



# AN INTERVIEW WITH BLIND CITIZENS AUSTRALIA'S PEER MENTORING PROJECT

---

NCOSS chats with BCA's New South Wales Coordinator, Sally Aurisch, about the strategies and outcomes of BCA's recently-concluded Peer Mentoring Project.

## Stories of Change and Good Practice

This document is part of a suite of resources developed by NCOSS under its Skilled to Thrive capacity-building project.

December 2019

---

A decorative image on the left side of the page showing a white notebook, a black pen, and a white flower on a light-colored wooden surface.

# Background

---

In July 2018, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) commenced a one-year \$90k project, under the Information Linkages and Capacity-Building (ILC) program of the National Disability Insurance Agency.

Officially titled "Life Ready", the peer mentoring project aimed to reach 800 individuals around Australia, and deliver a range of activities (teleconferences, mentoring, face-to-face capacity-building opportunities) with the following desired outcomes:

**increased self-advocacy skills;**  
**increased capacity to undertake identified tasks;**  
**stronger peer networks;**  
**enhanced employment and educational pathways; and**  
**improved self-confidence.**

If successful, BCA also aimed to externally offer its project resources and learnings to further increase awareness and community participation.

Potentially, the offerings could be used as a sustainable revenue stream for Blind Citizens Australia, a national organisation that is primarily led by people with disability.

## Which of your activities and strategies worked really well?

### Sally Aurisch:

The best thing was doing all the leadership training by phone using Zoom (video conferencing). It meant people all over New South Wales – from the south coast to Tweed Heads- were able to attend. Travel issues have always been significant, and this was addressed through teleconferencing.

We were also able to incorporate things that we were already doing well, as well as identify new ways of doing things.

Through the leadership training, we were able to identify potential leaders for Blind Citizens' National Policy Council, potential appointments to the Board, and people who we could invite to other opportunities.

We were able to identify the strongest of mentors who could work on individual advocacy cases, and to team them up with interested people. Our next move is to get lots of inputs from the mentoring relationships to feed in to the systemic advocacy of our work.

We did get close to reaching our original target of 800, albeit over 4 states. About 64 people did the phone training for peer support and leadership. We also produced a podcast series, recorded two podcasts that are now available to all BCA members in Australia. We were lucky to have been able to pool resources with (the state of) Victoria.

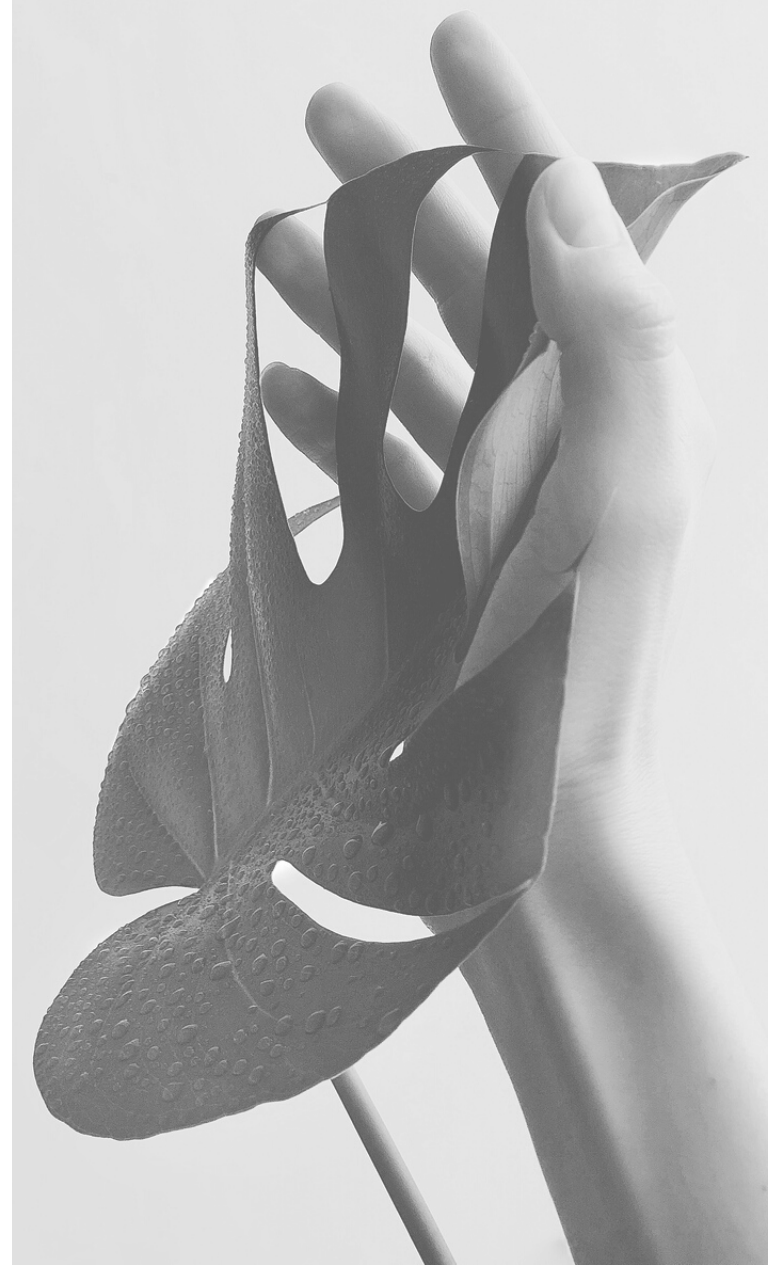
**One of your project goals was to increase skills in self-advocacy. Indeed, the UNSW Peer Support practice review (July 2019) mentioned how peer support is able to provide "broader benefits to participants' confidence in decision-making and self-advocacy". Do you find this to be true in your peer support networks?**

**Sally Aurisch:** At a training session, one of the participants mentioned that he was currently studying IT at TAFE and was hoping to eventually complete a Bachelor of Business in Information Technology, and later, an MBA. He also shared that he was experiencing challenges. Another participant happened to have been working in IT for over 30 years and had encountered similar challenges. They have formed a mentoring partnership since then, discussing ways to navigate barriers, whilst practicing the skills and principles that they learned from the BCA training.

I think it's vital to have programs that focus on peer support and self-advocacy. It's very important to get support from people with lived experience. The conversation you have with your best friend (who has the same disability as you) is different to (and sometimes more meaningful than) the conversations you might have with your partner. When two people have the same disability, it's easier to hear from a peer; example, regarding the right question to ask. (The outcome is) easy to identify, either pre- or post. Sometimes the peer advocate can provide the support (quickly) as such, e.g. filing a complaint.

What constitutes "success" in terms of NDIS appeal - filing paper work, clarifying, answering questions- might (preclude) the need for formal advocacy. The frequency, intensity and nature of support, all determine whether peer support can lead to not availing of formal advocacy; and whether it's individual or systemic advocacy (which an advocacy organisation can then elevate to a higher level).

(No matter how successful), peer support cannot take the place of a funded advocacy service. Although self-advocacy through peer support is vital, we definitely need both.



# 03

---

## If you could cite your top 3 strategies to support the building of self-advocacy skills, what would they be?

**Sally Aurisch:**

### **PROVIDING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT PROMOTES SELF-CONFIDENCE**

The person has to have self-confidence, a belief in self, and that their issue is worth raising. Otherwise, you tend to let it go, "I just can't be bothered". Sometimes, it (the issue) is embarrassing to raise, knowing that there are people around you.

Communication materials and all messaging need to contribute to providing a safe space, so a person can build self-confidence. Knowing that a lone voice contributes to the collective voice helps.

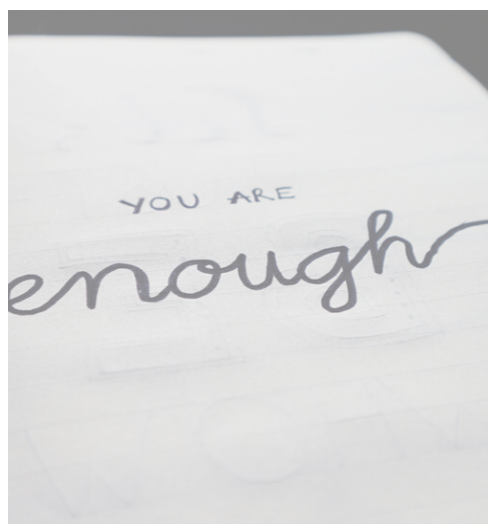
### **MATCHING MENTOR WITH MENTEE**

It comes down to matching the right people. Both parties also need to agree on guidelines around confidentiality and privacy, as well as a way to determine if the matching is wrong. At the start, matching is based on common interests and skills, personal profiles.

### **GETTING FEEDBACK AT KEY STAGES**

Check back in with people, evaluate along the way; and then again, in the end. Mentor evaluation is really critical; it needs to be at every stage; after 8-10 weeks, for sure.

Our program outcomes are still really new. Eventually, we will have ongoing evaluation processes in place. I have a research background and an evaluation/data-informed mentality. Looking at the data, managing it, (identifying those) leading to outcomes are all important.



# 04

---



**Another very promising aspect of your project was the plan for “Life Ready to be marketed externally...to be used as a sustainable revenue stream”. Could you speak more about this?**

**Sally Aurisch:**

Yes, the vision is to take the resources, content, all learnings, everything, and package them up and offer to similar organisations.

To an extent, we have already started doing this. We helped an organisation establish a similar program which is growing a lot, so we’re farming out consultancy services, as well.

The resources we've developed don't date, they're not time-sensitive; so that helps.

**The UNSW Peer Support practice review also mentioned that “Working with organisations currently developing new strategies for delivering online and phone-based peer support...could inform other organisations to increase their reach.” Given the need to be cyber-safety aware, while considering at the same time the power of digital strategies to reach marginalised individuals, is BCA embracing a particular practice in this innovative space?**

**Sally Aurisch:**

I agree on the potential of online peer support to have a wider reach and impact, and to reach marginalised groups. (To do that) It’s important to have appropriate resources. Everyone needs to know “who am I really talking to, and do they have my best interest at heart?” Which is why the peer advocate training and identification process is important.

I would still strongly advocate for trained peer advocates to safeguard things like Code of Conduct, privacy and appropriate responses. The NDIS Grassroots discussion on Facebook is already around, where anyone and everyone can participate in discussions. A Facebook post might get 600-700 comments (so there’s that already). We need proper set up at the onset, with a strong and clear Code of Conduct for users. It doesn’t need to be labour-intensive, especially if you put in strategies at the start. You can automate a lot these days, including the use of words and phrases that can trigger investigation. It is also easier to manage a (information) clearinghouse if it’s got your organisation’s name.





# References

---

- 1) A Wehbe, L Davy, K Fisher, S Robinson, R Kayess (July 2019).  
NDIS Peer Support Final Report. UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, Sydney.
  - 2) C Moore. Goal-Setting Theory, "How to set and achieve life goals the right way".  
Positivepsychology.com, November 2019.
  - 3) N Barber, "What is a Peer Mentor, and how can a Peer Mentor help you?"  
Blind Citizens Australia audio file, June 2019.
-



# Acknowledgment

---

**Sally Aurisch**

**Blind Citizens Australia NSW Coordinator**

Much thanks for giving us your time and candid thoughts in order to contribute to the sector's understanding of the impact of change on specific disability services.

**Queries about this paper to [info@ncoss.org.au](mailto:info@ncoss.org.au)**

**NCOSS Engagement Manager**

Olivia Wright

**NCOSS Program Delivery Officer**

Rocellita Lacsina

Readers may use, or quote from, this document, provided proper attribution/credit is given to NCOSS (NSW Council of Social Service), and the original URL (web address) is cited.

---

