeals of NDIS decisions. Advocacy organisations nationally have noted an increase in demand for AAT support which is causing waitlists and a strain on services.

Decrease in NDIS Appeals funding has reduced staff at RIAC

In June 2020 the funding for NDIS Appeals was reduced by 20% across the sector nationally. A part time advocate in the Geelong area was made redundant as a result of this reduction. Naturally this has caused additional strain on the capacity of the team.

Decrease in Victoria Legal Aid funding

The 20% NDIS Appeals funding reduction also extended to VLA . Due to the adversarial nature of the AAT process and the high work load and expense involved in gathering evidence, VLA play a critical role in the NDIS Appeals process.

If clients receive a package of VLA funding support they receive funding for specialist evidence and professional legal guidance which RIAC is not funded to perform. Outcomes for clients, especially for complex matters are more favourable with VLA funding.

Due to the decrease in funding, wait times for VLA funding outcomes have dramatically increased. This has resulted in even greater workload and strain for NDIS Appeals Advocates to progress matters at the AAT without Legal support or to seek pro bono support elsewhere.



53

**Cases at the Tribunal opened from
July 1st 2019-June 30th 2020**



ADVOCACY AND NDIS APPEALS

Increasing challenges with NDIS AAT processes

Our NDIS Appeals Advocates are reporting increased delays in the AAT process and increasing demands from the NDIS regarding evidence from NDIS participants or prospective participants to justify funding. The delays have a significant impact on the wellbeing of our clients and additional reports place a further strain on participants NDIS funding if available.



COVID-19 challenges

COVID-19 has presented numerous challenges for the NDIS Appeals process. Firstly, not being able to conduct initial face to face meetings with clients has been difficult. If clients do not have access to internet the team have conducted phone meetings which can be challenging to build rapport and trust with clients who are going through a challenging experience.

Of course our clients have been incredibly understanding during this time and acknowledge our team is doing all we can to support them.

Secondly, AAT matters involve a lot of evidence to be collected and reviewed by advocates and due to COVID-19 our clients are facing significant delays for further assessments which is impacting the progress of AAT applications. This cause further stress on our clients.



ADVOCACY AND NDIS APPEALS CASE STUDY



Our client's carer and great-grandmother sought RIAC's assistance to apply for an NDIS Internal Review, requesting funding for two additional terms at Mansfield Autism School.

Our client is a nine year old boy who has a complex history, and several diagnoses, including an Intellectual disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, Severe language disorder, Extreme injurious aggression including biting, swearing and otherwise melting down, and complicated domestic circumstances, with his biological mother having been recently released from prison, and his biological father also having a mild intellectual disability.

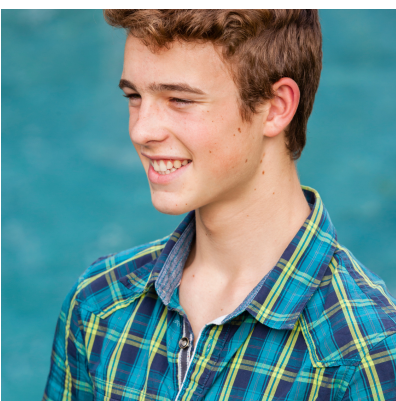
The outcome of the Internal Review was that funding for only one of the two terms at Mansfield Autism School was granted, despite the fact that all of the supporting medical evidence suggested that two terms was needed.

It was then decided that the outcome would be appealed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT). An application was also made to Victoria Legal Aid for legal assistance, which was successful.

Following several discussions with the NDIA's Early Resolution team, a very generous outcome was reached where our client was granted funding for an additional 2 terms at Mansfield Autism School (three terms in total), which amounted to funding totalling \$762,000!

The young boy is now receiving intense, targeted therapies which are very supportive of his complex needs.

It was a remarkable outcome for a very deserving little boy and his family!



PROJECT MANAGER

ILC: 'RIGHT-ON, ASK ME, HEAR ME, INCLUDE ME' PROJECT

Our 'Right-On, Ask Me, Hear Me, Include Me' Project was a great success, with over 120 people taking part in the 12 month project, with 60 group sessions facilitated, for 10 different group topics. The Average group size was about 5 people, with overall participation at over 350 attendees in total. The project established great community connections and opportunities for learning new skills which were well received by the participants, and are particularly needed in regional areas with a general lack of similar opportunities.

Each group was tailored and accessible- designed with the particular needs of the participants which contributed to positive learning outcomes. These groups were directly requested by people in the community/advisory group as to what they were interested in.

A marked outcome of the project was that the participants said that they felt more comfortable to consider living independently as they have new skills/awareness and confidence. Phone Apps and other information modalities were referenced and now utilised by participants increasing their safety and awareness as members of the community.

The project coordinator, Alyson Clements, was able to easily establish trust and gain participation for project activities due to her previous work and familiarity with the community.

Her knowledge of NDIS access/plans/reviews and other Government systems enabled her to understand what areas people were seeking capacity building in.

The project was supported by a strong Project Management approach, with appropriate opportunities for meetings, discussion and reflection. The group met and determined their purpose, and informed the direction of the project.



Lance Youston

The Advisory group made recommendations also for other program service delivery outside the project. The Advisory group was connected to the community through guests at meetings.

A respectful, safe space was created. The advisory group were an essential ingredient of the project, and assisted the project team to test ideas, to get clearer around communication/language, and to embed 'user led' practice in a practical way.

A literal 'voice at the table' opportunity was created and realised as ideas and feedback were then implemented in project design. Opportunities for integration of the advisory group into the wider community were initiated and will be continued after the life of the project.

The Project formed a partnership Steering Committee (SC) to oversee the project. The SC comprised members of RIAC & Woodbine Boards/Executive team and project officer & Manager, who met regularly to guide project targets/goals and to provide experienced knowledge, sharing and reflection as the project progressed.

RIAC as an Advocacy agency and Woodbine as a service provider have different program delivery, so had learnings and different perspectives to share and build upon. Both Woodbine and RIAC took part in a weekend workshop to explore and have a conversation about the term 'User Led'. Participants were a majority of each organisation Board, as well as senior managers. Discussions and action plans were work-shopped both together and separately. From this, each organisation developed a individual 'User Led' plan which will be actioned through the appropriate pathways of each organisation. This approach allows a whole of organisation approach to increasing the participation of people with disability in both meaningful staff/board roles, as well as effective service delivery.

150%

of Project Targets Achieved

OUR ADVISORY GROUP

ILC: 'RIGHT-ON, ASK ME, HEAR ME, INCLUDE ME' PROJECT

Lance Youston

This project has opened doors and provided a platform to our group participants, in particular for the Advisory Group to have their voices heard, whilst at the same time raise awareness in the community of their needs.

The group comprises of 8 people with different abilities and experience working in groups.

Throughout the project the Advisory Group has met once per month, putting forward their ideas for group topics, educational sessions and addressing issues with service providers.

They also organised Action Groups to carry out tasks with the support of RIAC's Project Coordinator. One member had the idea to set up a private Facebook page where all members could add any relevant notifications and information, and the group began to take on a little bit more responsibility.

Staff from a variety of disability service providers were specifically invited as guest speakers to attend the Advisory Group Meetings. Consequently, working alongside people with a disability, agencies were able to obtain evidence at grass root level of their needs and desires which assist service providers develop new programs for people with disabilities.

In addition to the above, the Advisory Group was also approached by other service providers for input.

Subsequently, we are delighted to inform we are now working collaboratively with a couple of local service providers.. Whilst we remain independent, we are working alongside each other to ensure the best outcomes for people with disability to fill in some of the service gaps in this region.

The change is enormous as many of the Advisory Group Members had never participated in groups, nor ventured that far from their own homes.

RIAC and other local Agencies value the Advisory Groups feedback in entities such as our easy read documents or you tube clips explaining NDIS etc., and all go through the Advisory Group for their input.

The Advisory Group Participants are enjoying new found friendships, supporting each other and most importantly being part of a group brings a true sense of belonging. Through this work, the Advisory Group Members are learning new skills and developing capacity building qualities. Workshops deemed by the Advisory Group as an educational necessity was the Fire Safety in the home and outdoors sessions; an important issue, (especially here in the Country) and we opened up free workshops for people with a disability to come along and participate.

These sessions were most informative with a great deal of participation by all attendees. So much so, that people, together with their support agencies began asking for more educational sessions like this to help participants further develop their knowledge.

The service providers saw huge benefits in this style of educational programs (and learned a few things from the sessions themselves); in fact RIAC are being approached by other service providers who heard of our workshops, are calling and asking if there are to be more of these sessions in the future for their clients.

The Advisory Group are keen to have further workshops which will teach/build upon existing skills, such as road safety, self-care self-regulation, budgeting and many more. The drive for change is being created through these groups as people with disabilities are learning many new skills, including knowledge about their rights; simultaneously, service providers are gaining insight into the needs of people with a disability.

This one year project provided the ideal space for people with disabilities to come together in a safe supported environment and trial being part of a group. RIAC Project Coordinator, assisted people to participate at their own pace. By providing each person with gentle encouragement, this enabled the group members to regularly step well out of their comfort zones.

We are very excited to continue this great work into the future with further funding opportunities, especially given the vast remoteness of many of our community emmbers in regional, rural and remote Victoria.



WALKING WITH PROJECT

Lance Youston

The Walking With project has facilitated greater engagement with the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander community.

A positive working relationship with Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative has enabled greater referrals to RIAC for Advocacy support. The project has allowed our advocates to engage in a wider range of community events and build relationships with a range of broader community organisations, who work closely with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the Shepparton region.

Due to the restrictions and health risks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, the support for the community has been mostly by phone or other on-line platforms. As restrictions ease and the opportunities for face-face engagement return, an emphasis on assertive outreach will be undertaken.

As part of the project, RIAC will be talking to the users of our service in regards to the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions, and what support, referrals and assistance is required now and into 2021.

RIAC through projects such as Walking With has the intention of building positive working relationships with all the ACCHO's in the areas we service. We strive to always work in a culturally appropriate and safe manner.

RIAC is currently undertaking a Reconciliation Action Plan process to review and build upon our commitment to work with and respond to the needs of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Community.

Walking With is a project inspired by the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and RIAC is proud and dedicated to play our part in realising the aspirations of this call for action.



VOICE TREATY TRUTH

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER MANAGER

Daryl Sloan

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advocacy program works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members with disability, their family and carers within the LGA's of Greater Shepparton, Moira, Strathbogie, Mitchell, Murrindindi and Campaspe.

Assertive outreach to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members is of major strategic importance in building relationships of mutual trust and respect for RIAC Advocates to be able to engage, provide advocacy and meet the community's needs. Considerable effort and time is put into face to face assertive outreach at such as NAIDOC,

Sorry Day and Reconciliation events. Approximately 15 percent of our work role is put into outreach to engage with community members to ensure a constant workload for the coming months.



This usually includes significant travel time, between July 2019 and March 2020, 16,672 kilometres were driven. Since C-19, there have been no assertive outreach undertaken and very little face to face contact with community members.

Advocates are known within the communities as "go to people" regardless of the day of the week, time of day; it's all about relationships and mutual trust. Most people wouldn't even know who we worked for, it's the outcomes achieved that matter most to them.

Community relationships has led to referrals to RIAC's Disability Royal Commission Advocate giving Aboriginal people whom were placed into what today is so poorly known as "State Care" the opportunity to share their personal stories to the current Royal Commission. The resilience these abuse survivors have continues to amaze and leaves hope they will one day see justice applied.



ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ADVOCACY CASE STUDY

A rise in Elder Abuse by family members has been noted in reviewing last year's issues, these are time consuming and complex cases as the abuse may be hidden behind a false veil of "cultural response" and social isolation of the victim perpetrated against.

Obviously, basic human rights are ignored and trampled upon. The more one advocates in such cases, the more offending behaviour is uncovered. Court Hearings, VCAT applications, restraining orders, police statements and criminal charges may latter result.



For thirty years RIAC has had a stance of not seeking the appointment by VCAT of either a guardian or financial administrator, always advocating on the community members wishes but this year that changed and this aboriginal advocate made application to VCAT for the appointment of a financial administrator.

This was made to protect a person who was cognitively unable to make that decision themselves. The VCAT matter was heard (by Zoom) with all parties participating. The sitting member was a highly experienced person who ultimately made the decision for the appointment due to evidence sourced by the Advocate.

Another terrific outcome that will make a vast improvement in the quality of life for another person.

Daryl Sloan

SYSTEMIC ADVOCACY

Systemic Advocacy at RIAC focuses on making a more inclusive community through changes to legislation, policies and practices which ensure the collective rights and interests of people with disability are provided.

RIAC's systemic advocacy strives to enable people with a disability to:

- Exercise their human rights and citizenship status within their local communities.
- Inform and influence the policies and practices of disability service agencies, governments and other authorities.
- Have control and influence over the decisions and choices which affect their lives.
- Influence public understanding and attitudes.

In order to achieve systemic change, RIAC works in partnership with other organisations to make submissions to government, publish Position Statements on issues affecting people with disability, provide education and awareness on systemic issues, and work with other organisations to maximise its systemic influence.

Our team work collaboratively within a range of networks, alliances, advisory groups and representative bodies.

YOU CAN READ SOME OF OUR SUBMISSIONS HERE:

<https://riac.org.au/systemic-advocacy/>



WE HAVE MADE

33

SUBMISSIONS

AND SPENT OVER

200 HOURS

ADVOCATING

SYSTEMICALLY

FOR CHANGE

**FROM JUNE 30
2019 TO JULY
1ST 2020**



ROCK IN AND CELEBRATE 2019



International Day of People with Disability

OUR AMBASSADORS



CAROL COOKE AM

Australian Paralympic Gold Medallist in Cycling, Motivational Speaker and Author, Carol inspires us to believe that nothing is impossible if we dare to face our fears and believe in ourselves.

In 2016 Carol officially joined us as an Ambassador; in the same year she also won two gold medals at the Rio Paralympics, was named Australian and Victorian Female Para Cyclist of the Year and Victorian Cyclist of the Year.

To find out more about Carol visit her website or connect with her on Facebook.



NARTARSHA NAPANAGKA BAMBLETT

Nartarsha Napanagka Bamblett, Scottish and Aboriginal Women from the (Yorta Yorta, Gunai Kurnai, Warlpiri, Wurradjeri) tribes.

Independent mother to son Jarrahly, working as a teacher's Aide at a primary school, apart of multiple business being Arbonne Independent Consultant, Big Sisterhood Mentor and Co-Director of Wala Impressions a cultural dance Company.

Nartarsha feels that her biggest achievement being elected to be a member of the First Peoples Assembly for the North East Region of Victoria.



Art Work by Firebrace Designs
Troy Firebrace
Aboriginal art
Aboriginal artist run and owned
Yorta Yorta. Dja Dja Wurrung.
#supportlocalartists
#regionalvictoria
Australia
www.firebracedesigns.com