

DDA Transport Standards FIVE YEAR REVIEW

A submission Frank Hall-Bentick Disability Australia Ltd.

My name is Frank Hall-Bentick, I have a life long disability, live in Melbourne and have been involved in disability empowerment for the last thirty years. During this time I have been employed in the Equal Opportunity Unit of the Australian Public Service Board, as Coordinator of Disability Resources Centre and as a Disability Officer at Centrelink.

Since 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons I have been at the forefront of disability rights in local, state, national, regional and world organizations, founding and leading many of these groups. For the last fifteen years I have worked closely with the United Nations in Bangkok as Resource Person and invited Expert. More recently I have been an active member of the International Disability Caucus and its work on the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in both Bangkok and New York.

During this time I have received a number of Awards including

1. 1992 – International Plaque awarded for distinguished and unstinting service in the cause People with Disabilities in the Asia Pacific Region,
2. 2001 - Rotary International "Shine on Awards, Certificate of Commendation" and
3. 2003 - Australian Centenary of Federation Award for long service to disability organizations and People with Disabilities.

Currently I am involved in;

1. International UN Disability Convention Caucus;
2. World Councillor, Disabled Peoples' International;
3. Treasurer & International Representative, Disability Australia;
4. Board member of Disability Resources Centre, Disability Rights Victoria & Leadership Plus;
5. Member of the Disability Advisory Council for Yarra City Council;
6. Member of the Ministerial Public Transport Advisory Committee;
7. Board Member of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations

GENERAL COMMENT

In 1992 when the DDA was en-acted it was hoped that disability discrimination would be eliminated within ten years. However people with disabilities have been severely disempowered by it's complaints mechanisms and an ineffective HREOC Watchdog.

STANDARDS

When first proposed the Transport Standards were seen by many pwds as a way of delaying the end of Transport exclusion and discrimination against pwds. Unfortunately pwds on the Federal Committee setup to develop the Transport Standards were greatly outnumbered by bureaucrats and transport service providers trying to water down and delay any changes.

However even these modest provisions have now developed a life of their own with State Governments and Transport Service Providers now starting to make changes to their services.

Unfortunately both the AS 1428 and Transport Standards are based on old access measurements and are rigidly followed by transport services as the maximum they have to apply. This means that access to public transport will always need catching up and never planning for the future.

TRAMS

Accessibility has suffered from the division of the metro trams into two separate companies under the Kennett Government. With different companies ordering different vehicles Melbourne now has completely different access on different routes. Although Yarra Trams made the 109 Route (Box Hill – Port Melbourne) a priority only some of the trams stops have been made accessible through Superstop Platforms. Even though Yarra Trams is the only operator different vehicles can't run on the same line. The Department of Infrastructure and Yarra Trams have refused to setup a tram committee to work in partnership with disability organisations. They have instead muddled along with no clear plan in mind. Further getting tram drivers to use the access features still proves very difficult.

TRAINS

Trains have suffered by being divided into two companies although it's back to one now. The purchase of different carriages has meant these new trains have different access problems still. Trains have gap and height issues outside the Standards and rely on direct assistance from drivers to put down a ramp for wheelchairs. All wheelchairs needing this assistance must wait to the head of the train for assistance. Anybody not waiting at the head of the train has little chance of the driver waiting for them. On the vast majority of platforms you must wait out in the wind and rain for the train to arrive. They are now building a small number of shelters to wait in but they are very few across the system. Gaps and heights between trains and platforms present severe safety problems for elderly people and people with mobility problems who need to use walking sticks, crutches, and/or walking frames. Drivers provide no direct to these people to board and alight the train even if they could walk up to the head of the train. The newer trains have no handrails in the doorways which people can reach to help themselves in and out of the train. Unfortunately because door handrails are not specifically detailed in the Standards, the metro rail operators are not interested in installing these safety items. Further when wheelchair and scooter circulation

problems are pointed out neither DOI nor Connex are willing to make modifications. Also on many stations the platforms narrow at the head of the train so when the ramp is laid down there is no room for wheelchairs and scooters to safely turn on to the platform.

BUSES

Buses in the metro area are by far the most further along to being accessible. This is because the purchase of new accessible buses is far cheaper than train or tram rolling stock. However there is still much work to be done on bus stops. Further to this there is very limited space for electric wheelchairs and scooters to enter via the front door so all buses should be fitted for backdoor entry as well. Driver assistance is very problematic with very few willing to help. The exemption to school buses from access standards has severely affected students with disabilities attending their local schools. Lastly much more needs to be done to fast track access buses in regional and rural areas as this usually the only form of Public Transport around and between rural towns.

TAXIS

In Melbourne the accessible taxi scheme is a hotchpotch of vehicles, incentives, training, enforcement and Taxi Companies. Over the years the Victorian Taxi Directorate has made many changes to the scheme most of which have provided financial incentives to owners and drivers. However these incentives have often attracted people more interested in a fast buck than providing quality reliable services. The VTD has been very slow to weed out bad drivers and owners acting more like an old boys club than a regulatory body. More recently the VTD has required all the drivers of Wheelchair taxis to undertake disability awareness training but don't require sedan drivers to do this training. Most elderly people and people with disabilities not using electric wheelchairs or scooters travel in sedan and regularly encounter discrimination and bad service. In future the VTD should make all sedan drivers undertake disability awareness training.

DOCKS & FERRIES

In implementing the Transport Standards the Victorian Government has ignored wharves and ferries claiming they are not public transport.

TOURIST, RELIGIOUS, SCHOOL & COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

These services continue to use inaccessible vehicles to operate their services. PWD's continue to be excluded from active involvement in the activities these services provide. Coach size vehicles would undertake a twenty year timetable and smaller vehicles a five year timetable depending on numbers in fleet.

AIRCRAFT, AIRLINES & AIRPORTS

These Airline services are becoming more deeply entrenched in problems and discrimination particularly with cut price airlines although this discrimination was already occurring. Operators have claimed the OH &S and Aviation Acts prevent them from making any changes to their systems, procedures and infrastructure

however it is only in a few areas where this may occur. Staff continually give pwds the wrong advise based on fewer hassles for staff than full and proper service. Airlines rigidly apply limitations on numbers of guide/service dogs and wheelchairs per plane. Don't provide free fares for Carers to persons with severe disabilities who need to travel with them. Don't provide free extra seats/upgrades for people needing oxygen/ventilators/batteries during flight.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The main disability transport advisory committee is the Public Transport Advisory Committee setup by the Minister for Transport and chaired by the Director for Public Transport. For years the representatives of pwds and disabled peoples' organisations have been forced to dance to overloaded agendas and few meetings like puppets on strings. With DOI and Transport Service Providers rarely involving the PTAC in partnership to arrive at workable solutions.

In recent times with the 5 year review deadline both DOI & the TSP have sort the work closer with the representatives of pwds on the PTAC. Unfortunately I don't expect that TSPs will continue this closer working relationship once the dust of the 5 year review settles. DOI has consistently resisted setting up Sub-Committees within the PTAC so TSP have very little advise on accessibility problems and the vast majority have no Committees of their own.

Therefore each State/Territory must setup a State wide Transport Advisory body of disability advocacy organisations, with a PWD as chair accountable directly to the Minister. With Sub-committees on each form of Transport. Each TSP must setup it's own Committee of pwds and employ a pwd to drive change in their organisation.