

Disability services need to employ more people with lived experience, say researchers

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New research from the University of Sydney finds almost a quarter of Australian disability services do not employ any people with disability, and 20% employ less than three people with disability.

This underrepresentation also extends to leadership roles within disability service providers, in what experts have labeled "an affront to the 'nothing about us without us'" movement.

The researchers from the University's Center for Disability Research and Policy are calling for the Australian Government to move beyond indirect "good will" statements and invest in a strong and direct suite of policy measures including disability employment and leadership quotas, wages subsidies and disability service legislative reform.

The calls are timely as governments grapple with how to improve the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), with workforce shortages in the disability services which support the planning and delivery of personalized NDIS plans, one of the major challenges.

Director of the Center, Professor Jen Smith-Merry from the Faculty of Medicine and Health said overall Australia has disappointingly low employment rates for people with disability compared to other countries, with only 48% of people with disability in any form of employment compared to 80% without.

However, she argues the failings of national policy to promote the employment and advancement of people with lived experience of disability in disability services holds particularly significant consequences.

"By not employing and promoting people with lived experience of disability, many services are missing out on a range of benefits—these include an increased understanding of clients and services, gains in staff morale, higher staff retention and greater productivity," said Professor Smith-Merry, senior author on the paper.

First author Damian Mellifont, Lived Experience Postdoctoral fellow at

the University of Sydney said, "We are also missing out on developing lived experience leaders in this space who have the potential to really shape the sector to better meet the needs of people with disability."

New data on employment in disability services

The new data, published in the journal *Social Policy & Administration* is unveiled for the first time following the introduction of new questions asked of employers in the 2021 National Disability Services (NDS) Workforce Census.

It shows that of Australian disability service organizations:

- 24% report they do not employ any people with disability.
- 50% employ at least one person with disability
- Only 24% include at least one person with disability on their board
- Only 19% employ people with disability in management positions

The census also highlighted the sector's failings to value disability as part of diversity, with high percentages of responses to questions on employment of people with disability recorded as "don't know" or "we don't keep records."

Time to build a diverse and inclusive workforce

The NDIS National Workforce Plan supports the building of a disability workforce that is "responsive and capable."

However, based on troubling Census results, the researchers argue that the Australian Government needs to lead by example and build a diverse

and inclusive disability services [workforce](#) that employs and promotes more people with lived experience of disability.

More information: Damian Mellifont et al, The employment of people with lived experience of disability in Australian disability services, *Social Policy & Administration* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/spol.12898](#)

Provided by University of Sydney

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