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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

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Submission

Inquiry into Library Services

People with Disabilities ACT acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we work and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to elders past, present and emerging.

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About PWD ACT

People With Disabilities ACT Inc. (PWD ACT Inc.) is a disabled peoples organisation (DPO) owned by people with disabilities. PWD ACT works to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of community life, to remove barriers to our inclusion and to inform the community discussion of disability issues by bringing to bear the daily lived experience of people with disabilities. PWD ACT advocates from a human rights perspective and acknowledges the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

The text of this Convention can be found at: www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/convention.htm

Article 21 of this Convention, 'Opinion and Access to Information' is especially relevant to this submission. Other relevant Articles are Article 19: 'Inclusion in Community and Living independently' and Article 30: 'Culture and Recreation.' The ACT Library Service is also a Government Service and as such needs to comply with the ACT Human Rights Act of 2004.

PWD ACT has informed its individual and organisational members and other disability sector organisations of this consultation in its e-Bulletins to members during the consultation period and informed them of our intention to make a submission to this Inquiry. PWD ACT supports the submission to this Inquiry by Women With Disabilities ACT.

PWD ACT has chosen not to specifically address each Term of Reference. Instead, our submission focuses on those aspects of library services which are crucial to our members.

Strategic Planning for Library Services

The starting point of our submission is that we are people first and our disability is second. Accordingly libraries are equally important to us as they are to the broader community as centres of information in both hard copy and electronic forms, as centres of learning, education and digital access and as meeting spaces for community organisations and for social interaction. Libraries have key roles in encouraging community participation and involvement and in lessening social isolation. This is especially so for those who experience social and economic disadvantage, many of whom are our members.

The ACT Library Service has a number of community access initiatives. However, the current Strategic Plan for library services does not mention disability. PWD ACT recommends that the ACT Library Service actively engage with people with disabilities and their organisations to develop and implement a specific Disability Action Plan to achieve accessibility of Act library services for people with disabilities. In doing so the ACT Library Service should engage with organisations representing people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people with disabilities who are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

The ACT Library Service needs to acknowledge that its libraries are public buildings and community resources. This requires:

- That library buildings are universally accessible; and
- That the information in libraries is held in a variety of formats so as to be universally accessible.

PWD ACT also recommends that the ACT Library Service fund and promotes its libraries as a “go to” place for people with disabilities whereby people can nurture relationships and facilitate “meet ups” through an information hub.

The Inquiry Terms of Reference specifically refer to accessibility of library premises. We remind the Committee that accessibility is more than the accessibility of the premises. Accessibility includes access to the information holdings, public meeting spaces and library learning, educational and community awareness programs conducted at library premises.

In relation to the physical accessibility of library premises, PWD ACT is anecdotally aware of access issues at various Canberra libraries. The Women With Disabilities submission mentions some of these access issues.

PWD ACT recommends that The ACT Library Service conducts an audit of its library buildings to determine the extent to which library premises comply with the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act Standards for Access to Premises and principles of universal design; relevant to accessibility of premises. Such an audit should include recommendations for overcoming identified access issues and a timetable for this remedial action to be taken.

PWD ACT also recommends that the ACT Library Service conducts an audit of the information holdings at each of its library premises to determine the extent to which the information holdings at each premises are held in appropriate formats so as to be accessible to people with a variety of disabilities. Relevant formats include: ordinary and large print, electronic in various formats, audio, braille and plain English. The audit should identify access gaps in library information holdings, actions to address these gaps and a timetable for these actions to be taken. In a city as compact as Canberra, there should be a system in place whereby, if a publication is not available to a person in their preferred format from their local library, it should be obtained for them from another Canberra Library in one working day. The ACT Library Service should consult with people with disabilities in addressing accessibility issues in its information holdings.

Addressing the Digital Divide

An important function of libraries is enabling people to access digital information including the Internet. We commend to the Committee, the analysis of the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey on household use of information technology in the submission by Women With Disabilities ACT.

Current library programs to provide computer literacy training need to include people with disabilities. Many people with disabilities need to use adaptive technology including screen magnification programs such as Zoom Text, speech output programs such as JAWS and alternatives to keyboard and mouse input, such as Drag and Dictate and Naturally Speaking. Computers set up with these adaptive technologies should be available at each library. Each library should also have staff who are trained in these adaptive technologies and who are able to assist people in their use.

PWD ACT has mentioned libraries as go to points and information hubs for people with disabilities. In this regard, we envisage libraries as having similar programs for people with disabilities as they currently have for mums and young children. Library 'tours' could offer based on different subjects or 'tours' on special formats specifically for people with disabilities.

The Inquiry's Terms of Reference seek information on comparisons of ACT Library Services with services in other States and Territories. PWD ACT is aware of the Disability Action Plans being developed by State Libraries in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

The ACT Library Service might also look at any Disability Action Plans or Strategies adopted by other national collecting institutions including the National Library. The website of the Australian Libraries and Information Association <http://www.alia.org.au> contains a number of useful resources on access to library services for people with disabilities.

Blind Citizens Australia, the peak national body for people who are blind or vision impaired has a policy on library services which can be read on its website <http://www.bca.org.au/policies>