



Final Report: Deafblind Connect (2021 to 2024)

Section 1 - Activity Details

1.1 Organisation Name: Deafblind Victoria Inc.

1.2 Is your Organisation part of a Consortium?: No

1.3 Activity Name: Deafblind Connect

(Funding stream: ILC Social and Community Participation 2020-21)

1.4 Activity ID: 4-G173EK0

1.5 Total Funding of Activity (ex GST): \$148,907

1.6 Activity/Project Description:

Create **Deafblind Connect**, a pro-tactile community space with accessible computer terminals & peer-based skill sharing at Ross House:

- A weekly drop-in program will offer support and social connection for Deafblind Victorians
- Auslan students can volunteer and gain experience
- Deafblind Victorians will share skills, such as hands-on arts & crafts, braille, tactile Auslan, smartphone apps and Deafblind awareness
- A point of access to information & civic participation for the Deafblind community.

The project is run by Deafblind Victoria, whose entire membership and committee of management are Deafblind, providing a model of a deafblind-led program.

1.7 Service Delivery Area: Victoria

1.8 Primary Disability Group: Deafblind

1.9 Secondary Disability Groups: Deaf, hearing impaired, hard of hearing, blind, low vision

1.10 ILC Priority Cohorts: Cultural and Linguistically Diverse communities

Section 2 - Participant Outcomes

Question 2.1: How many people with disability were supported by your activity?

ANSWER: 195 (This number includes 37 who attended the Thursday drop-in program and 165 who gave or received skill-sharing sessions, with an overlap of 7 participants between the two categories).

Question 2.2: How many family members or carers directly benefited from your activity?

ANSWER: 70 ("Carers" here is understood to include "communication guides", the preferred term for support workers who work one-to-one with deafblind individuals at home and in the community. Many commguides were trained by Deafblind people in skill-sharing sessions. Some of the family members and commguides are also people with disability.)



Question 2.3: How many people with disability were employed (paid) to deliver your activity?

ANSWER: 25 (this number includes 2 project workers and 23 deafblind peer trainers who received payment for delivering skill-sharing sessions)

Question 2.4: How many people with disability reported improved outcomes as a result of participation in your activity and how was this measured or collected? Maximum 300 words.

ANSWER: 139 (100% of those surveyed)

29 of the 37 people with disability who attended the drop-in program were surveyed with a tool adapted from a template provided by DSS, with modifications to increase accessibility: large print and electronic versions, plain English wording, concrete examples for abstract concepts, and Auslan interpreters in person to support the filling out of surveys. There were 14 questions, including a mix of multiple choice, scaled and open-ended questions. Surveys were conducted periodically throughout the project period.

Outcomes identified by respondents included:

- social connection
- use of accessible devices and digital connectivity
- tech support and exploration (troubleshooting, referral, loan devices, remote helpdesk)
- in-person support (interpreting/translation, advice, and referrals)

110 of the 165 people with disability who attended skill-sharing sessions filled out evaluation forms that asked 5 questions (3 open-ended questions and 2 yes/no questions). Those who had already filled out surveys as attendees of the drop-in program were excluded from this number.

Outcomes identified by respondents included:

- pride and self-esteem
- increased awareness of deafblindness
- acquisition of skills and knowledge

Section 3 - Overall Project Outcomes

Question 3.1: What were the three most important outcomes your activity achieved?

ANSWER:

1. Social connection

Deafblind Victorians are vulnerable to social isolation and prior to this project, lacked a public facility where they can turn up without an appointment, knowing that the environment is accessible and others will be able to communicate with them. The DBV Connect drop-in program ran on Thursdays in central Melbourne. The co-designed space continued to evolve over time as participants adapted things to suit their needs. It features a U-shaped layout with a partition for tactile navigation (“trailing”), accessible computer terminals, bright lighting, a matte black wall to reduce glare, high-contrast tape on furniture and cushioned tables for tactile communication. Attendees gave and received unstructured peer support, shared lunch, talked with volunteers, and sometimes just sat quietly for respite from a stressful world.



2. Digital inclusion

Access to the online world is a prerequisite for inclusion in contemporary society. Participants were supported to connect through exploration and play with new devices and apps. They borrowed refreshable Braille displays, so they were not shut off when their own was sent for repairs. They received tech troubleshooting from the remote helpdesk for specialised AT that mainstream services don't support. They received help engaging with services such as MyGov, Service Victoria and Apple care, and accessing birth certificates, rent assistance and log-ins.

3. Confidence and self-esteem

105 skill-sharing sessions were delivered by participants. Deafblind people, who are often viewed as passive recipients of services rather than contributors, took great pride in sharing their skills and knowledge in art and craft, Braille, Auslan, technology, life skills and deafblind awareness. In some cases, a pathway was built to future paid employment by setting up an ABN and learning to invoice for services. Some presented in front of a group for the first time, raising awareness by sharing their lived experience of deafblindness.

Question 3.2: How did you measure the outcomes/benefits of the activity overall?

ANSWER:

Overall outcomes were measured by documenting the number of people with disability who reported increased access to and use of community services and activities and increased social participation, and by qualitative data in the form of regular case studies that were submitted in periodic progress reports.

Progress reports also tracked milestones and recorded evidence of achievements in each of the program areas. For example: establishment of accessible workstations, evidence of deafblind leadership in program design and implementation, and volunteer engagement. For skill-sharing sessions delivered as website and social media posts, levels of online engagement were documented.

Throughout the project, a database was maintained which collected a range of data including:

- Drop-in program attendance (specifying numbers of deafblind people, people with disability, support workers and other visitors)
- Number of unique participants across programs and through time
- Number of skill-sharing sessions conducted, and range of skills/knowledge shared
- Survey responses (participant evaluations)

Question 3.3: What was the biggest challenge in delivering your activity? Explain how you were or were not able to overcome this challenge. Maximum 300 words.

ANSWER:

Covid 19 hit Melbourne early in the project, and public health directives began to urge social distancing. Soon, lockdowns were announced. Deafblind project participants were particularly vulnerable, as many:

- are already socially isolated and lack digital connectivity
- require face-to-face interaction and close physical proximity to participate, due to using tactile (hand-over-hand) sign language, or being unable to lipread people wearing masks etc.
- are older, due to the progressive nature of deafblindness, and thus more vulnerable to Covid



- have low literacy and limited access to general knowledge about health
- cannot see QR codes or know how close others are
- work with a small pool of support workers and interpreters, many of whom withdrew their services or became unwell

Project activities were disrupted, but quickly pivoted to providing critical information and remote support to ensure that participants were not completely isolated. Devices were loaned and so that participants could stay in touch. Covid tests were provided and participants were supported in administering them, as they often could not see the results themselves. Rules for social distancing and exemptions and adjustments were explained to participants and support providers alike. Gaps in support for Deafblind Victorians were brought into stark relief, reinforcing understanding of the need for the activities in this program that aim to increase social and digital connection.

Question 3.4: Will the activity continue once funding from the Department has ended? If yes, explain how you made the activity sustainable. Maximum 300 words.

ANSWER:

Yes. Deafblind Victoria has obtained funds for a two-year project, the Deafblind Community Hub, which extends the skill-sharing and drop-in programs initiated in the project reported here. Some digital resources developed in this project (particularly “tech talk” and “deafblind tips” posts on the DBV website) provide a framework that will be continued in another new project, the Peer Support Network, which will run for three years. Both projects are supported by the federal government (DSS).

Section 4 - Opportunities and Enablers

Question 4.1: Describe any unexpected opportunities, surprising outcomes or lessons learned.

ANSWER:

Deafblind Connect began as a partnership between Deafblind Victoria and the Ross House Association, the entity that manages the building in which DBV and other community groups are located. DBV designed the project and managed operations, while Ross House provided the legal framework and was responsible for compliance, liability, and payroll.

The project progressed from an initial pilot stage and funding was extended. At the time, Deafblind Victoria was running another, much larger project to run peer support activities and build individual and organisational capacity. Through this, DBV was able to incorporate as a non-profit association and reached a stage where they felt ready to manage projects independently. However, it can be hard for an organisation to secure grants without a demonstrated track record. Taking this project “in-house” presented a perfect opportunity to overcome the hurdle. A successful project with DBV as the lead organisation would provide the evidence needed when applying for future grants.

Ross House was committed to seeing their member groups grow, and was happy to support the hand-over, and after negotiations with DSS, the grant agreement was novated. As Deafblind Connect was a small project, it allowed DBV ease into its new responsibilities as an employer. Building on the successful transition, DBV then novated the larger project, and was ultimately able to secure more



funding. The springboard this project provided for a unique community group run by and for deafblind people was a wonderful additional outcome of the project.

Question 4.2: Were there any enablers that helped your activity progress faster than expected?
ANSWER:

The ILC project mentioned above was a key enabler in the success of Deafblind Connect. It provided handy opportunities for skill-sharing sessions to take place, such as monthly peer support groups. From that project's monthly Craft Group activity, a participant with excellent macrame skills was identified to run skill sharing sessions, and its monthly "Deafblind Café" event supplied more opportunities to engage participants. The website and Facebook group maintained by the other project provided a platform for online skill-sharing in the form of "deafblind tips" and "tech talk" posts.

In addition, a DBV member had been delivering Deafblind Awareness training, mostly as a volunteer, and with limited resources. Deafblind Connect was able to support her to present her lived experience, and provide the workshops with other deafblind people to present alongside her. As a result, many more skill-sharing sessions were run than has been anticipated. The synergistic effect of the parallel activities at DBV led to much greater outcomes than each one would have been able to achieve in isolation. These learnings have informed the design of the new projects, where these activities are integrated.

Section 5 - Budget

Question 5.1: Did you expend all funds by the activity end date?
ANSWER: Yes, all funds were expended by the activity end date.

Question 5.2: Did your actual expenditure match your planned budget?
ANSWER: Yes, the actual expenditure matched the planned budget.

Question 5.3: What was the biggest challenge in your budget that you had not planned for?
ANSWER:

The original budget had a management fee for the Ross House Association, which RHA used to cover accounting, payroll, insurance, etc. When taking the project in-house, DBV had to pay for these administrative costs directly, and redefine categories within the budget. An accountant was employed for a couple of hours per week. CPI price rises included an increased fee for room bookings at Ross House, and we booked more rooms than was originally budgeted for.

Section 6 – Evaluation

Question 6.1: Did your activity include an evaluation in your planned budget?
ANSWER:

Our initial budget included \$2000 for evaluation. Quotes from evaluators were sourced, but it became apparent that this was not nearly enough to cover actual costs when accessibility



considerations were taken into account, as none of the evaluator’s tools or established processes were suitable for use with deafblind project participants. Project staff instead conducted one-to-one evaluations directly with participants using Auslan interpreting and translation, plain English, large print, and other adaptations, and provided evidence of project outcomes in regular progress reports to DSS and to Deafblind Victoria’s Committee of Management.

Section 7 – Further Comments

Provide additional comments to highlight any aspects of your activity. You may also like to provide a good news story about your activity. Maximum 500 words.

ANSWER:

1. The Deafblind Connect drop-in program received a visitor from interstate who is deafblind and indigenous. There is no deafblind organisation in his home region, where he is socially isolated. He visited Victoria to connect with the Deafblind community. He had never encountered an organisation with paid staff who are deafblind. He and his support worker talked for hours with local deafblind project participants, swapping stories about the experience of deafblind people in each place. The visitor took a resource developed at DBV showing how deafblind people set up the organisation and built it over time. He wants to try to replicate it when he returns home.
2. A project participant was supported to present at deafblind awareness workshops, alongside a deafblind peer who is an experienced presenter. He shared his personal experience of growing up deaf, losing eyesight as an adult, and its impact on access to services. Through this project, he has developed skills and confidence in public speaking, and has educated service providers in how they can meet the needs of deafblind clients. He received training and support in making and sending invoices, and is now invoicing the project for presenting at Deafblind awareness workshops.
3. Another project participant had grown up blind and lost her hearing over time. She learned Auslan as an adult through the tactile mode of hand-over-hand signing. She is a proficient user of technology and braille, and she has a gregarious disposition and loves to share her skills and knowledge with others. However, prior to this project, she had few opportunities to do so. Even though technology, braille and Auslan are much needed skills in the Deafblind community, teachers lack specialised skills in deafblind communication and AT. This participant was supported to deliver one-on-one training about the use of screen readers. Her lived experience is an invaluable asset; she understands deafblind cultural and linguistic needs, and anticipates barriers. She reports a sense of increased social participation, and her trainees are more able to access community services and activities through the digital skills learn from her.



Section 8 – Signatures

Funding Recipient

Name: Ntennis Davi

Position: CEO Deafblind Victoria

Date: 30 Aug 2024

Department

Name: AJ Letchford

Position: Funding Arrangement Manager

Date: 2 Sep 2024