

**Women With Disabilities ACT**

Submission to  
**Inquiry into Libraries ACT**

ACT Legislative Assembly  
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services

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*Women with Disabilities ACT acknowledges and pays respect to the Ngunnawal peoples, the traditional custodians of the ACT Region, on whose land our office is located. We pay our respects their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their spiritual, social, historical and ongoing connection to these lands and the contribution they make to the life of the Australian Capital Territory.*

Winner 2012 International Women's Day Award, Community Category

Winner 2015 ACT Chief Minister's Inclusion Awards, Excellence in Championing Human Rights

**STRONG WOMEN STRONG VOICES**

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## About WWDACT

Women with Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is a systemic advocacy and peer support organisation for women, girls, non-binary and feminine identifying people with disabilities in the ACT. WWDACT follows a human rights philosophy, based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of (all forms of) Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). WWDACT is a Disabled People's Organisation, governed by women with disabilities, and its proposals and recommendations to government are consistent with Article 4 (3), and Article 29 of CRPD which outline the imperative for consultation with disabled peoples.

## Strategic Directions for Inclusion

Women with disability are often socially isolated from their communities and in the ACT in 2012, 1 in 5 women with disability were not satisfied with their level of social interaction<sup>1</sup>. Social isolation is a key determinant of mental and physical health. It is important that social isolation is remedied by examining our institutions and changing them to become more inclusive, targeting those most vulnerable to isolation. Encouraging a supportive and inclusive community through our public facilities is essential to fulfilling the vision set out in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (CRPD) Article 19, **Living independently and being included in the community**, which says *“Community services and facilities for the general population are available on an equal basis to persons with disabilities and are responsive to their needs”*. Libraries are a community service which need to be inclusive so that Canberra can be the diverse and inclusive city we want it to be.

Libraries around the world are being transformed beyond just repositories of books into community hubs for learning, socialising and innovation. Libraries ACT has done this as well, through new digital offerings, diverse events and projects like the Makerspace at Civic library. But more can be done to ensure inclusion for women with disability in the ACT. In 2015, WWDACT's *Contributing Our Voices* report showed that women with disability are interested in more community activities and group learning opportunities like those offered at Libraries ACT<sup>2</sup>. However, it is unclear if or how Libraries ACT has engaged with the disability community as there is no mention of disability in their publicly available strategic plan. Ideally, Libraries ACT should consult with people with disability to include specific strategic goals for inclusion or write a Disability Action Plan. Examples of library Disability Action Plans are available from the State Library of Queensland<sup>3</sup> and the State Library of Victoria<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Strong Women, Great City, WCHM and WWDACT, 2012 <https://www.wwdact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Strong-Women-Great-City-A-snapshot-of-findings-from-a-survey-of-ACTs-women-with-disabilities.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Contributing Our Voices, WWDACT, 2015, <https://www.wwdact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Contributing-our-voices.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Disability Action Plan 2017, State Library of Queensland, 2017 <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/about-us/corporate/publications/planning/disability-service-plan-2018-19/disability-action-plan-2017>

<sup>4</sup> Diversity and Social Inclusion Action Plan 2017-2020, State Library of Victoria, 2017 [https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Diversity\\_social\\_inclusion-FINAL\\_DX.PDF](https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Diversity_social_inclusion-FINAL_DX.PDF)

## Bridging the Digital Divide

According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics report on Household Use of Information Technology, 6% of households in the ACT have no access to the internet. The internet is a crucial part of modern life in many cases, which is demonstrated by its high use for banking (72% of internet users) and purchasing goods and services (61%). More people are also using the internet to access health services (an increase from 22% in 2014/15 to 46% in 2016/17) and formal education (31.7%)<sup>5</sup>. Due to multiple disadvantage and gender-based stigma, women with disability are likely to have less access to the internet, particularly older women<sup>6</sup>.

Libraries are an important public access point for those who do not have internet at home or have limited computer literacy. As stated in the Libraries ACT Strategy 2015 -19, a goal for libraries ACT is to “Create digital hubs in library branches with state-of-the-art digital and ICT equipment and access”<sup>7</sup>. This goal should be enhanced to address the digital literacy of people with disabilities. WWDACT’s 2015 report highlighted that low digital literacy was a barrier to employment for women with disability in the ACT<sup>2</sup>. Libraries could offer a space for disability specific computer classes, in addition to the current sessions for seniors which are held only at Woden Library. A range of accessibility technology could also be included in classes for participants to learn to use. Co-ordinated with community transport, this could be a way to help people with disabilities gain skills for engaging with the digital community and could also assist those looking for employment, enhancing outcomes of existing local and federal programs. The classes would have the secondary effect of reducing isolation and enhancing community connectedness with links to other Library Programs or activities.

## Facilities

Currently, Libraries ACT facilities are inconsistent in their accessibility. For example, the Kippax library has a ramp for wheelchair and walker access, but it was described to us as “unstable” by a WWDACT member. A user on twitter described a situation in March of this year where the accessible toilet at Belconnen Library did not have a functional light. In this case, this was the only accessible toilet nearby, meaning that the reliability of this was paramount to the accessibility of facilities around the library<sup>8</sup>. The community room at Woden Library has “limited wheelchair access”, meaning that some members of the community may not be able to access it<sup>9</sup>. Given that libraries are such an important part of the community, works should be undertaken to ensure that the facilities are up-to-date with accessibility standards.

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<sup>5</sup> Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Women with Disability overcome the Digital Divide, Interview with Eliza Cussen from Media Access Australia, 2013, <https://mediaaccess.org.au/audio-description-on-radio/women-with-disability-overcome-the-digital-divide?TRANSCRIPT>

<sup>7</sup> Libraries Strategy 2015-19, Libraries ACT, 2015, [https://www.library.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/728280/1500147-Libraries-Strategy\\_FA\\_web-FINAL.pdf](https://www.library.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/728280/1500147-Libraries-Strategy_FA_web-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Tweet by @trisgilla, 2018, <https://twitter.com/trisgilla/status/1031350422550659073>

<sup>9</sup> Community Facility Hire, Libraries ACT, 2018, [https://www.library.act.gov.au/library\\_services/community-facility-hire#rooms](https://www.library.act.gov.au/library_services/community-facility-hire#rooms)

Libraries in the ACT could be further improved by providing accessible tools for community use. Current facilities for hire could be fitted with hearing loops to provide more accessible facilities for information sessions, classes and consultations. For example, WWDACT would love to have use of hearing loop facilities across the ACT to help maximise our community's engagement with systemic advocacy. However, it can be very difficult to find suitable facilities close to the town centres along the length and breadth of the territory and costs to hire a hearing loop can be significant for community events.

Video conferencing would also be a great asset for those without facilities of their own and would allow use of live captioning or Auslan interpretation at events. This is particularly worth considering as there are so few Auslan interpreters available in Canberra. Video conferencing facilities would also help Canberrans tap into resources from around the country and would allow classes to be held with speakers from across Australia, broadening the possibilities for community education and events for all Canberrans.

## **Conclusion**

WWDACT believes that Libraries ACT fulfils an important role as an access point for information, community meeting place and education facility. However, more can be done to improve accessibility for people with disability and set a standard for access and inclusion in the ACT. Strategic investment in libraries can provide communities with the means to better include people with disability, to the benefit of the entire community.