Guide to Reasonable and Necessary (R & N) decisions

Topic: Smoke alarm supports for adults who are deaf or hard of hearing

We have used the words ‘deaf or hard of hearing’ in most of these examples. We acknowledge the terms deafness and hearing impairment mean different things to different people. Deaf is the preferred term used by people who use Australian Sign Language (Auslan) as a primary or preferred communication method and who identify themselves as a member of the signing Deaf community. It’s used to describe their unique cultural identity which is a result of their rich visual language and is used with pride. In this case the D in Deaf is capitalised.

Many in the Deaf community regard the terms ‘hearing impairment’ and ‘hearing loss’ as alienating and damaging because it implies deafness needs to be ‘fixed’.

We acknowledge that people will make their own choice about how they describe themselves and their disability or cultural identity.

Case Example

Amos is 24 and has severe, permanent hearing loss in both ears which was diagnosed when he was a baby. He communicates using Auslan and does not wear any hearing devices. Amos recently bought a house. He is moving out of his family home to live with his partner. He asks for NDIS funding for a visual and tactile alerting system connected to a smoke alarm.

Would we fund this?

Yes, visual and tactile alerting systems are NDIS supports. We would typically fund visual and tactile alerting systems for people who are deaf or hard of hearing if it meets the reasonable and necessary criteria.

Amos asks for advice from his audiologist about what smoke alarm would be suitable. He then has a conversation with his planner about low-cost assistive technology. Amos doesn’t need written evidence because the smoke alarm costs less than $1,500. The planner decides the support meets the reasonable and necessary criteria and includes funding for the smoke alarm in Amos’s plan.

Why would we fund this?

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We fund **NDIS supports**. NDIS laws determine what we can and can't fund. Things we can fund are called NDIS supports. You can use the funding in your plan to buy NDIS supports if they are directly related to your disability and are in-line with your plan.

To work out if funding for visual and tactile alerting systems for people who are deaf or hard of hearing is reasonable and necessary, we consider the information you've provided against the reasonable and necessary criteria.

Standard visual and tactile alerting systems and smoke alarms for people who are deaf or hard of hearing will usually meet your disability support needs as a standard level of support. They connect wirelessly through radio frequency transmissions to other devices, such as vibration pads you can place under a pillow to provide a tactile or physical alert at night, and flash receivers or strobe lights that provide a visual alert during the day.

Some states and territories provide a subsidy program for people who are deaf or hard of hearing to upgrade their smoke alarms. You can contact your local fire service to learn more.

What else do we think about?

The NDIS support you need will depend on your situation and the impact of your disability. Other things we think about include:

- your intellectual, emotional and physical ability to respond appropriately to a smoke alarm
- any smoke alarms you may already use or own
- any systems in place for other residents in the home with similar needs
- if it's the responsibility of other mainstream supports to fund the smoke alarm, for example some state funded housing authorities make allowances for minor modifications for their clients with disabilities.

Case Example

Sarah is 35-years old, with profound hearing loss in both ears. She has cochlear implants, which she has had since she was 21 after she suddenly lost her hearing. Sarah speaks and has good lip-reading ability, English comprehension, and literacy. She works full time and has lots of family and peer supports. Sarah lives with her husband and two young children, they can all hear.

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Although Sarah can communicate, she cannot hear the standard audible smoke alarms in her home. Sarah's husband travels regularly for work. Sarah worries she won't know if the smoke alarm is triggered when her husband is away.

Sarah's audiologist recommends a smoke alarm that sends a signal to a vibration pad under her pillow, a strobe light for visual notification and a tactile pager that vibrates when she cannot see the strobe light or is outside entertaining. Sarah asks the NDIS to fund this smoke alarm.

The planner considers the information provided, along with the reasonable and necessary criteria. The planner also considers the cost of the smoke alarm. Because the smoke alarm will cost less than $1,500, Sarah doesn't have to provide any written evidence. Based on the information, they determine the smoke alarm is reasonable and necessary, because:

- it is a NDIS support that directly relates to Sarah's disability
- it will alert her to smoke and fire supporting her independence related goals
- it's not reasonable for Sarah to be reliant on her husband and children to alert her each time the alarm is triggered
- evidence indicates she cannot hear standard audible alarms
- it's likely to be effective and beneficial to her independence in the long term.

The planner includes funding for the smoke alarm as low-cost assistive technology in the Core budget of Sarah's NDIS plan.

Case Example

Rafeek is 22 years old and has mild-moderate hearing loss in both ears. He is also a person with severe-profound intellectual and physical disabilities, caused by Coffin-Lowrey Syndrome. Rafeek lives in Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) with support 24 hours a day. Rafeek's SDA has standard smoke alarms and sprinklers. He wears hearing aids and needs help to manage them. Rafeek's family have asked the NDIS to fund a visual and tactile smoke alarm for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Rafeek's recent occupational therapy report identified he needs assistance with all activities of daily living, mobility and making decisions. The report also found Rafeek appeared to be scared of the flashing light and vibration pad that are part of a visual and tactile smoke alarm.

The planner looks at the information provided against the reasonable and necessary criteria and determines the funding for a visual and tactile smoke alarm is not reasonable and necessary, because:

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- Rafeek does not have the motor function and intellectual capacity to respond appropriately when the smoke alarm is triggered
- there is a risk he would hide from the alarm, which would be unsafe in an emergency
- Rafeek lives in SDA with 24-hour care
- it will not increase Rafeek's independence or reduce other supports because he needs support workers to explain what the smoke alarm means and help him if there is a fire.

The planner does not include funding for a tactile or visual smoke alarm in Rafeek's NDIS plan because it does not meet the reasonable and necessary criteria.

Case Example

Evelyn is 60 years old and has profound hearing loss in both ears. She does not wear hearing aids because they don't improve her ability to hear speech and sounds. Evelyn and her husband, who is also profoundly deaf, have lived in their home for 15 years. The house is currently fitted with standard smoke alarms and a doorbell for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, which includes strobe lights and a bed shaker. Her husband also has a pager to alert him to alarms or doorbells when he is outside gardening.

Evelyn would like to install a custom alerting system that uses different coloured strobe lights depending on which system is triggered. Her current system uses a white strobe light for all notifications. Evelyn needs to check smaller coloured lights on the current device to work out what has been triggered. She does not think the current standard system is reliable because the smoke alarm occasionally goes off when there is no smoke and she misses deliveries when she's at home. She wants it to be available in the bathroom, laundry or outside. Evelyn is worried about devices getting unplugged and concerned she won't see the strobe lights if someone puts something in front of them.

The planner looks at the information provided against the reasonable and necessary criteria. They determine the funding for an above standard smoke alarm or doorbell system for people who are deaf or hard of hearing does not meet the reasonable and necessary criteria because:

- Evelyn's home already has a functioning system that meets Australian standards and will alert her in an emergency. The system is the standard needed to alert Evelyn and has not reached the end of its expected service life. Funding a system above the standard level needed to provide alert notifications to Evelyn is not considered value for money.

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- there are solutions to stop the device becoming unplugged, switched off or blocked. Evelyn could use power point safety protectors. Strobe lights can be put higher on the wall in a specialised bracket. They can also be attached to the wall directly to stop them from being blocked or knocked over.
- a local supplier can assess the current system to make sure it's set up correctly.
- the current system can be set up in the bathroom and laundry, and a pager can be added which Evelyn can use outdoors.

Although the planner does not include funding for an above-standard smoke alarm or doorbell system for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, they decide it's reasonable and necessary to modify the standard system. The planner includes funding for additional strobe lights, an extra pager, and their installation in the home as per reasonable and necessary criteria.

For more information, refer to:

- Our Guideline – Reasonable and necessary supports
- Our Guideline – Assistive technology
- Our Guideline – Principles we follow to create your plan
- Our Guideline – Creating your plan
- Smoke Alarm Subsidy Scheme – Deaf Connect
- Smoke Alarm Subsidy – Expression Australia

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