



Submission to Senate Committees on Environment and Communication

**The capacity of communication networks and
emergency warning systems to deal with
emergencies and natural disasters**

Version 1.0

July 2011

The National Council on Intellectual Disability (NCID) was established over 50 years ago by parents and friends, in an endeavour to improve the quality of life of people with intellectual disability and to fill the need for national unity and information.

The Council is the recognised national peak body with the single focus on intellectual disability, ie, our actions and priorities centre on issues that affect the lives of people with intellectual disability and their families. Our mission is to work to make the Australian community one in which people with intellectual disability are involved and accepted as equal participating members.

NCID has over 5,000 members representing all 8 States and Territories. In addition to having people with disability on its Board, NCID receives policy advice from Our Voice. Our Voice is a committee the membership of which is exclusively people with intellectual disability representing all States and Territories.

National Council on Intellectual Disability
PO Box 771 Mawson ACT 2607

T: 61 2 6296 4400

e: ncid@ncid.org.au

w: ncid.org.au

Rob Allen
President

Mark Pattison
Executive Director

Statement of Principles

- All people have inherent dignity and worth and equal and inalienable rights.
- All people are valued members of the Australian Community.
- People with intellectual disability as equal participating members of the Australian Community have the same rights:
 - to respect for their individual autonomy and independence
 - to make their own choices
 - to participate in decisions which affect their lives
 - to pursue any grievance which affects their lives
 - to diversity of choice for housing, education, work, recreation and leisure
 - to equity and justice
 - to be empowered to take their full place in the Australian Community
 - to dignity and privacy in all aspects of their lives

National Council on Intellectual Disability will:

- ✓ work to make the Australian Community one in which people with intellectual disability have full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and are involved and accepted as equal participating members.
- ✓ promote and protect the human rights of all persons with intellectual disability, including those who require more intensive support.

Consultation Statement

National Council on Intellectual Disability consults people with intellectual disability and family members through our State and Territory Agency Members. In particular we:

- ➡ conduct an annual survey of members and stakeholders
- ➡ hold two meetings a year, rotating through all States and Territories
- ➡ present at the Having a Say Conference each year, attended by over a 1,000 delegates the majority of whom have a disability
- ➡ hold forums on specific issues
- ➡ sponsor actions and representations on issues of importance to people with disability

For this submission National Council on Intellectual Disability has specifically consulted with NSW Council for Intellectual Disability and used material gathered by NSW CID during its participation in the 'NSW Vulnerable Communities Project'.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Target Group.....	5
Ensuring the safety of people with intellectual disability	6
Technology and people with intellectual disability	6
Direct contact with people with intellectual disability	7
Specific Issues for people with intellectual disability	8

Introduction

To understand the impact of emergencies and natural disasters on people with intellectual disability it is important to have an understanding on what it means to have an intellectual disability.

Intellectual disability is characterised by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before the age of 18.¹

Intelligence is not merely book learning, a narrow academic skill, or test-taking smarts. Rather, it reflects a broader and deeper capacity for comprehending our surroundings - catching on, making sense of things or figuring out what to do. Thus, the concept of intelligence represents an attempt to clarify, organise and explain the fact that individuals differ in their abilities to understand complex ideas, to adapt effectively to environments, to learn from experience, to engage in various forms of reasoning and to overcome obstacles by thinking and communicating.²

From the definition it is understandable that people with intellectual disability will have considerable difficulty coping with emergencies and natural disasters without support and assistance.

It is acknowledged that many people in our community will have difficulties coping with emergencies and natural disasters and that some of these difficulties will be similar to those experienced by people with intellectual disability. NCID is not seeking a separate or 'special' system or process for people with intellectual disability, rather that whatever systems are set up that they take into account the distinct needs of people with intellectual disability.

NCID understands that the specific reference of this Inquiry is to communications networks, radio, telephone, internet and emerging technologies. Unfortunately these will not address all the communication needs of people with intellectual disability in times of emergency and natural disasters and this submission must extend beyond this term of reference.

Target Group

While this submission is concerned with all people with intellectual disability there is a group that is particularly at risk during times of emergency and natural disaster. The majority of people with intellectual disability do not have daily support, and for a significant number the support they receive is from family (including partners with intellectual disability) and friends (some of whom will also have intellectual disability).

For those who receive daily support, particularly residential support, communication should also be directed at those who provide the support; presumably they would receive this communication like everyone else in the community.

¹ Taken from, *Intellectual Disability: definition, classification and systems of supports*, AAIDD, 11th ed., Washington 2010.

² *ibid*, p. 15.

For those who do not receive daily support the challenge is for the authorities to communicate with them to get the desired response. As we will see from the comments below this is not straightforward.

Ensuring the safety of people with intellectual disability

The only way to ensure that all people with intellectual disability are safe during times of emergencies and natural disasters is 'friendly' communities, ie, communities where neighbours know each other and communicate with each other. When an emergency or natural disaster occurs people with intellectual disability will be part of the neighbourhood network and will receive communications through their neighbours.

In these neighbourhoods it is important to remind all members of the community to let their neighbours know what is happening. Some neighbours may presume that there will be services or specific supports for people with intellectual disability in these circumstances, which there is not; and this may prevent them from acting.

Unfortunately, most of us do not live in friendly communities. Though, all governments fund community capacity building and community development programmes and it is important that in funding or supporting such initiatives governments are aware that an important effect will be increasing the safety of people with intellectual disability. Also, in funding such initiatives government must ensure that people with intellectual disability are included and that emergency and natural disaster impacts are taken into account.

Technology and people with intellectual disability

NB: We must be careful when making general statements in regard to people with intellectual disability.

The task is to ensure that all people with intellectual disability are notified of emergencies and natural disasters and what action they should be taking and when. No single mechanism will be sufficient and multiple coordinated strategies will be necessary. Also, the safety of people with intellectual disability will not be achieved through one electronic system alone:

- some people are able to respond to mobile phone text messages.
- some people are able to get information through the internet
- some people listen to the radio
- some people watch television

Also, in providing information in an electronic format there are a number of elements that must be considered when providing information to people with intellectual disability and asking them to take certain actions:

- People have to physically receive the message
- People have to understand the message; the message should not cause the person to panic, the message should give the person an accurate picture of the situation, message, if requiring the person to act, the message should be clear, have steps and enable the person to act. People may also acquiesce.

- People have to be able to undertake the action; for example, if the text message, radio message, etc is to evacuate and the person does not have a car and public transport has stopped the person may become anxious and disorientated.

Technology literacy is important for people with intellectual disability, even though many may have difficulties adapting to it. As the community becomes more dependent on technology for getting its information people with intellectual disability must not be left behind. Thought is going to have to be given to how technology can be made to make it easy for people with intellectual disability to use.

This is just not going to happen and **NCID recommends that the Australian Government establish a Centre for Technology for People with Disability**, to ensure that all people with disability are safe during emergencies and natural disasters; and are able to participate in community life as the community become more dependent on technology for information.

But, not all people with intellectual disability use technology to communicate.

Direct contact with people with intellectual disability

There are a number of natural community contacts for people with intellectual who must be included in any strategy to ensure the safety of people with intellectual disability in times emergency and natural disaster:

- neighbours
- family
- friends
- employers
- social housing providers
- home and community care providers (HACC)

In the development of all emergency and natural disaster strategies the position of people with intellectual disability must be included. Also, when emergencies and natural disasters occur people must be told that they should contact people with intellectual disability and ensure that they have relevant information and that they understand it.

Suggestions have been made about having an **emergency contact register** which people could put their details on. Issues in connection with such a register are:

- how will people get to know about the register
- what should go on the register, eg, support needs
- who will have access to the register, ie, privacy concerns
- how will the register be updated with a person's contact details, eg, mobile phone numbers
- who should hold the register (local council, police)
- should certain people automatically go on the register, eg, people on Centrelink payments. Other sources may be medicare and the proposed health information card.

Suggestions have also been made about an **emergency checklist**; a checklist detailing, in an accessible format for people with intellectual disability, what they should do in

an emergency or natural disaster. For example, to listen to the radio, to ring a certain number, to look at a particular website, to speak to their neighbours, family and/or friends.

The emergency checklist should include an address and map of a community evacuation centre, ie, a place(s) to go to if possible. To increase the effectiveness of this strategy training or chances to practice 'what to do' would be useful. The Red Cross has produced some resources in Easy English for emergency planning:

[http://www.redcross.org.au/media/ARC_EE_INFO_BOOK_web\(1\).pdf](http://www.redcross.org.au/media/ARC_EE_INFO_BOOK_web(1).pdf)

During an emergency or natural disaster a common way in which people are advised of safety concerns, including the need to evacuate, is through **door knocking**. There are important issues with this that must be considered:

- **this is a good way to have personal contact with people and to ensure that the situation and what people should do is understood by the person with intellectual disability, but,**
- for some people it may be difficult to stay calm, anyone approaching their door may have to spend time both calming the person and making sure that the person understands what the situation is and what is expected of them.
- some people will not open their door to strangers ("use neighbours if this happens")
- some people do not trust people (even if they see them regularly) in uncertain or stressful situations - they have a history of being treated badly by people in authority ("the door knocker should wear a uniform with an id badge")

Training in disability awareness and communication strategies for emergency service personnel could also be included in emergency planning. For example, in NSW the Intellectual Disability Rights Service conducts education sessions for Police; this is delivered by trainers with intellectual disability.

The Communication Resource Centre, which is part of SCOPE have completed extensive work with the Victoria Police, Australian Red Cross and the Country Fire Authority. They have found that accessible written information can help people when planning for an emergency and particularly during an emergency and after an emergency.

Specific Issues for people with intellectual disability

Most people with intellectual disability rely on public transport or the assistance of others. Suggestions that people leave their neighbourhood including evacuation orders will cause difficulty for people who have no transport and may cause distress and panic as they are unable to do as they have been asked.

Once a person knows that an emergency situation exists or that a natural disaster is about to occur what happens then. For many it will be a case of wait for help to arrive. How long should I wait? When should I contact an authority? What do I need to be alright, for example, " ... if I have milk, bread and water I will be alright". People may presume that 'someone' will come to tell them what to do, but this may not be the case.

Forced evacuations will be a particular area of difficulty for people with intellectual disability and those trying to enforce the evacuation:

- the need to evacuate will have to be explained clearly and time taken to ensure the person understands. This may take place with no visible sign of danger, eg, strong winds or fire.
- people with intellectual disability may be reluctant to leave their possessions, and in particular pets
- people will be uncertain about where they are going, this will cause anxiety
- people will not necessarily know what 'essentials' they should pack in an emergency evacuation

Post evacuation may also pose some issues. People may not be sure about what to do upon return to their homes, e.g 'will the food in the fridge be ok' when the electricity has been out for some time – or how to clean up safely after a flood or fire.