



Submission for 2017-2020 State Disability Plan (Victoria)

A submission compiled by

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on behalf of the members of

Achilles Melbourne Incorporated

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Purpose

This submission from Achilles Melbourne Incorporated describes current barriers and possible solutions to creating an inclusive and accessible Victoria for participation in recreational physical activity. Our club's aim is to lower barriers to participation in mainstream athletics regardless of ability. This opportunity to respond to the State Government of Victoria's discussion paper of the 2017-2020 State Disability Plan is warmly welcomed by our club to support our members and potential members to be active participants in social physical activity.

Our submission responds to three out of four themes from the discussion paper: Active Citizenship, Rights and Equality and Making the most of the NDIS.

We explore our collaborative views on the barriers that face people with disabilities in participating in physical activity. Key issues that our members experience include access to transport, inclusion in local athletics clubs, cost of equipment and attitudes from both coordinators of events and clubs and people with disabilities themselves. This is further highlighted by case examples detailed in our submission. We also discuss strategies in which the Victorian Government should assist in enabling participation and inclusion in physical recreational activities.

Background – Achilles Melbourne Incorporated

Achilles Melbourne Incorporated is a running club with a difference. As an all-abilities club, our primary focus is to lower barriers to participation in mainstream athletics events. Our members include people with disability including vision impairment and physical disability. Our committee also reflects this with 50% of our committee having a disability. Established in February 2016, we have followed in the footsteps of our interstate partner organisations: Achilles Running Clubs Sydney and Canberra. It has taken 20 years for Melbourne to form its first all-abilities, all-inclusive running club since its inception in Sydney in 1996. Despite our club's relatively young age, Achilles Melbourne currently hosts approximately 10 people with a disability and 20 people without a disability who volunteer as guides for our athletes with vision impairment. We hold regular training sessions at the iconic Tan running track in Melbourne where approximately 4-15 people congregate for a Sunday morning run. Each member with a disability works towards their personal fitness goal which is usually participation in a mainstream fun-run event. However, despite our club's short term success, we acknowledge that a vast number of people with a disability are not currently participating or do not participate adequately in physical activity. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009), the rate of participation for people with a disability in sport of physical recreation is approximately 24%. We acknowledge that our club alone cannot rectify this statistic. The following submission will provide some insight into the barriers that our members face and suggest ideas for improving disability participation and inclusion.

Note: all persons described in this submission have been replaced by pseudonyms.

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Active Citizenship, Rights and Equality

Achilles Melbourne Incorporated feels that these two themes inter-relate for our members and will be discussed together.

Barriers to participation in recreational physical activity

Access to public transport

Many people with disabilities rely solely on public transport for mobility. Shortcomings and inadequacies therefore have a direct impact on the person's capability to fully participate in community activities. It can be difficult to muster motivation to exercise regularly at the best of times. Exacerbating this is the fact that recreational physical activity does not occur during peak time. Sporadic public transport services outside peak times make it imperative to plan ahead and only determined individuals appear to make efforts to participate in physical activity.

The Tram Tracker app comes a long way toward meeting the needs of people with disability, provided an individual has a smartphone with a data plan and the phone battery is sufficient to last a full day. However, there is also no way of knowing the number of the arriving tram for people with vision impairment, unless other persons at the same tram stop can provide this information when requested.

The metro train network is also heavily utilised by people with disability. However, during times of unscheduled changes and rail works, the accessibility of the train system becomes extremely difficult to navigate. Staff assistance is variable depending on the person on duty. Assisting people with disability appears to be an adjunct to their position rather than a minimum requirement.

Members from outer areas will not come to physical activity events when bus replacement services operate on the weekend since accessibility is too difficult to navigate and the extra time spent on replacement public transport is not worth their time. Attending one hour of training can easily take three times as much total time out of the day.

These inhibiting factors lead to isolation from a potential community of runners.

CASE EXAMPLE

During times of track works on train lines, navigation of altered services and extra time spent on replacement public transport extends travel time significantly. Recently, members Cass and Mike (both with vision impairment and live in Zone 2 areas) will not come to training when bus replacement services operate on the weekend.

Cost of taxi transport

The half price taxi subsidy is not available to all people with disability. Even so, many of those who are entitled to it cannot afford the cost of a weekly return trip.

CASE EXAMPLE

For Fred, a half price return trip from Camberwell to the Tan currently costs in the region of \$40. Fred will pay \$160 per month in taxi fares just to go for a run once a week. This does not include extra running or training that he undertakes outside this training time.

Other logistical difficulties – dog guides and equipment transport

Some vision impaired members require dog guides for independent travel. It is of utmost importance that these service animals are under constant supervision while the member is out in training.

During the Sunday morning runs, Achilles makes every effort to source volunteer dog sitters to ensure the dogs' safety during this time, but for official running events this task is even more difficult.

Logistics around transporting tandem bikes to cycling and triathlon events pose significant barriers to participating for vision impaired and other athletes who cannot drive themselves.

CASE EXAMPLE

Maxi taxis are in short supply and they give preference to transporting wheelchair passengers. Despite having made the booking in advance, Fred was left waiting at the finish line for more than two hours while trying to source a maxi taxi that could transport the tandem bike. This reality discourages members from participating in these events as it adds a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty to the whole experience.

Lack of inclusion from mainstream local clubs and facilities

Members who approach mainstream clubs with requests for inclusion and athlete guides encounter a startling lack of awareness of what it takes to be inclusive and supportive. Experience has shown that once a club becomes familiar with the capabilities of the athlete and how little it takes to support them, they are only too happy to assist. However, many clubs are not prepared to take this initial step and learn. It is just too easy to 'play it safe' and ignore the issue.

Some members have encountered unforeseen barriers when attempting to join their local gym. The perception seems to be that having a vision impaired client at the gym places an unjustifiable risk on the gym and membership is refused.

This again speaks to a lack of understanding of the nature of physical disability, the capability of the member, as well as the need for a clear legal position on health and safety. Our members should not be excluded from access to gyms purely based on their physical disability.

Positive engagement with health club owners is critical to rectify this discriminatory practice.

CASE EXAMPLE

Aaron and Shane approached nearly 10 gyms each, progressively further away from home, before finding a gym that would accommodate them. The gyms they approached sighted "occupational health and safety issues" and refused membership to these individuals. Aaron finally found a gym that has been accommodating to his needs by having an on-staff "floater" to assist and set up equipment for Aaron. This is part of their standard practice. Shane has also found a gym that has allowed him to use their facilities, but only when staff are on hand. As Shane occasionally works long hours, standard working hours for gym staff does not always suit his needs. Therefore, his attendance is limited according to the gym's staff roster despite being open at all times of the day.

Prohibitive cost of equipment

Should an individual require specialised equipment to participate in physical activity, the cost of specialised equipment can be vastly out of reach of most people. For example, a specialised recumbent bike or tandem bike costs approximately \$3000 for a basic model. Sporting wheelchairs which are light weight, have cambered wheels and have been set up by specialised professionals such as Occupational Therapists can be more expensive than the average economy car. Even at a basic level, items such as orthotics to correct for foot pronation (rolling in/flat feet) are approximately \$500, without including the cost of specialist Podiatry assessment and/or running shoes. When access to employment and regular income is already reduced for people with disability, basic costs of equipment can be prohibitive to participation.

Perception from mainstream athletics event organisers

Mainstream athletics events often have poor or non-prominent information regarding events that are inclusive of people with disability. Even the Premier's Active April program failed to provide support for people with a disability to participate. There may be a lack of confidence or knowledge from event organisers as to how they can cater their event for people with a disability. Furthermore, event organisers may feel that registration numbers may suffer due to a perception that inclusive events are not "challenging" enough. In Europe, Asia and America, events for people who are hand-cyclists, push-rim wheelchair users and people with vision impairment are prominently available and promoted for people with disability.

CASE EXAMPLE

Matt is a hand-cyclist and is unable to enter iconic marathon events in Victoria and Australia. Matt prefers to hand-cycle as this saves his shoulders from overuse injuries that he would otherwise sustain using a push-rim wheelchair. Major marathon events in Europe and USA have hand-cycle events, but Australia has none. When approaching a major Victorian event, Matt's entry was declined with no further consideration of including his disability category and event into future runs.

Participating in mainstream running events

Usually, the person with a disability is required to organise their own support. For a person with vision impairment, this means locating a person who will train and complete the event with you and then locating an additional person to look after your dog guide. Events do not provide this level of support. Being able to find the right people with time and resources can be challenging, let alone completing the event itself.

Normally, the event organiser incurs the cost of the additional guide as per the rules of programs such as the companion card. Where there are capped numbers, event organisers are unable to recover guide entry fees. While this may be a barrier for event organisers in promoting inclusiveness, a perception shift needs to occur whereby people with disability can be seen as an "untapped market" rather than a burden on an event's revenue.

Individual resilience and self-awareness

Current Achilles members are resilient and resourceful, but not all people with a disability have this capacity or are self-aware of their potential. This places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of current members to be ambassadors and to spread the word among people with and without disability to encourage participation.

How the government can make a difference to people engaging in physical activity

Improvements to public transport

In order to increase accessibility to Victoria's public transport for people with disabilities, we suggest the following for the tram system:

- Installing more automated announcements through external speakers on the tram itself, or a facility such as the ones found at train stations where pressing a button will let you hear the details of the next arriving tram.
- Stop announcements are automated in some trams, but often it is still missing. Relying on drivers to manually announce them is far from ideal.
- The Tram Tracker app can only guide a vision impaired person up to within 20 meters from a tram pole, which is not sufficient to locate the actual stop. Consider the use of iBeacon technology.
- The design of some trams make it difficult to seat a dog guide safely out of the way of other commuters. Some trams have sideways benches at the front and the only option is to have the dog sit in the pathway as it is built up under the seats.

The public transport system could also be improved by maintaining a registered list of transport users with disability who can be contacted by an officer or by enhancing the current PTV app. If a person's commonly used commuting route has planned infrastructure works affecting their travel, they can be notified by an officer/app with the option to apply for taxi vouchers. This will assist a person to plan ahead rather than finding out on the day of travel and reduce isolation due to increased travel time.

Path maintenance and enhancement

Running and cycling paths should be maintained in the interest of safety for all. Keeping paths clear of roots and overhanging branches will ensure the safety of vision impaired and wheelchair athletes, as well as families that are out with push prams and young children.

Glow in the dark paths should also be a consideration for improving bike path accessibility. Following examples in Canberra and Gosford, NSW (The Canberra Times 2015), the Victorian Government may wish to consider glow in the dark bike tracks to increase opportunities for those with limited night vision, but also to improve safety for cyclists in the general public.

Grants for clubs to promote inclusion

Achilles Melbourne proposes that state government funding of key disability sports organisations be reviewed and/or a grants process be opened to allow clubs to improve their capacity in providing inclusive sports and recreation opportunities. This may also include grants available to event organisers

who can apply to have entries covered for guides for events. This may also extend to offering funded entries into events to ensure that people with disability can financially access costly running events. In addition to this, event organisers can use funds to ensure that there are adequate facilities for people with disability to safely attend an event.

Actively promote organisations which are inclusive

In order to remove negative perceptions or defeatist attitudes towards participation from the general population and people with disabilities respectively, the Victorian Government should actively promote organisations that are inclusive or provide opportunities for people with disabilities. People with disabilities need to be seen as a normal feature of physical activity.

Other ways to address this aspect are to showcase the activities of current members, as well as outreach activities to currently non-active people with disabilities that will expose them to the benefits of physical activity in an inclusive environment.

We hope that this in turn will also assist event organisers to change their perception about inclusiveness and disability. By promoting inclusive organisations, event organisers may be more willing to support entrants with disability.

Counselling services for people with a disability

In order to build the capacity and resilience of individuals with disability, counselling and psychological support should be more widely available. These services can also be linked with community organisations such as Achilles Melbourne that can assist in directly supporting a person to achieve their goals once realised with the support of counselling. Mentoring can also provide opportunities for people with disability to inspire and improve their capacity.

How the business sector could make a difference to participation in physical activity

Improving inclusion in mainstream running events

The recommendation is that event organisers make provision for safe areas where dog guides may be kept safe while the members participate in the event.

Employing inclusion officers at key sporting bodies

Inclusion officers should be employed at key sporting bodies and organisations. Where a disability program exists, the role of this person should also be to improve the capacity of mainstream organisations to become more inclusive.

Our recommendation is that information about inclusion is included in the rules, regulations and other informational material in presentations to sports bodies and club affiliates. Coaching courses, workshops, information on the web, regulations and other material should include sections on disability just as it does on any other aspect of the sport.

Inclusion officers could also assist event organisers to effectively promote their event to targeted audiences of people with disability. This in turn would allow direct communication with people with disability and allow event organisers to tailor events as required.

How the Victorian Government can measure success

Board and committee members with a disability

The Victorian Government can measure success by reporting the number of boards or committees of sporting organisations that have people with a disability as members.

Participation rates

Participation can be measured by reports of membership of people with a disability in sporting and recreational groups. This can also be reflected in the number of entrants with a disability to mainstream running events.

Perception

With regards to mainstream running events, Achilles Melbourne would measure success by events advertising availability of services for persons with a disability such as guides being available for those with vision impairment, or allowing wheelchair or hand-cycle entries.

In order to gain insight into people's attitudes towards disability inclusion in mainstream events, a biannual survey from key disability sporting bodies could be commissioned to review current attitudes and perception towards participation in mainstream athletics.

Making the most of the NDIS

While the NDIS offers a myriad of opportunities to increase participation in recreational physical activity, some points need to be considered.

Funding of mainstream equipment

The NDIS must consider funding equipment that assists the daily needs of people with disability that may not necessarily be disability-specific equipment. Individuals will be required to justify their need to participate in physical exercise and differentiate what extra support is required as a result of their disability versus mainstream choice. For example, a person with a disability may seek funding for a treadmill to be used at home when a guide or inclusive athletics club may not be available to assist. However, this may be considered as a “lifestyle choice” rather than a device that is “reasonable and necessary” and non-disability specific according to the NDIS. The need to access mainstream equipment for our members appears obvious to us: if they didn’t have their disability in the first place, they would be running independently on the street or at a gym. Increased access to physical activity according to the individual’s needs will only serve to reduce our over-stretched health services and prevent long-term poor health outcomes. We hope that the NDIS considers access to barrier-free participation in regular physical activity as reasonable and necessary rather than a lifestyle choice.

Funding of private transport to recreational activities

When considering access to recreational activities for people with disability, the cost of transport in terms of time and money to these activities is far greater than for people without disability. Public transport increases travel time for those who live far from their final destination, especially during non-peak times. We hope that the NDIS will reduce the burden of cost and travel time to participation in recreational pursuits.

Conclusion

We are fortunate at Achilles Melbourne Incorporated to attract highly resilient and motivated individuals, regardless of ability, to run and walk together on a regular basis. However, we envisage a future where our members are involved in other mainstream athletics clubs in addition to Achilles Melbourne and that people who haven't yet engaged in regular running/walking become members of our club. We also hope to see many more people with disability involved in major fun run events across Victoria. We acknowledge that there are systemic issues within our current Victorian community that limit participation of people with disability in physical activity.

Achilles Melbourne Incorporated would like to thank the Victorian Government for the opportunity to accept our submission for the State Disability Plan 2017-2020. We do sincerely hope that more people with disability begin to feel confident enough to participate in mainstream recreational physical activities. We feel that promotion and support of their inclusion will have a positive outcome and reduce long term poor health outcomes and promote an inclusive and disability-aware community.

References

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