

**Inform Podcast**  
**Episode 16: Disability Royal Commission Advocacy and Counselling Supports**  
**Transcript**

Kirby Fenwick

Hello and welcome to Inform, a podcast where you'll be hearing from people with disabilities, as well as industry experts, on a range of topics.

I'm your host, Kirby Fenwick.

In this episode of Inform, we'll be discussing the services provided by DANA – The Disability Advocacy Network of Australia and the Blue Knot Foundation in support of the Disability Royal Commission.

Before we hear from our guests about those important and necessary supports, a quick content warning. Some of what is discussed in this podcast may be difficult for some listeners.

If you would prefer to read a transcript of this episode, you can find that transcript on the Inform website, that's [www.informonline.org.au](http://www.informonline.org.au)

If this episode does raise concerns for you and you need to speak with someone, you can reach Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the National Counselling and Referral Service on 1800 421 468.

Kirby Fenwick

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, or the Disability Royal Commission, was established in April 2019.

The Disability Royal Commission is expected to run until 2022 and will investigate and report on the experiences of people with disability in settings like schools, workplaces, group homes and hospitals.

Recognising that the work of the Disability Royal Commission and the stories and experiences being shared could be traumatic, even for those people not engaging with the Commission, the Australian Government has funded a range of services and supports for people with disability who have experienced violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation or for anyone who is engaging with or affected by the Disability Royal Commission.

In this episode, we'll be looking at two of those supports: advocacy supports provided by DANA, the Disability Advocacy Network Australia and the National Counselling and Referral Service, delivered by Blue Knot Foundation.

It's important to note that these services are free, independent, and confidential. You do not need to make a submission or have any prior involvement with the Disability Royal Commission to access these services.

Mary Mallet

A royal commission is a very big formal legal process. And people can be quite frightened by that. So that can be overwhelming, but also, they can be very unclear about the processes involved. These formal sort of legal processes.

So, having, the advocate being that single point of contact, to assist someone to talk through their story, write it up, and then source that legal support or the counselling is if, if necessary, that that helps the person be able to go through with the whole, whole process.

My name is Mary Mallet, and I am the CEO of DANA. DANA is Disability Advocacy Network Australia, and we are the national peak for the independent disability advocacy organisations that are scattered all around Australia in every part of every state and territory.

Kirby Fenwick

DANA's role is to coordinate advocacy support for anyone who may need some help to make a submission to the Royal Commission. Here, Mary explains how that advocacy supports works and why it might be needed.

Mary Mallet

And we're working closely with our other national disability peak colleague organisations on some of that. Then the advocates on the ground have been funded to provide direct advocacy support to people with disability who would like to tell their story really to the Royal Commission.

So, it's done in the form of making a submission, but many people are more comfortable with that, that sense that what they're doing is, is telling their story. And, and advocates are well placed to do this work.

Some people were coming directly to the advocacy organisations to ask for an advocate to help them. And then other, than the advocates who are doing this sort of outreach version, as best they could, and in the areas where they can to find people with disability who might not know that the Royal Commission was happening, and let them know about it, and then offer to help them

Mary Mallet

Now, there are plenty of people with disability, and their family members, who don't need help from anybody. Some of them may have been waiting for 20 years to tell

that story to someone and have them and be heard. So, some of those people will just do that themselves, they'll ring the Royal Commission directly, or they'll, they'll write it all up, some of them already have it written up and are kind of ready to go.

But for some people with disability, what they have is I have sort of, in their head, they have a jumble of, of the things that, the bad things that have happened to them of, and especially when serious traumatic events have happened to people, they don't have it neatly in their head as a chronological sort of ordered recount of things. So, what an advocate can do is meet with the person, listen to them, help them sort of frame their story in a way that, that also gets to the heart of what the problem is it because sometimes some people with disability, you know, have, have had so many bad experiences that, that they're not even quite aware of which ones are the worst ones or the most important ones. And advocates will help people to tease some of that stuff out and, so, it's not about the advocates telling people what to do or that this is how you need to tell your story to the Royal Commission. It's just, it's supporting people so that they're happy with the process.

Kirby Fenwick

Your advocate can also help link you up with other services related to your submission.

Mary Mallet

Some people may need an interpreter to work through their story, some people may need to an Auslan interpreter or a language interpreter.

Some of the people may need some legal advice about the way they're telling the story or particularly if they want to, if they want to mention the name of either a person or an organisation who they believe did them harm. And so, there's, there is a funded legal support, called Your Story Legal Support and the advocates will connect the person into the Your Story Legal Support service. And so the person can get that legal advice about what the consequences might be. And then advocates will just help create that link, so help the person connect into the legal support and advice and then the advocate will continue with the process of helping get the person's story.

Some of the people that advocates work with our people who are and have been very voiceless and not, their views not listened to or heard in the past. And so that's the advocates role is to bring a bit more balance into the, into the power imbalance that exists there where people with disability traditionally, and typically often have things done to them, and by other people, but without their, their voice or choices being, being heard.

Kirby Fenwick

While speaking with an advocate can be the first step towards making a submission to the Disability Royal Commission, Mary says it's important to know that you can

change your mind at any time. Just because you've contacted an advocate, or began working on getting your story down, doesn't mean to have to keep going.

Mary Mallet

Some people who've lived through trauma, they're not sure whether they want to tell their story to the commission so that, so not everybody who contacts an advocate will actually go through to getting their story to the Royal Commission, there are some people who decide not to do it. They, they take the first step, and they talk to the advocates, and they may start to put their story together or think about whether they should or not. But some people make their own decision that, that they don't want to. Some, for some people, they might be worried about really opening up something that they've sort of managed to deal with and get past and they don't want to expose themselves to kind of being re-traumatised by something.

You know, an advocate is certainly not going to push people or demand that they do their story, just because, you know, it might be a useful example. It's completely people's, people have a right to choose whether they do or don't tell their story to the Royal Commission, and advocates will support them, provide them with the information, you know, link them with others, if they want to talk to someone else about it, but they, they certainly are not going to be driving people towards the Royal Commission, if they, if they have decided that they just don't feel like they want to do that.

Kirby Fenwick

So how do you get in touch with an advocate if you're interested in getting some support to tell your story?

Mary Mallet

Because nobody, none of us, not not the advocates nor the Royal Commission, nor anybody wants to see people with disability being railroaded into, you know, or being forced in any way to tell their story because it's a good example of a bad thing that happened to somebody

So, the, the advocates have been receiving referrals. So, as well as people directly contacting their organisations, they, they get referrals from the Royal Commission itself, the Royal Commission has a 1800 number, and people can ring there. And so that that the Royal Commission refer some people through to advocacy, the, the National Counselling and Referral Service, which is run by the Blue Knot Foundation, that refers people through to advocacy. And then the Your Story Legal Support service also refers some people through to an advocate.

So, because it's sort of one of those designed as a no wrong door sort of system, that whichever of those services somebody comes to, they can be referred by any of the

organisations either for advocacy, if that's what they need, or for counselling, if that's what they need, or for the legal support, if that's what they require. So those, those parts of the system stay in close contact, and make referrals to, to and from each other.

Dr Cathy Kezelman

It's called people's stories, but it's not people's stories, it's people's lives. And you know, listening and understanding that what you say and what you've experienced mattered and that, you know, what you're saying, and what you experienced can actually change the future, not just hopefully, for yourself, but for others.

My name's Cathy Kezelman. I'm president of Blue Knot Foundation. That's the National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma.

So Blue Knot Foundation's an organisation that works with adults who've experienced repeated trauma, often as a child, but also as an adult, and that trauma is often interpersonal, so one person against another. We provide a number of helpline services. So, adults who've experienced childhood trauma can ring and talk to a counsellor. And we also run the National Counselling and Referral Service for people with disability.

Kirby Fenwick

So just what is the National Counselling and Referral Service? Dr Kezelman explains just what the service is and how it can support you.

Dr Cathy Kezelman

So, in the first instance, we provide counselling, which, which really is, you know, emotional support. And when someone has engaged with the Royal Commission, and it's a Royal Commission that's looking into trauma. So that means that often people will be revisiting their traumatic experiences, either from the past, or currently. And obviously, that brings up a whole lot of not just memories, and experiences, but, but emotional ups and downs.

And so, we can be there to just help walk alongside someone during that process to listen and to hear, and to help provide strategies as well for them around how to ground themselves and help them to feel safe, in what is, you know, a very challenging process. It takes a lot of courage to come forward and speak up and out about, you know, what's happened to you, and traumatic experiences that have really often profoundly affected your life. And so, it's very important to have someone who can, can listen and be there with you, and particularly during a time of isolation,

We can also obviously provide referrals and you know, we provide a lot of referrals and that's often not just giving someone a phone number, but doing what we call a warm transfers, you know, checking in with, with what service would be helpful for

the person, engaging with that service. And, you know, while we have that person on the phone, or by video conference and making that warm connection, so the person doesn't have to repeat everything they've just told us that they can find a place where they can then get the support they need. And that may well be an advocacy service, which can help support them in writing a submission to the Royal Commission that may be financial counselling service, you know, many, many different services.

And I said before, you know, sometimes practical supports to help with just daily needs with shopping with, with, you know, the many, many things we as human beings often take for granted but can be quite difficult.

But we are very passionate about what we do. We're very focused on really educating people around this sort of trauma. When people think of trauma, they think of the trauma of a single incident, of a, of an assault as an adult, or natural disaster or an accident, and obviously, people experience, you know, profound, often profound impacts, PTSD, as a result of that. But when people have repeated interpersonal trauma, it could actually affect you know, the very development of your core sense of self, your relationships, your physical and mental health, you know, right through the lifecycle unless you get the right support. And so, you know, we're very much about educating people around this different sort of trauma, and the different sort of support people need to recover and to heal.

Kirby Fenwick

As Cathy explained The National Counselling and Referral Service, provides free, independent and confidential counselling to support people with disability, their family members, carers, advocates and support workers who have experienced or witnessed violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation. While the service was originally established to support people making submissions to the Royal Commission that has changed. You don't have to have engaged with the Disability Royal Commission or have made a submission to use the service.

Dr Cathy Kezelman

That's right. So originally, it was set up to support people engaging with the Disability Royal Commission, but it's now a much broader scope. And certainly, we find that, you know, we're able to support people with lots of different needs in the community and we're very keen to continue to do that.

Kirby Fenwick

This expansion is necessary because the reality is that even if you haven't engaged with the Royal Commission directly, you might still be struggling with the conversations that are being had in the media or in your communities and you might just need someone to talk to.

Dr Cathy Kezelman

Oh, absolutely. And we also know that you know sadly you know many people in the community experience you know the sorts of trauma we're talking about. And you know people with disability you know are definitely not immune to that and have experienced additional barriers to support. And it's very important that they're able to access emotional support to talk to someone who can listen, deeply listen to what they need, meet them, sort of in the present, and find out how to help.

Kirby Fenwick

You can contact the National Counselling and Referral Service on 1800 421 468. That's 1800 421 468. You can also reach the National Counselling and Referral Service via the National Relay Service on 133 677. There's also a free Translating and Interpreting Service by either calling the National Counselling and Referral Service and asking for an interpreter or calling the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450 and asking to be connected to National Counselling and Referral Service.

The National Counselling and Referral Service operates from:  
9am-6pm AEST/AEDT Mon-Fri and 9am-5pm AEST/AEDT Saturday, Sundays and public holidays.

To speak with an advocate, you can contact your local or state-based advocacy services. You can also contact the National Counselling and Referral Service and ask for a referral. You can also contact the Disability Royal Commission directly on 1800 517 199, that's 1800 517 199, and request a referral for advocacy support to tell your story.

Kirby Fenwick

Thank you for listening to Inform, a production of Independence Australia. Inform is hosted and produced by me, Kirby Fenwick. Our managing editor is Alison Crowe.

This episode of Inform was recorded and produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulan nation. We pay our respects to elders past and present.

You'll find links to the resources mentioned in this episode, plus more, in the show notes at [informonline.org.au](http://informonline.org.au)

Our thanks to Mary Mallet from DANA, the Disability Advocacy Network Australia and Dr Cathy Kezelman, from the Blue Knot Foundation.

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