

THE RIGHTS
INFORMATION
AND ADVOCACY
CENTRE

20
23

RIAC ANNUAL

REPORT

Who we are

The Rights Information and Advocacy Centre [RIAC] is a rights based, person centered organisation that works to ensure the voices of people living with a disability and their carers and families are heard, and that their rights are upheld.

RIAC works one-to-one supporting individuals and carers to advocate on their behalf, and to build their capability to self-advocate. RIAC also engages in systemic advocacy to remove barriers and ensure people with a disability have control of their own lives.

Our Mission

Ensuring that the rights of people with a disability are supported and upheld by building capability to remove barriers and have control of their own lives.

Our Vision

RIAC is the leading advocacy and support provider to give voice for people experiencing disadvantage to live the life they choose.

Our Values

- Respect
- Independence
- Action
- Collaboration

From the Chair

As Chair of the Rights Information Advocacy Centre (RIAC) Board, I am pleased to introduce our annual report for 2022-2023. It has been a privilege to work with the RIAC Board, Executive Management Team, and staff this year.

During the course of the year the Board farewelled Michelle Church, Sophie Ratnutunga, Albert Amadei, Peter Carkeek, Colleen Furlanetto, Mandy Ritchie and Wilson Zhang. I sincerely thank them for their support and contribution to the organisation. This year RIAC welcomed four new and highly skilled members to the Board including Mark Poswiat, Louise Halliwell, Kathryn Londrigan, and Bich Jennings.



From the left: Diane Coulbourn (A&S Officer), Carli Leishman (Chair of RIAC) and Susie Wilson (Advocate).
Picture: Three women smiling and standing in front of a RIAC Sign at a community event.

In December 2022 I had the pleasure of attending RIAC's pop up stall at the Sunraysia Farmers Market for the International Day of People with a Disability.

In January 2023 Karryn Goode finished up at RIAC, and I thank her for her contribution to the organisation as a Board Member, Board Chair and CEO.

Towards the end of the financial year RIAC welcomed our new CEO Dr Sandy Ross. Sandy came to RIAC with a wealth of knowledge and experience in both advocacy and membership organisations having previously worked as the Executive Officer at Financial Counselling Victoria.

During the year in addition to our monthly virtual meetings, the Board was able to meet in person twice in November and May to work on our strategy, and in May we completed a risk workshop and had the pleasure of meeting our new CEO Sandy Ross face to face. With a view to ensuring continued good governance, the Board, along with Sandy, this year completed its first risk appetite statement for the organisation.

“With a view to ensuring continued good governance, the Board, along with Sandy, this year completed its first risk appetite statement for the organisation”.

- Carli Leishman

I thank our wonderful staff, our talented management team, and my hard-working fellow Board members. The passion, effort and dedication of everyone who contributes to the quality and quantity of RIAC’s important and diverse work continues to inspire me. I look forward to working with you all in 2023–24.



From the left: Sandy Ross (CEO) and RIAC board members- Mark Poswiat, Bich Jennings, Shannon Burdeu, Kathryn Londrigan, Beau Mittner, Louise Halliwell, Michael Curtis and Carli Leishman.

Message from our CEO

I was excited to start as the new CEO at RIAC on 15 May 2023. This means my direct experience of RIAC for the 2022-23 year only comes into the last 6 weeks of that year, so I have a limited capacity to reflect on that year as a whole. I can, however, express my appreciation for the work of the Board and staff in the organisation.



"RIAC is a well-respected, leading disability advocacy organisation, and our achievements over the year... have been readily evident and should be celebrated."

- Dr Sandy Ross

I want to acknowledge the new Board members who joined during the year and have contributed support to my first period in the role, and previous CEOs over 2022-23, Karryn Goode (July- January), Amanda Robinson (Acting, January-February) and Ken Marchingo who acted as interim CEO from February 2023 until my appointment.

RIAC is a well-respected, leading disability advocacy organisation, and our achievements over the year – for all that I am new to the organisation– have been readily evident and should be celebrated. Our work supporting clients to engage with the Disability Royal Commission concluded at the end of the year as the Commission was winding up, but this work has been integral to ensuring the voices of people with lived experience have been heard during the Royal Commission process.

Another highlight worth flagging is the work of RIAC's Manager Advocacy and NDIS Appeals, Rachael Thompson, in helping convince the new Commonwealth Government to institute a trial Independent Expert Review process to help empower clients and clear a backlog of NDIS appeals. We have continued to provide a wide range of advocacy support to people with disabilities, and also a range of access and support services for vulnerable community members.



I look forward to working with the Board and staff to improve and develop RIAC into the future.

Dr Sandy Ross, CEO



From the left: Mark Naughton, Cameron Mason, Lauren Burchell, Amanda Robinson, Sandy Ross and Vereena Robertson.

Statistics

Over the course of the year, RIAC supported various matters across all of our programs.

513
CASES

NDAP
National Disability Advocacy Program

82
APPEALS

NDIS Appeals
National Disability Insurance Scheme Appeals

1550
HOURS

Volunteer Coordination
HACC-PYP Program

2242
HOURS

CHSP (Over 65 years of age)
Commonwealth Home Support Program

2535
HOURS

HACC- PYP (Under 65 years of age)
Home and Community Care Program

11
PEOPLE

FNDAP or VDAP
First Nations Disability Advocacy Program

Operations at RIAC

As Operations Manager I oversee the National Disability Advocacy program (NDAP), NDIS Appeals program, First Nations Disability Advocacy program, Disability Royal Commission (DRC) program and the Intake Team.

Aligning with RIAC's strategic plan, the 2022-2023 financial year has focused on developing service delivery to our clients and how that will look in the future with increased demands for service and the opportunities that will come from the finalisation of the DRC program and the recommendations that will come from the report. Rachael Thompson has been Acting Operations Manager from April 2023- present and has been working diligently to ensure the continuity of Operations for RIAC. I would like to thank her for stepping up into this role in my absence.



As an organisation we have progressed in the development out our Outcomes Framework with hope to have this completed by the end of 2023. This document will assist RIAC to further understand and measure the extent to which RIAC makes a difference to people's lives and how we can further develop and improve our service provision to continue to provide services that develop capability and the improve the well-being and outcomes of the people we support.

All programs are continuing to meet targets set by our Funding bodies and staff continue to work hard to ensure client outcomes are met and service delivery is of a high standard. All staff continue to develop their skills to keep up their great work through, training opportunities provided by RIAC, self-guided research and learning, mentor sessions and meetings, networking opportunities and through any other opportunities they can.

The level of commitment and passion our staff show daily is to be commended and this is evident through great feedback from clients and our invitations to be involved in and to lead sector submissions and events among many other things. Without all their hard work we would not be seeing the outcomes that we do. So a very big thank you to all the staff at RIAC, you are all an integral part of the team and I thank you all.

-Nicole James

NDIS Appeals

Our staff supported people with **82** issues relating to NDIS Appeals. This is where we support people to understand their rights when they disagree with a decision by the NDIA and want to go to the Tribunal.

RIAC hears from our staff and community it is very intimidating and overwhelming to go to the Tribunal. Our team is working hard to make sure the NDIA understands the process needs to be re-designed with people with disabilities at the centre.

‘The support and help that I received was invaluable, helpful and first class, with the result that I have now obtained access to the NDIS after having to go to the AAT to get a result. RIAC and the staff named were invaluable and an integral part of obtaining this result after a two and a half year battle. Thank you very much for your help and support it is very much appreciated.’

- NDIS Appeals Client

RIAC supported Tammy to have her voice heard by giving evidence at a public hearing for the Joint Standing Committee inquiry into the culture of the NDIA. This was a powerful experience for Tammy who shared some great advice to ‘Keep going and fighting for what you need!’ and ‘Don’t let their decision, be the only decision!’

-Rachael Thompson A/Operations Manager



Picture: Tammy smiling after giving her evidence at the Joint Standing Committee hearing

Disability Royal Commission

With the delivery and the tabling of the final report from the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) in the Australian Parliament a few weeks ago, the DRC has finally completed its mandated task. Our RIAC (DRC) Team played a supporting role in all of these. I want to acknowledge and applaud the hard work put in by our own DRC Advocacy Team.



‘During the period under review, Our DRC team carried out community outreach through face-to-face presentations, community organisation emails, flyers, telephone calls, newspaper advertisements and radio interviews.

Towards the second half of 2022, RIAC teamed up with the YourStory Legal Team from Victoria Legal Aid (VLA), Leadership Plus Advocacy Organisation Melbourne, and two Counselling Services - Relationship Australia and Blue Knot Foundation.

We carried out joint community outreach presentations in Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura, Swan Hill and Horsham.

A week before these presentations were made, the following were carried out:

- Emails and Flyers were sent out to Disability Support Organisations, group accommodation, government departments and other disability services.
- Radio Interviews were undertaken with ABC Radio during their peak breakfast show – throughout the regional ABC Radio network.
- Newspaper advertisements were placed in both paid ads with the local newspapers and the free community newspapers.

Disability Royal Commission

A big thank you to the RIAC Board, Management and staff for the support given to the DRC Team to do their job as well as they could. Well done everyone.

-Rusi Varani, DRC Advocate



Picture: From left- Madelin Lawson (Drummond Street Services), Carolyn Maltese (RIAC), Rusi Varani (RIAC), Mercedes Martinez-Cruz (Relationships Australia), Michelle Bowler (Your Story).

From the figures received from ABC Radio, based on their average daily audience numbers, the five radio interviews (Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura, Swan Hill and Horsham) the announcements was accessible to a combined audience of:

151,200 people!

Based on the figures received from the various print and online outlets we reached **205,600** people!



Picture: Rusi Varani (RIAC) and Madelin Lawson (Drummond Street Services) presenting to service providers and community members at a Community Outreach event.

Advocacy

Our staff supported people with 513 advocacy matters under the National Disability Advocacy Program Funding.

Over the year we farewelled some advocacy staff and welcomed advocates Kendall and Cameron to the team.

Our advocates are regularly connecting with the community to speak about advocacy and what we do at RIAC.



Picture: 5 RIAC staff at the VALID Having a Say Conference 2023 where RIAC was a bronze sponsor

Systemic Advocacy

RIAC believes in building strong connections in the disability advocacy sector to raise the collective voices of the communities we support on common issues that need to change.

We are informed and work alongside people with disabilities to prepare submissions, give evidence at inquiries, attend forums and network meetings.

We are stronger when we work together to develop a more inclusive society for people with disabilities.

We believe in building the capacity of our clients to have their voices heard by the community and decision makers.

RIAC supported Cheryl (pictured right) to give a presentation about her experience self-advocating for her rights at the VALID Having a Say Conference 2023.



Picture: Cheryl, her husband David and RIAC's Acting Operations Manager, Rachael Thompson at the VALID Having a Say Conference 2023.

Access & Support

It has been a great year for our Access and Support team, as we welcomed the establishment of a few new key roles.

RIAC established a new role of ‘Outreach Coordinator’ to promote RIAC’s services and develop/strengthen relationships with other service providers in the community. We have had great success in this role with the co-creation of DSP and NDIS PowerPoint presentations with our advocacy team, directed at specific service providers (i.e., Job Service Providers, Medical Practitioners etc.) to educate professionals and streamline processes for both the client and other service providers.

Delivery of these presentations in person has proven beneficial, and we are seeing less referrals coming through our intake for access support as GPs are equipped with more tools and knowledge of the government’s requirements for medical evidence documentation.

We also welcomed new staff member Diane in Mildura to the role of Access & Support Officer who came to us with great local knowledge and connections in the Mildura region.

Alongside one of our wonderful volunteers, Diane has been integral in the creation of an INFORM Hub in Mildura, which assist people to fill out forms and provide some of RIAC’s templates and resources for applications such as Disability Support Pension and NDIS.

This year saw some challenges in our communities with the Floods in late 2022, where we provided some assertive outreach to affected communities to ensure that they had the supports that they needed during this challenging time. Our teams continued to work hard to ensure that people continued to work hard to ensure that people were able to gain access to much needed services and supports.



Picture: From the left, Carolyn Maltese, Diane Coulbourn, Vereena Gleeson, Feonyx Holden, Mark Naughton and Amanda Robinson at 2022 Program Planning days

-Amanda Robinson, Business Systems Manager

Volunteer Program



The new role of Volunteer Coordinator, which is being delivered by Feonyx Holden, is part of our HACC (under 65) program.

We have been establishing a framework for our program, and have recruited two Volunteers, one in Bendigo and in Mildura who assist with our weekly INFORM Hubs.

Sherrie Gumley supports our Bendigo Inform hub and brings with her a wealth of experience and knowledge. Sherrie is passionate about supporting people, breaking down barriers and helping people to live as independently as possible.

Margaret Nugent supports our Mildura Inform Hub and was previously a nurse and financial counsellor. Margaret retired two years ago but still feels that she has something to give, and has always had a keen interest in advocacy, so being a Volunteer with RIAC really suits her background and interests.

Both volunteers are passionate, dedicated and skilled, and we thank them for their time.

We are looking to grow our Volunteer program over the next 12 months through further regional INFORM hubs, Carer Support Group Facilitation and Volunteers to assist in gathering feedback from our clients.

If you are interested, please get in touch today!

We need you!



**VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED!**

**Are you looking to make a difference
in the lives of people with disability?**

Do you have some spare time and
great skills you would like to share?

We're looking for you!



Picture: Margaret Nugent, Volunteer at RIAC Mildura.

Strengthening Parents Support Program



In January we welcomed our new Carer Support (SPSP) Coordinator, Carolyn Maltese to the RIAC family. Carolyn has made some incredible inroads to the Carer community and has been instrumental in developing multiple Self-Care Hubs across the region.

We are really excited to continue to grow our groups and networks across the region, and work closely with our Volunteer Program to expand our hubs and groups.

Carolyn delivers a monthly Carer Connect eNEWSletter with great information, tips and contacts for carers. To sign up, please email carers@riac.org.au

An analysis of feedback from carers attending our support groups led to a decision to offer groups that have a focus on carer self-care. Thus, the Self-Care Hub was born, where carers can enjoy a cuppa, chat, a massage, and access to a variety of self care activities, at an easily accessible location.

These Self-care Hubs run regularly in Bendigo, Castlemaine, Kerang, and Cohuna. With plans in place for Echuca in 2024. Bendigo and Castlemaine carers also have the option of joining us at our walking groups.



On 28 July 2023 the SPSP program presented Kim Alexander and the Juggle of Neurodiversity in the Education System.

This hybrid workshop offering parents and carers tips and strategies to support their children negotiate the education system, and was very well received with 20 in-person attendees at the Bendigo Library and 13 online.

The positive feedback received has led to plans for further workshops on navigating the education system in January 2024.

Our current partnerships include the Castlemaine Community House, Bendigo Health, Northern District Community Health, with discussions continuing regarding a collaboration with Carer Gateway and Merri Health to deliver supports to First Nations carers in the Echuca area.



**CASTLEMAINE
COMMUNITY
HOUSE**

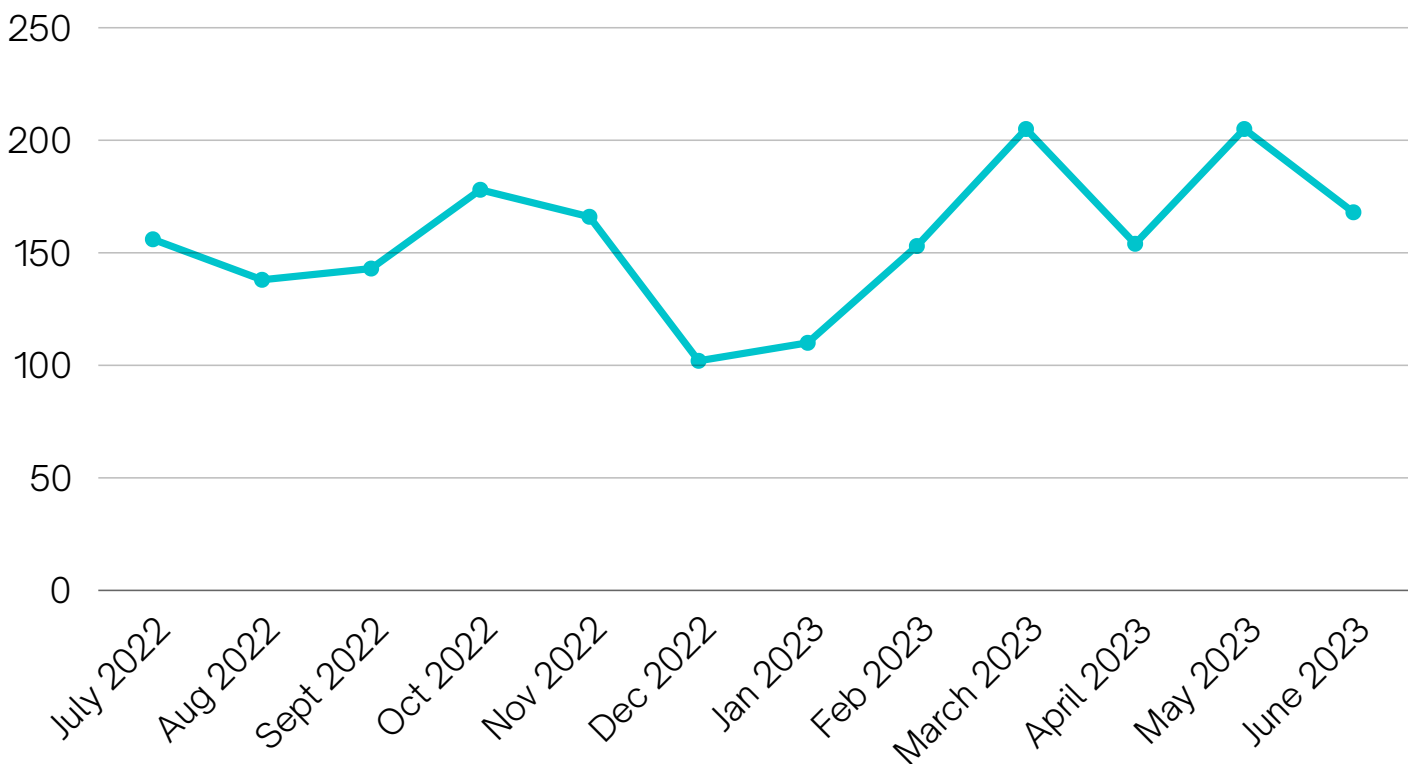
Intake Program

**1938
ENQUIRIES**

INTAKE ENQUIRIES

All Programs

The number of intake enquiries each month for the 2022-2023 Financial Year



1020

Via Phone

543

via email

361

Via our Website

Over the past year, the Intake team have continued to develop pathways to service the demand. The introduction of an Intake Advocate role has allowed RIAC to triage enquiries and provide different levels of service, dependent on the needs of each client.

This ensures that everyone that comes to RIAC receives some assistance and are never turned away.

This model has now been adopted by other advocacy agencies due to its success.

CLIENT EXPERIENCES

Here are some key highlights of the support that we have provided across our programs over the past year.

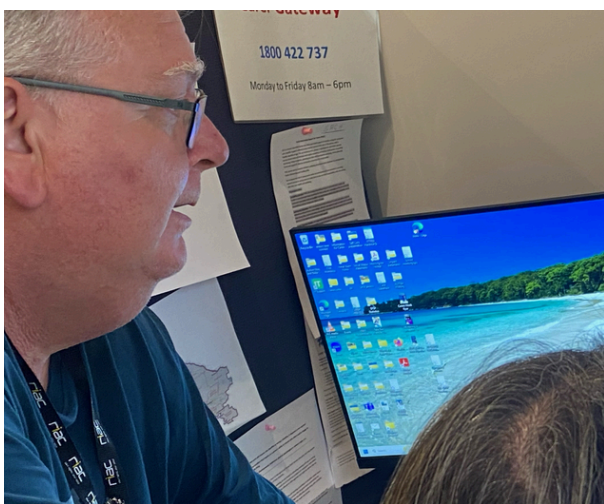


NDIS APPEALS

- RIAC supported Tammy to have her voice heard at the Joint Standing Committee
- Tammy was able to stand up, speak up and give advice to others just like her.

HACC PROGRAM

- An injury meant that our client could not work or enjoy a social life.
- We assisted them to regain financial security by helping with a Disability Support Pension Application



CHSP PROGRAM

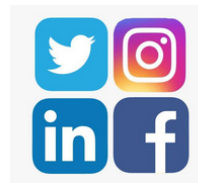
- Ethel had issues accessing a support package
- Ethel needed assistance in the home but was unhappy with council services.
- RIAC staff supported Ethel through the My Aged Care process

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our members, supporters, stakeholders and funding bodies.



This RIAC Annual report 2023 was designed by Amanda Robinson (Business Systems Manager)



We thank you for the continued support of our advocacy and support services.

Contact

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