November 2023

To Share to Prepare - Inquiry into North Island severe weather events

Please find attached DPA’s submission on Inquiry into North Island severe weather events

For any further inquiries, please contact:

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**Introducing Disabled Persons Assembly NZ**

**We work on systemic change for the equity of disabled people**

Disabled Persons Assembly NZ (DPA) is a not-for-profit pan-impairment Disabled People’s Organisation run by and for disabled people.

**We drive systemic change through:**

* **Leadership:** reflecting the collective voice of disabled people, locally, nationally, and internationally.
* **Information and advice:** informing and advising on policies impacting on the lives of disabled people.
* **Advocacy:** supporting disabled people to have a voice, including a collective voice, in society.
* **Monitoring:** monitoring and giving feedback on existing laws, policies, and practices about and relevant to disabled people.

# The Submission

DPA welcomes this opportunity to feedback about what lessons we can learn from the North Island weather events which have transpired across 2023, particularly those which occurred in January/February.

The disabled community are already being hit by the impacts of climate change and are expected to be one of the hardest hit population groups going forward, locally, nationally, and internationally.[[1]](#footnote-2)

New Zealand also has international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (article 11) to protect and uphold the rights of disabled people to receive humanitarian assistance in emergency situations.

## Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Gabrielle’s impact on disabled people

## DPA, in the immediate aftermath of the Auckland Anniversary Weekend flooding events and before Gabrielle struck, reached out to our members in the region to ascertain what their experiences had been like.

## While many disabled people were resilient and had withstood the floods well or were not impacted at all, others had been more seriously impacted. We heard stories about the impact that weather-enforced homelessness had on disabled people, exacerbated by the lack of accessible housing.  We also heard that some had difficulty accessing support especially when it came to assisting with property clean ups and disruption of disability support services and activities.

We note that the new Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People initiated a response aimed at Auckland’s disabled community over both storm events by providing essential information and a coordinated response with disability organisations and service providers during these periods. The availability of funding from central government aimed at disabled people and their whānau and disability organisations also assisted during the clean-up and recovery period.

However, these storms reinforced the need from a civil defence perspective for timely information in accessible formats, good support systems, assistance to disabled people and their whānau in planning for disasters, and the ability to have well organised disability support systems and structures in the recovery phase as well.

One of the impacts of the weather events for some disabled people was the disruption to disability support services which resulted after the storms. Support services including personal assistance, home help and other supports were impacted for a short time and coming on top of difficulties encountered during peak Covid in accessing these same supports caused additional stress for some disabled people. The support received from Whaikaha and other agencies helped with resolving these problems.

There was also disruption to transport links and accessible transport options including buses and mobility vans. Some disabled people reported being stranded on the Friday evening of the Anniversary Weekend storm as transport routes began to close meaning that disabled people, for example, were stranded at bus stations and train platforms.

We recognise that both disabled and non-disabled people were stranded but the lack of accessible transport options means that disabled people can be doubly disadvantaged if sudden weather events or other emergencies impact transport systems.

## Civil defence response to disabled people during storm events

Alongside others in the community, DPA were very concerned by the initially poor response by local agencies to the Auckland Anniversary Weekend flooding events. The failures around not declaring a state of emergency and issuing warning notifications quickly enough have been well highlighted. We hope that this inquiry will seek to address those failures to ensure that they do not happen again.

While regional emergency responsiveness had improved by the time Cyclone Gabrielle struck in February, there is still a need to continually exercise and test all CDEM capabilities and capacities, including communications, with key stakeholders including disabled people.

Every CDEM region around the country should anticipate and assess a range of potential hazards and events and set out clear management approaches to address each contingency for at risk demographics and communities including disabled people. All aspects of emergency planning, management and response should be done in partnership.

All emergency management systems must have the capabilities they need to support effective response and recovery. This capability building should extend to disability responsiveness and awareness training for CDEM staff and volunteers across the country.

This should include how CDEM should communicate with and support disabled people to plan for emergencies and then provide active support and accessible communications during emergencies.

One mechanism would be for a Disability Responsiveness Advisor to be appointed to all regional emergency planning teams who would act as a focal point of contact between each team and the relevant disabled community. Any appointees should preferably self-identify as a disabled person and have good links to each region’s disabled community and disability organisations.

Disability responsiveness advisors should also be part of all local CDEM executive management teams around the country so that a disabled community perspective can be fed into all emergency response planning and during times of emergency.

We also understand that the inaccessibility of the government’s main national crisis centre has an impact on disabled officials' ability to undertake their work and provide crucial links to the disabled community in a time of crisis.

DPA would like to see all regional and national CDEM headquarters accessible for all staff and volunteers, including disabled people, who will be working within them.

**Need for community readiness**

All communities around the country, including the disabled community, should be informed, prepared and resilient to emergencies.

DPA supports the use of public awareness and community engagement activities that will contribute to these goals. However, there is a need for programmes to be specifically tailored and accessible for disabled people.

This will mean having CDEM working in a co-design partnership alongside disabled people to develop community readiness and responsiveness programmes that work for disabled people and their communities.

These programmes should be co-delivered by regional CDEM in partnership with disabled people and disability organisations around the country.

## Disability organisations, including disability service providers, Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People and Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) including DPA need to be utilised by both national and regional CDEM.

## Information and resources about civil defence emergencies and risks/hazards should be made fully available by national and regional CDEM in accessible formats including New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), Braille, Large Print, Easy Read, and audio to any D/deaf or disabled person who requests them.

Emergency notifications should also be readily available on websites, text, and email link and on mainstream media (especially NZSL interpretations which have been very usefully provided at media conferences held by both national and local CDEM in the recent past).

Emergency refuge spaces/evacuation/welfare centres need to be fully accessible to disabled people in terms of ensuring that they are physically accessible and usable by people with mobility impairments (i.e., wheelchair/mobility aid users), so have accessible toilets cleaning and showering facilities (including wet floor showers and railed toilets) and have visual fire alarms;

Evacuation processes should be made accessible to disabled people by regional and national CDEM in terms of, for example, providing free mobility taxi and accessible bus services to transport disabled people to safer refuge in times of emergency (if time permits), as well as inflatable rafts and other rescue equipment worked by well-trained staff and volunteers who understand the needs of disabled people.

## Double whammy of weather events and housing crisis on disabled people

One of the most serious post-weather event impacts was the lack of accessible housing to live in if houses were damaged. One wheelchair user was forced to sleep in their wheelchair for three nights after their house became flooded

DPA has stressed in various submissions to both central and local government the need for more universal design, accessible housing to be consented and constructed around the country.

The 2023 storms highlighted the double whammy of the ongoing housing crisis and the lack of accessible dwellings as when emergencies strike, there are few alternative options for disabled people to turn to, especially if their homes are rendered uninhabitable.

Following Gabrielle, there were stories about disabled people not being able to return to their homes due to delays on the part of service providers in getting supported accommodation re-opened. One prominent example was that of Wairoa resident, Gavin Jones, who only returned to his IDEA Services run home in June 2023, nearly four months after the cyclone.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In December 2023, DPA received a report of a family/whanau of one disabled person still living in temporary, emergency accommodation nearly 12 months after they were forced to leave their home during the Auckland floods.

In the longer term, accessible, universal designed housing and communities will be an essential component of building climate resilience across the motu. In the short to medium-term, DPA predicts that finding accessible housing for disabled and older people who need to be re-housed after severe weather events will become even more of an issue.

**Other response needs**

Aside from housing, government need to work with social agencies, including DPO's and disabled people to identify recovery needs and ensure that resources and support are pooled from both central and local government as well as communities to ensure that disabled people are supported with clean-up activities, finding food and clothing and also having whatever personal supports they usually have or may require due to the emergency.

# Recommendations Summary

Here is a re-cap of the key recommendations made in this submission:

**Recommendation 1:** that disabled people and other at-risk groups in emergencies are integrated into all emergency response management, planning and policy making processes.

**Recommendation 2:** that regional CDEM build strategic partnerships and relationships with the local disabled community and disability organisations

**Recommendation 3:** that disability responsiveness and awareness training for Civil Defence and Emergency Management (CDEM) staff and volunteers should form part of ongoing capability and capacity building around the country.

**Recommendation 4:**  that regional CDEM's appoint Disability Responsiveness Advisors/Trainers to their teams with their main role being to build relationships between CDEM and local disabled communities.

**Recommendation 5:** that CDEM regional offices recruit and build a diverse volunteer and paid workforce

**Recommendation 6:** that national and regional CDEM headquarters be fully accessible for all disabled staff and other essential volunteers to work in.

**Recommendation 7:** that national and regional CDEM work in partnership with disabled people to develop and deliver community preparedness and responsiveness programmes tailored for disabled people and their communities.

**Recommendation 8:** that information and resources about civil defence emergencies is made available in accessible formats.

**Recommendation 9:** that national and regional CDEM provides emergency information in accessible formats both online and on mainstream media channels.

**Recommendation 10:** that key refuge/evacuation spaces are accessible and user friendly for disabled people.

**Recommendation 11:** that accessible evacuation processes are in place for disabled people.

**Recommendation 12:** that government work with disabled people and disability organisations to identify the recovery needs of disabled people and the disabled community in the aftermath of emergencies.

1. Stein, J.S., Stein, M., Groce, N. & Kett, M. (2023). The role of the scientific community in strengthening disability-inclusive climate resilience. Nature Climate Change 13, 108-109. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01564-6.epdf?sharing_token> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Hawkes Bay Today. (2023, June 6). Displaced Wairoa Gavin Jones returns home with mayor after four months. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/hawkes-bay-today/news/displaced-wairoa-man-gavin-jones-returns-home-with-mayor-after-four-months/MR73LUB5ZBA63ALQKL6XDW32YQ/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)