

People with Disabilities WA  
individual & systemic advocacy



**Submission**

**Inquiry into climate change and its impact on health and health systems**

PWdWA is the peak disability consumer organisation representing the rights, needs and equity of all Western Australians with disabilities via individual and systemic advocacy.

PWdWA is run BY and FOR people with disabilities and, as such, strives to be the voice for all people with disabilities in Western Australia.

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# People with Disabilities Western Australia

## People with disabilities WA (PWdWA)

Since 1981 PWdWA has been the peak disability consumer organisation representing the rights, needs, and equity of all Western Australians with a physical, intellectual, neurological, psychosocial, or sensory disability via individual and systemic advocacy. We provide access to information, and independent individual and systemic advocacy with a focus on those who are most vulnerable.

PWdWA is run by and for people with disabilities and aims to empower the voices of all people with disabilities in Western Australia.

## Introduction

People with disabilities are a cohort which will likely be adversely impacted by climate change before other groups. As a demographic people with disabilities are more likely to have other health conditions, are more likely to be reliant on technology and require access to specialised equipment and resources to live the best life they can, and are less likely to be able to quickly respond without support to extreme situations of flood, heat, bushfire. As the impact of climate change is being felt it is people with disabilities who are being impacted first with temperature increases and energy supply having a major impact.

## Issues

- *establish current knowledge on the implications of climate change for health in Western Australia (WA) and recommend a framework for evaluating future implications;*

Much of the literature on the effect of climate change on people with disabilities is not Australian. The evidence that is in place shows that people with disabilities have a lower survival rate of natural disasters which are more likely to occur as we see the effects of climate change.

Extreme heat events are more likely to affect people who are older and people with disabilities particularly those disabilities where there are issues with body temperature regulation such as spinal cord injuries, neurodegenerative diseases, and other diseases that affect the nervous system.

Data collection on death related to extreme heat events need to include health and disability statistics.

Extreme events such as flooding and fires, and in the case of WA and the Perth Metro area the possibility of King tides and tsunamis, adds additional physical challenges for people with disabilities when evacuating and in terms of the supplies of prescription medication and necessary medical equipment. Evacuation facilities and shelters may not have appropriate facilities or appropriately trained support staff.

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- *identify and recommend a program of work to manage the implications of climate change for health in WA, which will:*
  - *protect the public from the harmful health impacts of climate change;*
  - *strengthen the preparedness and resilience of communities and health services against extreme weather events, with a focus on the most vulnerable in the community;*
  - *reduce the contribution of WA health services to climate change and other detrimental impacts; and*
  - *enable WA Health services to implement change, including energy efficiency, to a more sustainable model*

For people with disability an essential part of a program of works must include plans to address extreme heat events. This can be through a number of ways including public education on what to do when extreme heat events occur. There should also be funding and support for people to install air-conditioning and pay electricity bills. Where possible if someone is at risk of overheating and they currently have a debt in their electricity bill the should be waived. Housing should be insulated and all public housing should have solar panels or alternative forms of energy production to reduce the costs of high energy using products such as air-conditioning.

If events are known to be going to occur then this needs to be provided as information to the public and through social networks and government agencies. Public buildings such as libraries, hospitals, community centres should specifically open in locations where there are going to be high temperatures with air-conditioning and water available.

Any plans for the provision of emergency shelters must take into account the need for cooling and the need for accessible bathrooms, full-size change tables, hoists, and a range of equipment such as catheters.

Information provided needs to be effective for alerting people who are deaf and vision impaired, as well as using the networks that people may have for those who are not connected digitally.

Prevention through well-built housing and localised solar and backup energy networks and batteries needs to be prioritised in areas where people with disability live.

- *evaluate the likely benefits (health and wellbeing, social and economic) arising from climate change mitigation strategies, with a focus on WA health services;*

Keeping data related to disability for deaths that are a direct impact of heat or disruption to energy sources will provide an indicator of potential benefits that come from making change in these areas.

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- *define the role of the Department of Health in leading public policy on climate change and health; and*

The Department of Health has a role in facilitating and leading conversations with other departments on what they need to do to prevent death as a result of climate change. The Department of Health should have statistics and information on how best to support and treat people experiencing extreme heat and also on the support required for people with disabilities. This information as well as potentially policy on how to address issues as they arise should be informed by knowledge held by health. The Department of Health should be providing information to emergency services, housing, and Western power and the Water Corporation on what the effect of extreme heat events could be if there are not backups for water or power for people with disabilities. The Department of Health has a role to play in ensuring the impacts of climate change on health such as death and disease are understood by other areas.

- *recommend the terms of reference, scope and preferred methods for undertaking a climate change vulnerability assessment for the health sector; and*
- *developing a Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the health sector.*

People with disabilities and chronic health conditions need to be considered as the first points of impact for climate change events. This means that vulnerability assessments need to look at the preparedness of health facilities, and general community facilities for supporting people with disabilities in an emergency including extreme heat events. People with disabilities who have a high reliance on the health and disability support systems should be included in determining the scope of an assessment as well as part of developing a more comprehensive response.

### **Conclusion**

People with disability are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to ability to be prepared for many of the extreme events that can occur with climate change. It is only with comprehensive planning at an individual level beforehand that people will be prepared. This must include knowing who they can go to if things break down within their own home. It also means there must be preventative measures put in place with how housing is built and what backup generators, batteries, solar panels et cetera should already be in place for people.

When extreme heat events occur there needs to be places in the community that are prepared, are fully accessible, are air-conditioned with battery power backup, and where support staff could be sent to. Unfortunately we are likely to see more of these over the next short period of time where the types of responses that might normally need to be in place for something like bushfire will need to be in place for extreme heat events.