3 December 2021

On International Day of People with Disability (IDPwD) 2021, the NDIA celebrates and acknowledges the achievements and contributions of all Australians living with disability.

NDIA Participant Advocate and Disability Champion Donna Purcell says IDPwD is an important day to help raise awareness and understanding of people with disability and to recognise the contributions of people with disability across Australian society – today, and every day.

“It’s important to have awareness of what people with disability contribute to our community, and IDPwD is an opportunity for organisations, including the Agency, to celebrate or acknowledge what people with disability bring to their workforce and to the community as a whole,” Ms Purcell said.

“Disability is part of the diversity of our overall community so it’s important to have a day to acknowledge that because, otherwise, it is something that can often go under the radar.”

Ms Purcell says she hopes IDPwD leads to greater ‘true awareness’ of people with disability and a change in perceptions.

“I think there is a growing awareness and acceptance of people who have disability in our community and in our workplaces, but I think the missing link is still around people's ability and what they can do, and looking at the person - who they are, what they can do – rather than the focus on the disability,” she said.

“I think there is more awareness in the community but it’s often through that lens of hero status, and it doesn’t acknowledge people with disability are normal people who may just need to have some adjustments and changes in their life on how they do things, but they are normal people.”

This year’s UN theme for IDPwD is ‘Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world’.

Ms Purcell says the NDIA is committed to being an employer of choice for people with disability and is helping to promote more accessible, inclusive workplaces and communities by employing people with disability in key roles, such as her own.

Following an extensive career developing and leading strategies for inclusive workplaces and communities in both the public and private sector, Ms Purcell, who is blind, joined the NDIA’s Senior Executives as the Participant Advocate.

She is a current board director of the Australian Network on Disability, past Chair of the NSW Disability Advisory Council and a Churchill Fellow. She is also a NDIS participant.

“I think a key component of creating inclusive workplaces is for workplaces to employ more people with disability in mainstream roles, so that it is just part of the organisation's DNA,” Ms Purcell said.

“And we need to look at how workplaces support adjustments and actually support people, in whatever way that looks like for them, to integrate into our workforce and have mainstream jobs.

“We (the Agency) are working towards being a much more accessible and inclusive organisation. But at the same time, we also know that it's a journey and we're not there yet, we still have more work to do.”

Ms Purcell says about 17% of the NDIA workforce identifies as having a disability, compared with about 20% of the broader community.

“I think that demonstrates that we are an organisation who attracts people with disability but also employs people with disability,” she said.

“The fact that we're actually almost there in representing the Australian community as a whole in our employment, shows that commitment that we are genuinely wanting to increase that social and community participation for people with disability.”

Ms Purcell says people living with disability often bring valuable qualities to the table, including resilience, determination, problem-solving skills, and the ability to adapt quickly to change.

She says she hopes IDPwD will remind employers and organisations to focus more on these qualities and the ways they can support people to integrate in their workplaces and communities.

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