



MEDIA RELEASE

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Disability justice: How best to reduce the possibility of victimhood in the first place

The recent dismissal of child sex charges against a local school bus driver again reveals the challenges of ensuring a fair go at justice for people living with disability. As reported in the Advertiser Wednesday, December 21, charges were dismissed because the two complainants—children living with intellectual disability—apparently were not able to provide reliable testimony.

Research and consultancy organisation Julia Farr Association believes coverage of this issue is missing a critical point. The Association's CEO Robbi Williams said that while improvements to the justice system were important, the bigger issue is vulnerable children and adults being placed in service arrangements that increase the risk of predatory behaviour.

"The problem is that when our society places people in support arrangements that put them out of view of other citizens—whether those arrangements happen to be a group home or in this case, a special bus—this can increase the chances that someone might be abused, assaulted or neglected by others because there are fewer people around to look out for the person," Mr William said.

Mr Williams believes these risks can be reduced if society rethinks the way people living with disability are supported.

"A better way to safeguard the rights and well-being of people living with disability is to find ways to support people so that they are routinely present in daily life, as visible and valued members of our community," he said.

"In the present case, the alleged assaults took place in a service where special bus transport was presumably taking children to a special school."

"If so, it is important to explore how a child living with disability might be supported to use a regular school bus to go to a regular school, because this presents the prospect of that child being much more visible in community life and growing up alongside nondisabled peers."

"We're not saying that this will be a straightforward endeavour for every person living with disability, but we are saying it is an essential endeavour to achieve better natural safeguards in people's lives and to improve their life chances."

The Julia Farr Association welcomed the government's announcement earlier this week that it will develop a disability justice plan to improve protection for people living with disability in the criminal justice system, but Mr Williams said that by itself this initiative may not reduce the likelihood of intentional abuse, assault or neglect.

"It is of course important to strengthen our justice system so people living with disability get a fair go, otherwise there may be an even higher risk of assault because people might think they can get away with it. But we need something more than just the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff."



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