NEDA

NATIONAL ETHNIC DISABILITY ALLIANCE

Submission to the Department of Social Services on the National Principles for the Regulation of Assistance Animals

June 2025

Acknowledgement

NEDA acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we live, work and gather. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We value the knowledge and wisdom they share with us.

About Us

NEDA is a national Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) governed by and constituted of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people with disability. The key purpose of NEDA is to promote, protect and advance the human rights and freedoms of all people with disability from CALD backgrounds, including, but not limited to, those on temporary visas, and from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

NEDA's membership is made up of CALD people with disability. Our state and territory member organisations are either CALD DPOs, CALD disability advocacy organisations or community-led disability advocacy organisations with a demonstrated history of working in partnership with CALD people with disability and their communities.

Introduction

NEDA thanks the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the National Principles for the Regulation of Assistance Animals. We welcome the focus on inclusive policy development and encourage continued engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse people with disability, their families and carers, and communities in future policy design and implementation.

This submission draws on insights from participants in NEDA's national online consultation. All participants identified as CALD and included assistance animal users, carers or family members of people with disability, and advocates.

Input was received from people with a broad spectrum of disability experiences, including psychosocial, sensory (hearing and vision), neurological, physical, chronic

pain-related, and developmental disabilities. These experiences often overlapped and intersected, shaping complex support needs. Participants contributed from across metropolitan, regional, and remote areas of Australia.

Many of the participants in our consultation were current users of assistance animals. Several people were carers or family members/supporters of people with disability who would benefit from an assistance animal, or were seeking to access one themselves. As reflected in the discussion, lived experiences with assistance animals vary widely, and participants' paths to obtaining and accrediting them included:

- Government-funded programs, such as the Department of Veterans' Affairs or the NDIS
- Charitable or non-profit organisations
- Personal or private means - often due to limited eligibility or mistrust of mainstream channels

Accreditation pathways ranged from formal mechanisms, such as Public Access Tests, state or territory schemes, and international recognition through Assistance Dogs International (ADI), to informal or self-managed options, including letters from medical professionals or trainers, or training in accordance with section 9(2)(c) of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

Despite these diverse approaches, participants consistently encountered structural barriers. These included jurisdictional inconsistencies, inaccessible housing policies, transport discrimination, and the ongoing burden of proving legitimacy, especially for those without conventional accreditation. Legitimacy was often judged visually, with some participants noting that unless the animal resembled a traditional guide dog, and the handler visibly appeared to have a disability, their access was more likely to be challenged or denied.

Cultural and linguistic differences further compound these challenges. Several CALD participants described how mainstream services failed to reflect their values, communication styles, or lived realities, leading to a sense of exclusion or reluctance to engage.

These findings reinforce the need for nationally consistent, inclusive, and culturally safe assistance animal principles that recognise both accredited and non-traditional pathways, and centre the experiences of diverse assistance animal users.

Principle 1 – Nationally Consistent Accreditation for Trainers and Training Organisations

Input received from our consultation supported the development of a nationally consistent accreditation framework, provided it is co-designed and does not entrench existing provider monopolies.

The people we consulted with consistently identified national inconsistency as a significant barrier. Many shared experiences of training being recognised in one state but not another, causing disruptions to travel, accommodation, and access to essential services. There was support for a framework that allows national recognition without increasing gatekeeping by dominant service providers.

Our consultation identified concerns that national accreditation could entrench the dominance of a small number of providers, particularly where only a few are recognised under existing government schemes. One consultation participant compared this to a market duopoly, where smaller or community-based trainers struggle to enter the market despite offering culturally responsive services.

One participant noted how accreditation tied to major providers led to long waitlists and a lack of culturally safe services, particularly in regional areas. Concerns were raised about smaller and community-led training organisations being excluded from formal recognition, despite often providing more accessible and culturally responsive services.

Our consultation identified strong support for the development of a nationally consistent accreditation framework, including eligibility criteria, recognition processes, and assessment methods, to be co-designed with people with disability, particularly from

CALD communities, rather than being driven by training professionals, large providers, or industry bodies.

Principle 2 – Minimum Assistance Animal Training Standards

Participants supported the introduction of minimum training standards to promote safety, public confidence, and consistent expectations across settings. However, this support was conditional on how those standards are designed and implemented (flexible, culturally responsive, and accessible to all, including those using self-training and community-based models).

Our consultation identified that the framework must be:

- Flexible, recognising a range of legitimate training pathways including self-training, community-based, and non-mainstream models.
- Culturally responsive, with an understanding that training practices may vary across communities and cultures.
- Accessible and affordable, with calls for subsidised or free training options, especially for people with disability from low-income or CALD backgrounds.

One key concern raised was the lack of affordable and culturally accessible training options, with some participants noting they had to train their own dogs due to cost barriers or the absence of programs available in their language or community. Participants requested flexibility in recognising diverse training pathways (including self-training and community-led approaches) and emphasised that minimum standards should focus on the outcome of training (an animal's behaviour, task performance and public safety). To helps make the standards more practical, equitable, and culturally responsive, participants stressed that they must be co-designed with people with disability, particularly from CALD backgrounds.

Principle 3 – Single National Public Access Test (PAT)

Participants supported a nationally consistent Public Access Test, with calls for it to be government-administered, low cost, and accessible across jurisdictions.

Participants in our consultation viewed a national PAT as essential to reduce confusion, eliminate postcode-based discrimination, and remove conflicts of interest where trainers both assess and accredit their own clients.

In the input received during the consultation, participants noted that some individuals must travel long distances, sometimes across state lines, to access the appropriate Public Access Test, incurring significant time and financial costs. In addition to these logistical barriers, some also reported inconsistent recognition across jurisdictions, where their assistance animal was accepted in one state but dismissed in another due to not fitting the stereotypical image of a guide dog.

Participants called for PATs to be administered by neutral authorities (e.g. state governments), not providers, and to be accessible at low cost across the country. Many supported reassessment every two to three years, noting the importance of regular checks but warning against annual tests as burdensome or at risk of being revenue driven.

Principle 4 – Evidence of Disability and Need

Participants only supported the idea of a single, nationally consistent evidence process with strong caveats - specifically that it must be equitable, affordable, culturally safe, and underpinned by enforceable legal protections.

Participants in our consultation broadly accepted the principle that assistance animal users should only be required to provide evidence of disability once, through a fair and consistent process. However, this support was conditional on reforms that make the process accessible and affordable.

Participants highlighted the burden placed on people with disability, who are often required to undergo multiple assessments across different systems. Many expressed that it is unreasonable and unfair to be repeatedly asked to prove their disability or justify their need for an assistance animal, sometimes simply to enter a public place such as a shop.

There is a need for equitable and accessible evidence processes, particularly for people on low incomes or with limited healthcare access. For instance, in our consultation, it was noted that not everyone can afford a specialist letter, and the question was posed as to whether a GP or community health worker could provide the evidence.

The input we received in our consultation highlighted the importance of culturally safe processes, support for people with low literacy, and recognition of hidden or psychosocial disabilities. Consultation participants strongly opposed systems that require individuals to “justify” their disabilities repeatedly in public spaces.

There was general agreement in our consultation that evidence should only be collected once and used to issue formal accreditation or an ID card, with clear limits on what businesses can ask for or expect.

As highlighted during the consultation, penalties for non-compliance vary significantly across jurisdictions. In Queensland, for instance, under the *Guide, Hearing and Assistance Dogs Act 2009*, individuals can face fines of up to $10,000 and corporations up to $50,000 for unlawfully denying access to a certified assistance dog. In contrast, enforcement in New South Wales appears limited. While refusal of access is unlawful under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, participants noted that few infringement notices have been issued in practice. We suggest there would be value in further considering the enforcement of these laws, including through additional consultation with assistance animal users.

Principle 5 – National Identity Card and Logo

Our consultation input indicated support for a national identity card and logo for assistance animal users, provided that it includes strong privacy safeguards, offers a digital format, and is accompanied by a public education campaign to encourage broad recognition and compliance.

There was support for a national ID card and logo as a practical solution to discrimination, confusion, and repeated questioning. Participants viewed this as critical to upholding dignity and preventing confrontations in public, noting that people should not have to explain their diagnosis to access services, such as in a café or when using a taxi.

There were mixed views about what information should be included in a national identity card and logo. Some people advocated for minimal information (e.g. photo of animal, name, expiry), while others supported including a list of access rights or consequences for unlawful denial.

A common concern was privacy – particularly the risk of including home addresses, which some participants said made them feel unsafe. There was strong support for a digital version of the card for people who regularly lose or cannot physically carry a card.

Participants also emphasised that a national identity card will only be effective if supported by a robust, government-funded public education campaign. This was seen as essential to avoid placing the burden of explanation and advocacy on individual assistance animal users. Participants discussed the importance of a public campaign to help prevent the onus and responsibility of educating others from falling on people with disability from CALD backgrounds.

This recommendation was reinforced by calls for the card to clearly state legal rights and consequences for unlawful denial, to reduce the need for users to self-advocate in

public settings. Participants noted that they do not always have the energy to explain their rights. In our view, people with disability should not be required to.

Principle 6 – Animal Welfare

Our consultation input indicated strong support for animal welfare. Participants also called for a broader view of animal welfare that includes infrastructure, emotional wellbeing, and cultural context.

Participants described experiences of discrimination, including being denied access or questioned about their capacity to care for an animal, based on assumptions related to their disability or cultural background. For example, when people are asked whether their disability or cultural background poses a risk to the welfare of their assistance animals, the concern is often not genuinely about the animal's wellbeing, but rather reflects assumptions made about the person themselves.

Several participants also noted that poor public infrastructure posed more serious risks to animal welfare than anything related to a handler's disability. Suggestions included reviewing building standards to better support animals in public places. For example, airports, shopping centres, and transit hubs may lack safe toileting areas or quiet zones, contributing to distress for assistance animals. Universal design features such as accessible relief areas and lighting that does not overwhelm animals with sensory sensitivities were viewed as necessary for animal welfare.

Participants also raised concerns around the emotional and psychological welfare of animals, particularly when removed from the people they support and have bonded with, as the animals can be traumatised by removal.

Participants supported the view that animal welfare standards should be co-designed with assistance animal users, rather than imposed by training organisations or regulators without lived experience.

Conclusion and Final Comments

Across all six principles, our consultation input called for an approach rooted in fairness, inclusion, and lived experience. There was a clear desire for the disability support and regulatory systems to move away from provider-driven definitions and towards co-design with the people most impacted – particularly those from CALD, regional, and low-income backgrounds.

Participants also called for the development of a national legislative framework, not just voluntary principles, to enshrine rights, responsibilities, and consistent enforcement. Without binding legislation, several expressed concern that access issues, discrimination, and accreditation confusion would continue despite the existence of national guidance.

Several systemic issues were highlighted:

- **Multiple participants had faced rental increases or rejections after disclosing their assistance animal.**
- **People reported being forced to leave animals behind in hospitals or shelters.**
- **Unsolicited questioning, intrusive behaviour, and refusal of access were common experiences, exacerbated for people with hidden disabilities or animals that did not “look” the part.**

One participant reflected that the issues raised go beyond assistance animals themselves. At their core, they are about dignity, inclusion, and ensuring that people with disability from CALD backgrounds can feel safe, supported, and able to participate in their communities.

Summary Recommendations

1. Develop a nationally consistent accreditation system for assistance animal trainers and training organisations, co-designed with people with disability and CALD communities, and inclusive of small and community-based providers.
2. Define flexible minimum training standards that recognise diverse pathways, focus on animal behaviour and task performance, and are accessible to people who self-train or use non-mainstream models.
3. Implement a national Public Access Test (PAT) that is affordable, administered by state or territory governments, and reviewed every two to three years.
4. Establish a streamlined national evidence process that is affordable, culturally safe, and only required once, supported by strengthened protections under the *Disability Discrimination Act*.
5. Introduce a national identity card and logo with optional digital formats, privacy safeguards, and public education to support recognition and enforcement.
6. Ensure animal welfare standards are co-designed with assistance animal users, inclusive of diverse breeds and training models, and supported by accessible infrastructure in public settings.

Publishing Information

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