

Advocacy Tasmania

This submission was authorised by Leanne Groombridge on 23 April 2021. For further comment, please contact ceo@yoursaytas.org.

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Introduction

Advocacy Tasmania (AdvoTas) is an independent, client-directed service that provides support to people with disabilities, older persons, people living with mental illness, and people who use alcohol and other drugs. AdvoTas' responses to the issues raised in this consultation are directly informed by the reported experiences of our clients with disabilities; AdvoTas is therefore only able to provide comment on matters where our clients have sought support from AdvoTas for issues related to, or provided feedback to AdvoTas regarding, that matter.

Case studies in this document have been anonymised, and therefore have some details changed to prevent identification and/or may be a combination of multiple clients' experiences.

Tasmanian context

Tasmanian public transport has significant limitations compared to public transport that may be available in other areas of Australia with higher population density. There are no passenger rail or tram lines for public transport, with options generally being limited to bus services, taxis, or private vehicles. There is also a distinct lack of any accessible public transport whatsoever in many areas of Tasmania. AdvoTas' primary experiences in supporting clients with transport issues are related to securing funding for taxi transport (either via the NDIS or State taxi transport subsidies) or access to the Patient Travel Assistance Scheme. However, AdvoTas has supported a proportion of clients with disabilities to communicate with, or make complaints to or about, public transport services.

Staff training and communication

AdvoTas clients report that the training and attitudes of frontline service staff are frequently the defining factor in their experience of using public transport.

Clients have described incidents which indicate that frontline public transport staff may not be familiar with how various disabilities can present. Particular disabilities often lead to atypical patterns of communication or behaviour, such as when an Autistic person experiences a meltdown or shutdown, or a person with Tourettes experiences significant physical or verbal tics. This unfamiliarity has led to such presentations being misinterpreted by staff as rudeness or aggression, and responded to unjustly.

CASE STUDY: ALEX

Alex is a young adult who has Tourettes but is otherwise fully ambulant and has no intellectual or cognitive impairments.

They described an incident in which they experienced verbal and physical tics while travelling on a Metro bus service. The driver became angry at Alex, and shouted at them to get off the bus. Alex attempted to quietly explain their condition to the driver, even offering to show them a medical certificate kept on-person for situations exactly like these.

Alex reported that the driver was not receptive to their explanation, and maintained the decision that Alex had to leave the bus. To avoid further public humiliation, Alex gave up, got off the bus and walked upwards of 7 kilometers to their destination. Alex reports suffering extreme anxiety when faced with traveling on busses as a result of this interaction, which significantly limits their activities of daily living.

CASE STUDY: JAMES

James was aged in his 20s at the time of his presentation to AdvoTas, and was a full-time wheelchair user. James was nonverbal and was supported to communicate by his family.

James and his family sought advocacy support to make a complaint to their bus service provider. They reported that on attempting to use bus services advertised as accessible, James was frequently refused access by the bus drivers. James' family members reported incidents such as:

- The bus driver telling them to “get *it* off the bus” (i.e. referring to James as an “it”)

- Saying “people come before wheelchairs” (i.e. implying James was not a person, and reducing him to the object of his mobility aid)
- Bus drivers initially refusing to let James on the bus, then being shamed into allowing him on by other passengers
- Bus drivers putting the ramp down suddenly and dangerously very close to James, causing him to panic and risking a collision

James’ family had attempted to make several complaints to the service in the past, but state that they do not believe the complaints were taken seriously or treated respectfully. When the family tried to escalate their complaints to Equal Opportunity Tasmania, they report that the bus service provider was uncooperative and obstructive.

When the family ultimately did take the complaint to Equal Opportunity Tasmania, they report that they were “punished” by bus service staff for making the complaint, regardless of clauses in the Anti-Discrimination Act that prohibit retributive action.

Mobility aid safety

See example outlined in James’ Case Study.

Allocated spaces in transit

AdvoTas clients have reported experiences where prams have been prioritised over wheelchairs when competing for space on a bus. This has led to wheelchair users being denied access to a bus outright or the wheelchair user being harassed by other passengers after boarding.

Wheelchair users have also reported being reprimanded by drivers when their wheelchair sits slightly over or on the line of an allocated space due to the space not being large enough.

Lifts

AdvoTas clients report that they must call ahead to ensure that a given bus service which is advertised as being accessible will have a functioning wheelchair lift or ramp. In the case of Metro Tasmania, clients report that they must call on the day to confirm the “accessible” service will be accessible; for Redline services, clients report needing to call multiple days in advance to specifically request a bus with a functioning lift.

Website accessibility

AdvoTas clients report that bus service websites in Tasmania do not indicate effectively when accessible buses will be on a particular route. Although certain routes and times are marked as accessible, clients report that they still have to call ahead to ensure that the advertised accessible routes will actually have accessible buses at those times.

Timetables available on the Metro Tasmania website are not visually accessible – clients report that they are very difficult to interpret, with no accessible guides readily available on how to use them. Many AdvoTas clients report asking for dedicated funding in their NDIS Plans for public transport training so

they may learn to use bus timetables, but are unsuccessful in using public transport independently even after receiving this support.

A brief inspection of the Metro Tasmania website using a website accessibility checker tool showed that the trip planner tool is not accessible for keyboard-only users in a variety of ways; many people with disability may not use a mouse when accessing their computers, either due to the use of a screen reader for vision impairment or due to fine motor control issues, such as dyspraxia or tremors.

Passenger loading areas

AdvoTas clients frequently report that there are no appropriate accessible passenger loading areas near their homes or along routes they need to use. This has become increasingly the case over time as housing affordability has reduced in Tasmania; as many People with Disability are under- or unemployed and have limited income, increasingly they have been forced to move to less central and more remote areas, which have extremely limited public service coverage.

A client who was a wheelchair user reported to AdvoTas that they had been told by Redline Bus Service that wheelchair users would not be permitted to disembark from the bus service at any stops other than at the CBD depots, as others using the service are permitted to. The client reported that up until 2017 other disembarkation points had been available for wheelchair users, but that despite having used those other points for years with no incidents, Redline had indicated that wheelchair users disembarking anywhere other than the depots was an “OH&S issue”.

CASE STUDY: Wendy

Wendy lives in a semi-rural area in Tasmania and has disabilities that impact on her mobility.

Wendy sought advocacy support to make a request for increased bus access so that she would be able to travel independently from her home to her daily activities. She was able to reach the nearest bus stop to her home independently, but the bus stop itself was not accessible, the bus that travelled the route was also not accessible, and the bus only arrived at a single time of day - 6:30am - which was too early for the client to be able to utilise the service (again, due to the impacts of her disability).

In response to the client’s request for an accessible bus service, Metro Tasmania indicated that they were not contracted to provide that degree of service in semi-rural areas and directed the client to the State department responsible for the contracts. In contacting the State department responsible, the client was told that the service was in fact being reduced and the single bus stop that the client was able to reach would no longer be in service at all.

CASE STUDY: Bruce

Bruce is a young man with disabilities that impact on his mobility. Due to the shortage of affordable housing in Tasmania, Bruce was forced to move to a remote town where there is no public transport other than an extremely limited Redline bus service.

Bruce relied on the bus service to run important weekly errands such as grocery shopping and medical appointments. Bruce also relied on the service to access the community and see his friends/family as his move had left him isolated.

The already limited bus service was made unusable for Bruce when the number of bus stops in his town was cut to increase efficiency. The one bus stop that was close enough to Bruce's home for him to safely access was removed. The only remaining stop was over 1 kilometer from Bruce's home, a distance that is impossible for him to cover on foot, especially while carrying a week's worth of groceries.

This was brought to the attention of the service provider who refused to accommodate Bruce's needs, stating that the Department of State Growth is responsible for decisions regarding where to place stops. When the Department of State Growth were subsequently contacted regarding the matter, they also refused to make any changes to accommodate Bruce's needs.