



Program Evaluation – The Association for Children with Disability (Tas) Inc.

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This evaluation was funded by The Association for Children with Disability (Tas) Inc. and the Commonwealth of Australia represented by the Department of Social Services.

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Executive Summary

The Association for Children with Disability (Tas) Inc. (ACD Tas) is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers a comprehensive suite of advocacy, information, consultation, case-coordination, training, and peer support services, including those provided under the Peer Network Hub program, designed to support individuals with disabilities and their families across Tasmania. ACD Tas's service provision within the Tasmanian community is unique, as it responds to a broad context of needs across urban and remote areas throughout the state. According to the Australian Bureau of statistics (2015), the prevalence rate of disability in Tasmania is higher than any other Australian state or Territory (25.2% of the population). By comparison in the NT, WA, and ACT disability prevalence rates were 11.3%, 14%, and 15.8% respectively. This reflects the importance of ACD Tas's strong understanding of individual support for Tasmanian young people with a disability and their families.

Engaging with over 1000 families annually, the program's primary objectives are to foster empowerment, build social connections, and enhance advocacy skills. This family-led support model is one that empowers families to overcome any barriers to choice and control. The services offered include: "Self-advocacy Assist," "Network Assist," and "Leader Assist," (including, "Youth Empowering Peers" [YEP], the first Tasmanian leader's network for individuals with disability under the age of 18), are deeply rooted in principles of social justice and communities of practice (CoPs, Lave & Wenger, 1991). These principles encourage participants to take control of their lives, advocate for their needs, and engage actively in their communities. The Peer Network Hub takes a holistic approach to family-centred practice, and so is designed to not only address immediate needs but also to build long-term resilience and self-efficacy among participants.

ACD Tas places relationships with others as key to the outcomes of their programs. Connected to a wide range of family stakeholders across Tasmania, including in rural and remote areas, ACD Tas are a strongly established, well-respected, and inclusive organisation. Family peer assistance is available to Tasmanian families by telephone, email, virtual platforms, and in-person mentoring or demonstration, and ACD Tas continuously engage family stakeholders in the development of their programs. Their inclusive approach is also reflected in the number of parents and carers of

children with a disability, as well as individuals with disability that they employ, and who sit on their board.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

To assess the effectiveness of ACD Tas's Peer Network Hub services over the past three years, an independent evaluation was commissioned. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this evaluation has aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data surrounding participant satisfaction and outcomes. The evaluation framework centred on three core domains: Empowerment, Connections, and Knowledge, each of which played a critical role in assessing the program's overall effectiveness and its contributions to the lives of participants.

Quantitative data was collected by ACD Tas over the course of the program through two surveys administered to participants across the services provided by the Peer Network Hub. These surveys were designed to capture detailed demographic information, assess participant satisfaction, and measure outcomes related to empowerment, knowledge acquisition, and community connections. The quantitative analysis within the evaluation aimed to identify key trends, validate the effectiveness of the program, and ensure that the services were meeting the diverse needs of the participant population.

In addition to the quantitative component, qualitative data was gathered by the evaluation team through semi-structured interviews with a broad cross-section of participants. These provided rich, personal insights into the experiences of individuals and families involved in the program, highlighting the nuanced ways in which the program had influenced their lives. The qualitative analysis focused on understanding the personal journeys of participants, the challenges they faced, and how the Peer Network Hub program supported them in overcoming these challenges through the domains of Knowledge, Connections, and Empowerment

Key Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis provided robust evidence of the Peer Network Hub program's positive impact on participants, particularly in terms of satisfaction, achievement, and the effectiveness of the services provided in relation to outcomes across the three key domains identified by the evaluation framework.

As these surveys were not designed by the evaluation team, the survey instruments used in this evaluation were rigorously tested for validity and reliability to ensure accurate measurement of the program's impact. Factor analysis revealed a clear two-factor solution related to community connection and knowledge/skill acquisition, accounting for approximately 55% of the variance in responses. This analysis confirmed the robustness of the surveys, with strong internal consistency demonstrated by Cronbach's Alpha values of .74 for community connections and .71 for knowledge acquisition. These findings underscored the reliability of the survey instruments and affirmed that the measured outcomes were a true reflection of the participants' experiences.

The survey data revealed that the program had a significant positive effect on participants' self-efficacy and confidence. For example, 90.32% of respondents reported that they had gained new skills and knowledge that would help them achieve their personal and family goals. This acquisition of skills was closely linked to increased empowerment, with 79.03% of participants indicating that they felt more empowered to advocate for themselves and their families as a direct result of their involvement in the program. Furthermore, 87.1% of participants reported feeling more motivated to take action and pursue their goals, highlighting the program's effectiveness in fostering a proactive and self-reliant mindset among its participants.

The quantitative data also highlighted specific areas where the program excelled in relation to the 'connections' domain of the evaluation framework. For example, 85% of participants reported developing more connections within their community because of participation in the program, which is a critical factor in reducing isolation and building a supportive network. Additionally, 87.1% of participants felt valued by the people around them, indicating that the program not only facilitated the formation of connections but also enhanced the quality of these relationships, contributing to a stronger sense of belonging and community integration.

In addition to these findings, the evaluation explored the relationship between demographic variables such as age and socioeconomic status (SES) and the outcomes of the program. The analysis found no statistically significant relationships between age, SES, and the key outcomes of community connection and knowledge acquisition. This suggests that the program's positive impacts are consistent across different demographic groups, demonstrating its broad applicability, effectiveness, and equity for participants from diverse backgrounds.

Key Qualitative Findings

While the quantitative data provided a broad overview of the program's impact, the qualitative findings offered a deeper, more personal understanding of how the Peer Network Hub program influenced the lives of its participants. Participants shared their experiences with the evaluation team providing rich narratives that illustrated the program's role in fostering empowerment, building social connections, and enhancing knowledge.

"The peer network hub gave me the skills and the confidence to use my voice" (Survey Respondent 31)

Empowerment emerged as a central theme in the qualitative data, with participants describing how the program had significantly impacted their confidence and ability to take control of their lives. Closely linked to this, participants recounted how they had become more effective advocates for themselves and their families, particularly in navigating the complexities of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) amongst other systemic challenges. From the data, it was clear that the program provided critical support in understanding and accessing the services participants needed, which was often described as a daunting task prior to their involvement with ACD Tas. Finally, participants emphasized that the program's focus on leadership development and self-determination was instrumental in empowering them to make informed decisions and take meaningful action in their lives.

Social connections, facilitated through the communities of practice, were another major outcome highlighted in the qualitative findings. Participants spoke

extensively about the emotional and practical support they received through these connections, which were crucial in reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging both within ACD Tas and the broader community. The peer networks established by the program were particularly effective in creating a supportive environment where participants could share knowledge, experiences, and strategies. This peer support was not only valuable in addressing immediate challenges but also played a significant role in building long-term resilience. Many participants noted that these connections helped them to feel less alone in their struggles and more capable of facing the challenges associated with disability advocacy and access to services.

Knowledge sharing within the CoPs was also a prominent theme in the qualitative data. Participants discussed how they had gained both explicit knowledge, such as understanding disability rights and navigating the NDIS, and tacit knowledge through shared lived experiences. This collective wisdom was described as a critical resource that empowered participants to develop more effective advocacy strategies and contributed to their personal growth. The program's emphasis on continuous learning ensured that participants remained informed and capable of influencing change at both individual and systemic levels. For many, the knowledge gained through the program was transformative, leading to new opportunities and a greater sense of agency in their lives.

*Well, I develop my knowledge, which develops my confidence.
Yeah, so I'm able to speak up more than what I used to. But I also
put that down to being ... a lot more cynical than I used to be.*

(Participant 3)

In relation to connections, participants also highlighted the Peer Network Hub's role in fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. It was clear that communities of practice had been effectively developed and these were described as spaces where individuals could come together to support one another, share knowledge, and work towards common goals. This sense of community was particularly valued by participants, who often faced significant social and emotional challenges in their daily lives. The program's ability to create and sustain these

communities of practice was seen as one of its greatest strengths, contributing to both individual and collective empowerment.

The qualitative findings also revealed the program's role in fostering leadership and advocacy within the community. Participants spoke about how the program had inspired them to take on more active roles in advocating for disability rights and influencing policy. This was particularly evident in the YEP program, where young participants described how they had been empowered to lead initiatives and engage in advocacy efforts that had a tangible impact on their communities. The program's emphasis on leadership development was seen as a critical factor in its success, providing participants with the tools and confidence needed to effect change.

The YEP program, which works alongside youth with disabilities, was identified as particularly impactful within the qualitative findings. Participants in this program reported significant increases in self-confidence and social connections. They described how the program provided them with the tools and support needed to advocate for themselves and others. The YEP program was also credited with creating a safe and empowering environment where youth could develop leadership skills and engage more actively in their communities. This aspect of the program was seen as particularly important in helping young participants transition into adulthood with a stronger sense of identity and purpose.

... having people with disabilities that ... have gone through the same stuff that you've gone through, it's just a life changer... (YEP Participant 2)

In addition to this, participants in the YEP program reported significant improvements in their self-confidence, with many describing how the program had helped them to advocate for themselves and take on often significant leadership roles in the broader community. The qualitative and quantitative data together underscored the program's impact on youth, who also noted the importance of building meaningful social connections that reduced isolation and fostered a sense of community. These connections were essential in providing the emotional support

needed to navigate the challenges of living with a disability and in encouraging participants to engage more fully with their communities.

Recommendations

The findings described above underscore the critical role the Peer Network Hub plays in empowering individuals with disabilities and their families. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings confirm that the program has been highly effective in achieving its goals, resulting in significant improvements in the lives of parents, carers, and individuals with disability. The program's success has been built on a foundation of strong community ties, effective knowledge sharing, and a commitment to fostering empowerment and leadership among participants. These elements have not only improved the lives of individuals with disabilities but have also contributed to broader social change, promoting greater inclusion and advocacy within the wider Tasmanian community. Subsequently, the following recommendations are provided more as suggestions in relation to potential ways an already outstanding service could be further enhanced.

1. Flexible Social Participation:

The evaluation identified a need for more flexible offerings in the social domain to accommodate the schedules of time-poor parents and carers. The introduction of more asynchronous digital engagement opportunities (e.g. online chat groups) may prove useful in this respect. However, it is important to note that the Peer Network Hub is currently in the process of expanding its services further into the digital space, demonstrating a strong capacity to recognise participant needs and "meet people where they are currently at."

2. Continued Focus on Leadership Development:

The program's emphasis on leadership development has been one of its most impactful elements, particularly in the context of the YEP program. Continuing to prioritize and expand these opportunities will be crucial in empowering the next generation of advocates and leaders within the disability community.

Concluding Remarks

The Peer Network Hub services provided by ACD Tas have had a profound and positive impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families across Tasmania. The program's family centred approach has proven to be highly effective in addressing the complex challenges faced by participants.

In addition to this, the Peer Network Hub has contributed to broader social change through the promotion of greater awareness and inclusion of people with disabilities within the community. It is clear, that the program's success in empowering individuals to take on leadership roles and advocate for disability rights has had a ripple effect, influencing policy, improving service delivery, and raising the profile of disability issues in Tasmania.

In summary, the Peer Network Hub program stands as a testament to the power of community-driven initiatives in transforming lives. The evidence gathered through this evaluation highlights the Peer Network Hub program as a model of best practice in disability support and advocacy services, demonstrating how a well-structured, community-based approach can have a transformative impact on the lives of those it serves. Its success is a clear indication that with the right support, individuals with disabilities can overcome significant barriers, achieve their goals, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Given the substantial benefits reported by participants, continued investment in and expansion of these services are not only justified but necessary to ensure that all individuals with disabilities in Tasmania can lead empowered, connected, and informed lives.