



DIDRR in Action:
Taking disability out of the too hard basket

What is the issue?

Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) means making sure that the needs and perspectives of people with disability and the people who support them are included in all stages of emergency management: preparedness, response, and recovery.

DIDRR is about:

- ensuring that people with disability have equal access to information about disaster risks and tools that help them to self-assess risks and take preparedness steps;
- understanding what people with disability can do for themselves and what they need support for in emergencies; and
- developing proactive planning and responsive emergency management practices that ensure safety and resilience for people with disability who we know are at greater risk in emergencies than the general population.

DIDRR requires emergency personnel to work together with people with disability and the services that support them to identify and remove barriers that increase disaster risk for people with disability in emergencies.

This project focused on developing DIDRR in Queensland communities through cross-sector collaboration. Our efforts were threefold:

1. Including *people with disability* in community engagement activities and co-designing tools so that they would have accessible resources they could use to self-assess preparedness, capabilities, and support needs and take effective steps to prepare.
2. Building capability among *community and disability support services and disability advocacy organisations* for enabling personal emergency preparedness with the people they support and engaging in organisational preparedness and service continuity planning.
3. Expanding community engagement practices of *emergency personnel* to include community and disability support and advocacy services and their networks, and making disaster risk information, education, and resources accessible for everyone.

Over a three-year period (2019 – 21), we brought together stakeholders to learn and work together to identify and remove barriers to the inclusion of people with disability in disaster risk reduction. The project had two phases.

In the *first phase*, we undertook a cross-sector inclusive community engagement process in four Queensland communities involving 250 participants, including 75 people with disability. We also conducted 30 key informant interviews, hosted 5 multi-stakeholder advisory meetings, and undertook document analysis of resources relevant to DIDRR. This iterative learning process enabled learning together about the challenges for people with disability in emergencies and supported the co-creation and tailoring of knowledge about how DIDRR could be implemented through cross-sector collaborative action in Queensland communities. The [DIDRR Framework and Toolkit](#), including a companion [DIDRR Resource Library](#) were the products of this learning.

Phase two focused on implementation of the DIRR Framework; mobilising local champions, resources, and opportunities to work together for DIDRR development. In Phase two, we tracked learning and DIDRR development within and across the three participating stakeholder groups: (1) people with disability and their representatives; (2) community and disability service providers; and (3) emergency personnel. Outcomes of that learning were shared in [videos](#), [case studies](#), and [webinars](#) to demonstrate DIDRR in action. The [Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness \(P-CEP\) Toolkit](#) was further developed, field tested and refined throughout Phase 2. This included the co-design of a [P-CEP Workbook](#) and a [P-CEP Resource Package](#) to help people get started.

What did we do?

In this study, we conducted interviews with emergency personnel about their experience of engaging in the DIDRR project.

The aim of the interviews was to understand how emergency personnel view their role and contributions to DIDRR and what opportunities they envision for future DIDRR development.

A secondary aim was to understand what tools or training they believe are needed to further develop the role and capabilities of other emergency personnel to contribute to DIDRR into the future.

Twelve people agreed to participate (n = 4 men; 8 women). These participants held diverse roles that are representative of the breadth of responsibilities undertaken by personnel in the emergency management sector in Queensland:

- Local Council emergency managers responsible for local disaster management planning;
- emergency services personnel with roles in community engagement, response, operations, disaster coordination, and capacity development; and
- disaster recovery officers

Participants were invited to:

- share how emergency personnel work to increase safety of people with disability in emergencies
- discuss what works well and why
- consider any tools or training that would increase DIDRR

[Reflexive thematic analysis](#) was conducted to identify themes in the interview data.

What did we learn?

Unclear roles and responsibilities

Regardless of their specific role, all participants engaged in activities across the preparedness, response, and recovery cycle. Participants described their responsibilities in relation to five types of emergency management practices:

- community development and engagement work
- emergency activation work
- recovery work
- governance work
- sector capacity development work

They acknowledged that people with disability have not been included in these routine practices. All participants acknowledged that the inclusion of people with disability is regularly filed in the *“too hard basket,”* resulting in negative consequences during disaster events.

We know there’s a gap. We feel it. We see it when we hear stories of response efforts gone wrong. (Council Emergency Manager 1)

They attributed their failure to include people with disability to their lack of experience and limited exposure to people with disability in their personal life and professional roles.

Some participants did not see it as the core responsibility of emergency managers, employed by local government, to make inclusion happen.

We need to be there, in my opinion. It’s really important that that local government is there, but I don’t think it’s our show...Yes, we know our people. Yes, we know our communities. Everything is locally led, but this [disability] is not an area that we’re the experts in. (Council Emergency Manager 3)

In contrast, other participants embraced their engagement in the DIDRR project as an opportunity for local government to reach out to the disability community; to listen and learn from them.

I guess that was my strategy to try and make sure we [Local Council] were actually listening, and we were taking the advice from the people best placed to give it. (Council Emergency Manager 2)

Insufficient tools

All participants agreed that a significant barrier was that they *“haven’t had the tools”* to engage effectively with people with disability.

Ever since I’ve been in emergency management, there’s been that question about, “How do we help people with disability or who are vulnerable?” (Council Emergency Manager 4)

Taking disability out of the too hard basket

The P-CEP was seen as a solution to the problem and meant that they no longer had an excuse to keep disability inclusion in the too hard basket.

That was one of the beautiful gifts that P-CEP, I felt, gave my work is that I could really say, “Okay. Yup. There’s the problem. Here’s the solution.” (Council Emergency Manager 5)

This is a concrete thing that I can put in someone’s hand, whereas the kind of toolkits that existed before this, I’ve said, “Yeah, that’s a lovely fluffy document, but how do I apply that here on the ground? How do I make sure those vulnerable people are taken care of?” And I think P-CEP is the answer to that. I’ve tried to suggest that we build that into our training framework that we already planned to release. (Emergency Services personnel 3)

I’ve sent the P-CEP through my channels, and I’ve tabled it on my [Emergency Service] agency report at the local disaster management group meetings. (Emergency Services personnel 4)

Participants identified the [Capability Wheel](#) and [Four Steps](#) as key features of the P-CEP that simplified the process of preparing people with disability for disasters and other emergencies. It was a process that allowed people with disability and emergency personnel to work from a position of [strength](#).

It's great that it's all there. And now we've got the wheel. Everyone loves the wheel... There's simple tools that are meaningful when you work through them. (Council Emergency Manager 1)

It was those eight key components that make them think about, "Well, what am I doing in communication, what am I doing in my mobility, what am I doing in management of health?" I think that's a key part of why it is so successful... I think the steps go a long way to help with that, because it [P-CEP Workbook] tends to just literally step you through. And I always highlight the fact that you're **working from a position of strength... You give that education and then you start working through with what they can actually do to look after themselves, to be self-sufficient.** (Emergency services personnel 1)

Starting with strengths enabled emergency personnel to shift how they thought about their community engagement role and [how they talked](#) about people with disability.

I think honestly what works well and why is it that it is community-led and strengths-based. Like really talking to the communities, those with disability, or those that are caring for those with the disability, and actually really listening. Understanding where their strengths lie. Understanding where their challenges lie. It's an empowerment process. It's a supportive - they're talking to you, not you talking to them process. (Council Emergency Manager 5)

That's where I really felt at home in that step two, because I actually had that captive audience and I can tell them what I know and understand of the risk. I can talk to them and personalise the disaster risk information to their situation. (Emergency Services personnel 1)

[Empowering people with disability](#) was also [empowering for emergency personnel](#) who described engaging with P-CEP as helping them to, "think beyond the end of the hose." Their examples illustrate how they used P-CEP to expand their community engagement functions and outreach in the community.

So, now I want to educate my firefighters to understand more about people with disabilities. And how that will affect the work that they do and things like that. And just take the notch up a little bit further and have that thought about how you can help these people. (Emergency services personnel 6)

In regards to P-CEP, I see it as a bit of an advocacy. How can we intertwine that into our general business within community engagement? I see my primary role in it to be able to provide [P-CEP] to people. And eventually if we can get VCEs [volunteer community educators] trained in it. (Emergency Services personnel 6)

Expanding responsibilities to include “linking work”

Emergency personnel reported using the P-CEP to expand their emergency management roles to include “linking work.”

I think the biggest thing for me was the networking. I never expected to see the amount of networking that’s occurred. And I’ve got an inroad and we’re still working, building on a database of all the players [service providers] out there because they’re so many. And just being able to get that network to a level where we can communicate with them, in a more simplified way. (Emergency services personnel 1)

I started going to those monthly [disability peer support] meetings and used some of the feedback from the people in that group to change how we were doing things and to update things. Some of it was really simple. We just weren’t having the conversations with people to know that we weren’t getting it right. (Council Emergency Manager 2)

How can we develop disability inclusive emergency management?

When asked about tools and training for emergency personnel, many participants reflected on the “immersion experience” that [the DIDRR project](#) provided. Those who engaged from the start of Phase 1 talked about the power of the inclusive community consultations in transforming thinking about disability and disaster preparedness.

I found that workshop to be very enlightening. Talking with people with disabilities and everything like that and not realising how much some people didn’t understand about how emergency response works. (Emergency services personnel 6)

Participants also commented on the practical structure that the P-CEP offered to them in sustaining their engagement with people with disability and other high-risk groups (e.g., elderly). All participants said that emergency personnel would benefit from “disability awareness training” and cited key features of their engagement in the DIDRR project that would be beneficial to other emergency personnel (e.g., first-hand experience interacting with people with different disabilities, listening and learning from the lived experience of people with disability who experienced disaster). They felt that a training module on disability awareness would further strengthen the capability of emergency personnel to engage effectively in conversations using the [P-CEP capability wheel](#) and [four step](#) emergency preparedness process.

Actually, training first responders about how to interact and engage with those with a disability. From a training perspective, I would really love it to be a bit more of an immersive kind of experience and also integrating some of those things into the more informal day-to-day happenings. (Council Emergency Manager 5)

Participants who were involved in sector capacity development saw great value in building P-CEP into training for emergency managers and wanted training that would be easily accessed by a wide range of personnel and completed in short self-study sessions (e.g., short, interactive, online learning modules).

It's got to be flexible training. Now that video conferencing is more accessible and acceptable to everybody, more people will engage if you give them the opportunity that's online rather than face-to-face...We've also got a network of volunteers that love the community engagement side, and they live within SES and Rural Fire Service. They're called volunteer community educators. I think they would love to pick up this programme and just start using it with everybody on the street that they see.
(Emergency services personnel 3)

What do our findings mean?

- For too long, disability has been kept in the “too hard basket” because emergency personnel did not have the right tools to support meaningful inclusion, participation, and tailored planning for disasters.
- There is confusion about whose role and responsibility it is to include people with disability in emergency planning.
- It is hard to include people with disability when emergency personnel do not have effective tools, capacity, and training to do so.
- Bringing people with disability and emergency personnel to learn together contributed to inclusive disaster risk reduction.
- Specific features of the P-CEP (e.g., the “Capability Wheel” and 4 steps) supported disability inclusive emergency planning.
- Engaging in P-CEP helped emergency personnel to better understand their role and the role of individuals in tailoring preparedness to their support needs.
- The P-CEP promoted role definition and collaborative action which expanded to include linking work with people with disability and the services that support them.

Next steps

Follow our [program of research](#) to learn about how findings from this study are being used to develop community capacity for emergency personnel in person-centred capability approaches to disability inclusive emergency planning.

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