

**Submission
No 12**

THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024

Organisation: National Disability Services

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Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West region of NSW in October 2024

About this response

National Disability Services (NDS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West New South Wales (NSW) in October 2024. National Disability Services (NDS) is Australia's peak body for disability service organisations, and Australia's biggest and most diverse network of disability service providers. Our valued members collectively operate several thousand services for more than 300,000 Australians with disability and employ a workforce of more than 100,000 people. NDS is committed to a sustainable and diverse disability service sector, underpinned by the provision of high-quality, evidence-based practices and supports that strengthen, safeguard, and provide greater choice for people with disability in Australia.

We are grateful to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning for the opportunity to provide a submission and welcome the opportunity to contribute to future mitigation and preparation strategies.

In summary:

In response to the terms of reference, NDS recommends that:

- A single government agency or alternative body is allocated to lead an emergency response and that this is clearly communicated to community including people with disability and support services,
- Electricity providers and lead emergency response agencies should ensure that people with disability and their support services should be consulted and prioritised in all levels of emergency electricity outage planning, response, and recovery,
- Electricity providers and any other lead agencies should ensure that accessibility of communications for people with disability and their support services is prioritised in the planning, response, and recovery in the event of electricity outages. It is imperative that people with disability are able to access the right supports, at the right time, from the right people, services, and systems.

Dr Debbie Jagers

State Manager - NSW

Level 3, 28 Foveaux Street, Sydney, 2000

debbie.jagers@nds.org.au

Phone: [REDACTED]

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services (NDS) is the peak body in NSW and Australia for non-government disability service providers. Our valued members collectively operate several thousand services for more than 300,000 Australians with disability, employ a workforce of more than 100,000 people, and provide a full range of disability services, including disability support work, allied health, and behaviour support, to some 500,000 people with disability.

Our **vision** is for an inclusive Australia where all people with disability live safely and equitably. To achieve this, people with disability need to access the right supports, at the right time, from the right people, services, and systems.

NDS acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands, seas, skies, and waterways throughout NSW. We pay respect to elders past and present and recognise their deep and continuing connections with our shared country, culture, and community.

Introduction

Over 18% of the New South Wales (NSW) community [live with disability](#). This equates to 1.37 million people living with disability in NSW. People with disability are a diverse community. They vary in age, gender, gender identity, race or cultural background, family environment, socioeconomic circumstance, geographic location, and the nature of their disability. People experience a range of impacts due to disability, with [over 6 per cent of the population experiencing profound or severe disability](#).

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) supports 196,870 people in NSW as of [September 2024](#), including 18,430 (9.1 per cent) participants who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 21,741 (10.8 per cent) who identified as culturally or linguistically diverse. The NDIS supports people with permanent impairment (physical, intellectual, cognitive, neurological, visual, hearing, or psychosocial) resulting in significant disability, and typically provides support to individuals between the ages of 0 to 65. The [National Disability Reform Agenda](#) is currently designing and planning for foundational supports to support people with disability who have needs greater than the mainstream system can provide and

outside of the NDIS. Approximately [12 per cent](#) of Australians with a disability are active participants in the NDIS.

In Far West NSW, [953 people living with disability](#) were accessing NDIS supports in September 2024. Of these 953 participants, 35 individuals live in Supported Independent Living. [Supported independent living](#) is a housing option for people with a disability who have higher support needs and need a significant amount of help daily. In 2022, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that people with disability living in households required informal assistance with the following tasks:

- 80.5 per cent of people received support with reading or writing tasks,
- 78.8 per cent received support with meal preparation,
- 78.2 per cent received support with transportation.

People with disability also required formal assistance from carers to complete the following daily activities:

- 55.9 per cent required formal assistance with access to healthcare,
- 51.7 per cent required formal assistance with cognitive or emotional tasks,
- 36.9 per cent required formal assistance with household chores.

It is widely known and regarded that [emergencies increase the vulnerability of people with disability](#). The World Health Organisation reports that in emergencies:

- People with visual, hearing, and intellectual impairments, and severe mental health conditions, and those who are socially excluded may be unprepared for events that lead to emergencies and may not know or understand what is happening.
- Inappropriate methods of communication for those who have difficulty in hearing, seeing, or understanding can exclude them from receiving information about emergencies.
- People with disability have greater difficulty accessing basic needs including food, water, shelter, transport, and health care services.
- People with disability are at a heightened vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse.

Because of this, there is the need for concerted and inclusive actions to be taken before, during and after emergencies, including power outages, to manage the health risks and wellbeing of people with disability.

Timeline of Events: Power Outages October 2024

NDS consulted disability service providers operating in Far West NSW to develop this

submission and respond to the inquiry terms of reference. A timeline of events developed from member consultations is below:

17 October: Severe storms destroyed seven Transgrid towers, impacting Broken Hill, Tibooburra, Wilcannia, Menindee and White Cliffs. 10,000 residents in Far West NSW were left without power for 36 hours as the electricity backup generator failed, with residents relying on self-supplied generators. During this time, members reported a significant heatwave with temperatures over thirty degrees.

20 October: NSW Government announces planned outages for generator maintenance, cutting power from 11pm Sunday to 5am Monday 21 October. The community reported that electricity outages often occurred for longer periods of time than communicated, sometimes coming on as late as 9am.

21 October: Broken Hill's main generator fails, causing further blackouts. NSW Government declares the Far West NSW power outages an emergency.

24 October: Rolling power outages continue, with warnings that they could last until early November. Residents asked to reduce energy usage between 5:30pm and 10:30pm

31 October: Power is restored to impacted areas in Far West NSW.

6 November: Transmission line repair reconnects the region to the national grid.

7 November: NSW Government announce [Individual](#) and [Business Support](#) grants, closing 31 March 2025.

Response to the Terms of Reference

a) The preparation and mitigation strategies in place by electricity providers in Far West NSW in the event of a major electricity outage.

From the timeline above, the preparation and mitigation strategies in place by electricity providers in Far West NSW were not effective in preventing major outages. NDS members reported that the initial power outage lasted for **36 hours** due to the backup power generator not working, and during this time the community experienced several disruptions, including potential life-threatening consequences including:

- 10,000 residents lost electricity supply impacting their ability to store food safely in fridges and freezers, maintain personal and healthcare routines (such as access to hot water for showers), store medication which requires refrigeration, safely light their home, and manage temperature control during the hot weather.
- Local businesses lost electricity impacting their ability to store food safely, sell essential goods and services without electronic payment methods including vital equipment such as batteries, generators, and satellite phones.
- Additionally mobile network outages meant people were unable to text and call to complete welfare checks on their family, friends and vulnerable people in the

community including people with disability.

- The community was unable to call 000 in the event of an emergency
- The community was unsure of who to contact for urgent assistance and updates on the power outages.

Disability service providers reported the significant impact of not being able to call emergency services when the electricity and mobile phone power was out, particularly for people with disability who have high support needs. Providers spoke of the implications to people with disability who:

- Utilise oxygen concentrators, home ventilators, home respirators, home parenteral or enteral feeding devices, or continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machines who have respiratory disability,
- Were unable to charge their electric wheelchairs,
- Require medication to be refrigerated,
- Are socially isolated, live alone or live in remote NSW with limited access to transport to access emergency food, water, and healthcare.

This has significant implications to the physical and emotional wellbeing of people with disability, with life and death consequences in an emergency, as well as physical and emotional implications for staff providing critical support for these individuals who are required to escalate issues and concerns.

NDS was told that several providers were required to travel significant distances of over 150 kilometers urgently to obtain generators to maintain temperature control for people with disability and ensure medication remained refrigerated in line with their obligations under the NDIS Code of Conduct.

As part of the [NDIS Code of Conduct](#) enforced by the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, staff working at disability service providers are required to:

- Promptly take steps to raise and act on concerns about matters that might have an impact on the quality and safety of supports provided to people with disability, such as access to electricity outages and disabled mobile networks,
- Take all reasonable steps to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against, exploitation, neglect, and abuse of people with disability.

Due to this responsibility, disability service providers have developed risk management plans for the people with disability they support. Providers commented on their requirement during the electricity and telecommunication outages to complete individual home visits to ensure the safety of people living with disability and staff working for their organisation.

NDS strongly encourages electricity providers to consult with people with disability and their service providers as a priority cohort in developing preparation and mitigation strategies for future disasters.

Additionally, NDS recommends improvements to electricity provider preparation and mitigation strategies to mitigate risk for future disasters.

b) The overall effectiveness of preparation and mitigation strategies.

As discussed in responding to the previous term of reference, the preparation and mitigation strategies in place by electricity providers in Far West NSW were not effective in preventing major outages.

Multiple disability service providers in Far West NSW told NDS that there was no clarity around the lead agency coordinating the emergency response. As such, providers, their staff, and people with disability were left without information about how to seek urgent assistance for people with disability and community, and updates on the electricity and mobile phone outage.

c) The role of relevant NSW Government agencies and local government in preparing for and responding to major electricity outages.

Disability services commented that there was no evidence of a coordinated government response from the state or local governments, or awareness of who the lead agency was coordinating the emergency response. This made it difficult for individuals and service coordinators to know where to go to seek accurate information, and how they could safely support and contribute to the emergency response to the electricity outage.

This lack of clear communication and escalation strategies added extra complexity and difficulty to disability service coordinators and disability service providers both in and out of the Far West region to find information about access to key services to maintain the wellbeing and safety of people with disability accessing their services, such as where to locate generators.

A number of services contacted Local Health Districts in the Far West Region and local hospitals directly regarding the wellbeing of people with disability.

Providers told the NDS about the assistance provided by organisations such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service who provided emergency access to water and charging facilities. Lifeline provided food vouchers to the community. However, a number of providers commented that the building is not accessible for individuals who utilise a wheelchair for mobility excluding them from participation or relying on support networks to access supports on their behalf.

The State Emergency Services were offering emergency generators for vulnerable groups, including people with disability, however this information was not communicated until after generators had been purchased by individuals and/or service providers.

NSW Government has offered grants of \$200 to individuals affected by the power

outages however feedback from providers is that:

- People had to dispose of more than \$200 worth of food and medication alone throughout the electricity outages.
- The process to obtain the grants was difficult and inaccessible for people with disability to access. Service coordinators provided examples of where they had visited Service NSW in person with groups of people with disability and waited for up to 6 hours to process the grants.
- Many individuals found the process too difficult, and inaccessible, and these barriers resulted in people with disability not applying.

In line with the [Australia Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub](#) guidelines, NDS recommends that there is a need for the Government to:

- Publicly identify a lead agency to take responsibility in preparing for and leading future emergency responses,
- Provide details around aware, capable, and prepared emergency services and resources that can support during emergencies, particularly to vulnerable cohorts including people with disability,
- Ensure state and local governments engage in inclusive practices by promoting collaboration between different groups involved in emergency response, and clarify their roles and responsibilities,
- Ensure people with disability are involved and profiled in the development of emergency response plans,
- Audit back up power and electricity sources more frequently to thoroughly assess the viability of these sources,
- Explore and invest in alternate and resilient options for shelters in regional, rural, and remote NSW that operate off the grid that can provide access to electricity and water and vital services (similar to [Queensland Public Cyclone Shelters](#)).

d) The implementation of recommendations from previous electricity outages in Far West NSW.

This submission identifies that people with disability and their support providers were not prioritised as a group requiring support in the power outage in Far West NSW in October 2024. As stated above NDS encourages electricity providers to consult with people with disability and their service providers as a priority cohort in preparation and mitigation strategies in preparation for future electricity outages and disasters.

In previous electricity outages in Far West NSW, the backup power supply has been

operational. In October 2024 during the electricity outage, both back up power sources were not operational.

NDS recommends, in alignment with the recommendations made in the previous terms of reference, the need for increased audits of power sources, investment in resilient off grid shelter options, and the establishment of clear government roles and responsibilities to enhance emergency preparedness response, particularly for people with disability.

e) Recommendations on future alternative power supply emergency response and effective redundancy.

Power outages have been experienced in Far West NSW prior to October 2024 and will inevitably occur in the future, and across the state. The distances between towns in the Far West add additional complexity and risk. In January 2025, [electricity outages alongside natural disasters](#) impacted the Maitland, Port Stephens, and Snowy Valleys local government areas.

Further emergency management investigation and planning is required by electricity providers, NSW Government, and local governments in Far West NSW to build resilience and where possible effectively mitigate future disaster status in power outages.

f) The effectiveness of providers' communications strategies regarding electricity outages.

Electricity provider's communications strategies regarding the electricity outage have been reported as inconsistent, sporadic, and not informative. Alternative methods for requesting urgent assistance were not clearly identified.

When some timelines of electricity re-instatement were communicated, they often did not match the experience, meaning community experienced power outages for longer periods than communicated. As mentioned above this has implications for people with disability, their formal supports provided by disability support providers and carers, and their informal supports including family members. For many individuals, this impacted their mobility, access to food, water and medication, access to information, and access to other formal and informal supports.

Communications were delivered in written format mostly via text or website updates, however, to exercise best practice in delivering accessible communications, NDS recommends that where possible, [accessible and inclusive](#) communication channels are developed. Where possible, easy read guides should be developed so information can be understood and interpreted by people with intellectual disability.

g) Any other related matters.

The [Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#) in 2023 found that Australia is not prepared for emergencies, and this has a significant impact on people with disability who may already be disadvantaged, noting that their situation may get worse during emergencies. The final report made 222 recommendations on how to improve laws, policies, structures, and practices to ensure a more inclusive and just society that supports people with disability to live free from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The recommendations NDS has made in this submission, directly reflect the recommendations made by the Commission, which include:

- Include people with disabilities in all levels of emergency planning and response, including disaster response,
- Improve accessibility, to make information accessible and user friendly, especially in emergencies,
- Create complaint mechanisms to facilitate complaints and oversight opportunities,
- And finally, keep community connections alive.

The Ageing and Disability Commission published the [Preparing for the future](#) report in 2023 detailing the impact and a summary of proposed actions for the NSW and Australian governments after the impacts of COVID-19. This report details the importance of:

- Planning, consultation, and leadership during a disaster, including establishing crisis protocols that trigger an integrated care sector response including federal, state, and local government departments, and disability, aged care, and carer services,
- Key considerations around information and messaging, including embedding accessibility and inclusive language into all public health frameworks,
- Access to services and support, including developing an evidence-based framework for maintaining priority access to mental health support, and aged and disability care support during crisis periods.
- Financial pressures, and mental and physical health considerations.

A number of these proposed actions should be reviewed and considered in developing emergency plans which plan for and respond to disasters in Far West NSW, including power and telecommunication outages.

NDS notes the NSW Ageing and Disability Commission and Homes NSW, which is part of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, held an Emergency Management Disability Forum on 2 October 2024. This forum brought together disability representative organisations and peak bodies including NDS with emergency responder services to discuss priority strategies for emergency management preparation, response, and recovery in NSW. NDS recommends consideration of outputs from that work in consideration of any government actions from this inquiry.

Concluding Comments

This inquiry provides an important opportunity for electricity providers and relevant government agencies to reflect, review and develop mitigation strategies for future electricity outages and disasters in Far West NSW and across the state. In response to the terms of reference, NDS recommends that:

- **A single government agency or alternative body is allocated to lead an emergency response and that this is clearly communicated to community including people with disability and support services,**
- **Electricity providers and lead emergency response agencies should ensure that people with disability and their support services should be consulted and prioritised in all levels of emergency electricity outage planning, response, and recovery,**
- **Electricity providers and any other lead agencies should ensure that accessibility of communications for people with disability and their support services is prioritised in the planning, response, and recovery in the event of electricity outages. It is imperative that people with disability are able to access the right supports, at the right time, from the right people, services, and systems.**

As a peak body with expertise at a national and NSW level, NDS brings its experience and provider engagement to detailing its recommendations contained in this submission.

