



This transcript of VALID's Podcast, an interview with John McKenna and Arthur Rogers has been provided by Deakin University for educational purposes.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Welcome to the VALID Podcast. I'm John McKenna. Many Victorians who are involved in disability and in particular have interacted with the Department of Health and Human Services, I'm sure will be very familiar with the name Arthur Rogers. For those who haven't heard of Arthur, he has held leadership roles within the Victorian Government in disability, social housing and is currently the Victorian Disability Services Commissioner.

If you've ever had a chance to meet with Arthur, I'm sure you'll agree he's a strong advocate for independent choice and the inclusion of people with disabilities. I sat down with Arthur at VALID's Having a Say Conference in February 2019. During my interview with Arthur, he reflected on a personal level about what he's seen and how the disability landscape has evolved. We covered the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the impacts of institutions on people's lives, and his thoughts on the importance of self-advocacy looking back and looking forward. This podcast goes for about 20 minutes. We hope you enjoy it.

You're listening to the VALID Podcast. My name is John McKenna. I'm with Arthur Rogers. Hello Arthur.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Hi John. How are you?

JOHN MCKENNA:

Arthur you've got a huge bio. So, give us a summary of what you wanna tell the world, who you are, what you've done a lot.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Thanks John. Well, I won't go through everything because I've been working for quite a while. But probably the most relevant thing is I got into Human Services in the sort of middle part of my career. And I worked in the Department of Health and Human Services as it's called now and in a range of areas I did health. I was a regional director and I covered all sorts of programs like health, housing, child protection, disability, mental health. And so I was a bit of a generalist. And then I got transferred into the disability program into the department and ended up running the program. And basically that's when I really did, I think I finally did get disability and about the issues that are important.

JOHN MCKENNA:



Wow.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

And as a generalist, I just sort of skirt across a lot of things. But working in that area I just basically started really talking to people with a disability and they really helped me understand what's important around the program. And it's not what books tell you or research tells you, it's what they tell you. So, I did that for quite a while and then I was asked to look at to looking after public housing for a while which I did and then got back into disability to help implement the National Disability Insurance Scheme in the state.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Which I did until recently, and then there's I think a terrific office in Victoria called the Disability Services Commissioner which is an independent body established by government to help people with a disability speak up and resolve complaints about services. And I've been doing that for about six months.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

That's really, really a rewarding thing to do. And I work with great people and we help people with a disability get the sort of services they should have, the ones that they want and the ones that are safe for them.

JOHN MCKENNA:

So, to look at from, you know, to go off the dance floor and look down at the disability landscape. How is it now? What's it look like?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

I reckon I think, look I've got to say, I think we've come a fair way in Victoria, but I think, and Australia, but I think we've got a fair way to go. And it's also I think a position that you can never take for granted because I think you've got to be constant about making sure that the rights of people with disability are not taken away or diminished. So, I think it's something while we've come a fair way, we've got a fair way to go. It's pretty exciting time in Australia with the National Disability Insurance Scheme coming in and all the potential that's got. Because it's got great potential to give people more control over their lives, more choice and to have the sort of



services that they want and for the services to fit them rather than the other way around. But there is a 'but' and I reckon it's a fairly big 'but' that when you're introducing something like this, you've got to get it right.

JOHN MCKENNA:

For sure.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

You can't let it sort of start the wrong way. And actually being a big national scheme, it doesn't take over the lives of people with a disability. It's there in the background to help them. And I'm not saying it's gonna do that, but I just think it's whilst it's exciting we've got to make sure it gets implemented the right way, and we've got to make sure that people with a disability their voices are right in the middle of it and they're heard and they guard what's happening.

JOHN MCKENNA:

What's it look like when we've got it right?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

What I think it looks like is that it's actually it's not particularly visible in a person's life.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Well, the person's life is they're doing the things they wanna do and it's easy for them to access, for people with a disability, to access it and they can control how it works for them. So, basically you get it right when people with disability get the support they need to do the things they want.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

And they do it without a lot of hassle and they haven't got to fight to get things and they haven't got to go through a lot of rigmarole and bureaucratic red tape to get things. It's in the background and they're living their



lives the way they want to with the support they need. And you know that's, it's important they get the support they need, but I also don't think that's anything. I mean it's a bit about the community being accessible as well.

Well, that's the National Disability Insurance Scheme can do things about that, but that's a broader thing for the community and for governments, all governments. And I've often thought, you know, you need the right support to do what you wanna do, but the community has got to be accessible and the legal systems actually got to not be discriminatory. So, I reckon we've come a fair way, but there's a long way to go yet. The NDIS is a great idea and it's making a lot of, making big change in people's lives, but it's also need to keep, we need to keep working on it.

JOHN MCKENNA:

So, when you've come across people who are strong self-advocates and they make you actually go home and say, "Wow, that was pretty amazing to meet that person." Any stories perhaps you can share on what an empowered self-advocate looks like? Not so much physical disability. And I have one and you and I have known each other for years.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah.

JOHN MCKENNA:

I'd be really interested if you perhaps share a story of someone with intellectual disability on what a strong advocate look like.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah. Well, I know, I've known and I do know a lot of very strong advocates. I think when I look back what sort of I remember the most about my early days was meeting some guys who had lived their early parts of their lives and perhaps into their 20s and 30s in institutions, and they had been labelled as having intellectual disability. And some of them might, you know, I don't know how they started their lives, but institutionalization robbed them of a lot of things. And I remember one guy telling me that, you know, when he was 18, he only had one possession which was a toothbrush.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ARTHUR ROGERS:



Because that stage, institutions used to, you know, the clothing was everyone's. You'd put in the laundry, you'd take a piece of clothing, when it came back from the laundry or where they were cleaning it and so on, and you just got issued with things. And he had a toothbrush.

JOHN MCKENNA:

OK.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

And he, you know, he was living at that stage of life in the community, you know, in a place where he wanted to live, with people he wanted to live with very independently. And he was, you know, and many people like him I met at that stage and particularly around institutions because we were talking a lot about how we could try and get rid of them in Victoria. And just their personal stories like, you know, their personal stories about how it, what it did to them and how they got through their life and got to do the things they wanna do. And it's a long, long fight for them and how they got there and what they overcome, it was just like amazing. And it's touched me then. It still touches me now to talk about it. I just find it really just amazing how they managed to get through it.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yeah. I've had some advocacy work in prisons with (INAUDIBLE). And they have more than a toothbrush. They have other possessions.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah.

JOHN MCKENNA:

So, when you look at it through that lens, it's pretty credible when you use it as an example.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah. And this is just going back a while now. But it was just, it's probably a stark example of what institutional living can do. That it's actually in the end that the institution runs for the institution and they forget about people. And now we don't do that anymore in Victoria in that way, but I still think you've got to be careful that places and services don't run for the system of the service and that they don't make people fit into what they wanna do. It's about they fit to what people wanna do.



So, I still think we see that sort of thing except it's not perhaps as stark as I've described now. Which is why it's important, you know, you've got individualized support based on a person's own choices and they make the choices and they control what happens to them, and they live the lives they wanna do and not...

ARTHUR ROGERS:

What someone else thinks they wanna do. And then so and, you know, the people I'm talking about were very, very great self-advocates. I mean they made a great change in their community and, you know, they're still going, still do. And there's nothing more powerful than listen to a person's own experience. And also, you know, anybody with disabilities had, they've had to battle all their lives to do the things they wanna do.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Exactly.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

But people born a while ago when it was the natural thing, you know, they were the parents were told put the child in an institution and forget about them and maybe have some more children. And you know, that for a system to think about that that was right to tell people and families is just, you know, we would think it's terrible now, but I'm not sure it doesn't happen to some extent the same as it these days.

JOHN MCKENNA:

It's like either.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

No.

JOHN MCKENNA:

I guess what's really fascinating for me as I work as an advocate acknowledging that family plays a huge role in decision making about a person's future especially when we talk people intellectual disability. How do we mentor or enable a family member to take that risk?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah. And it's a good point because families, you know, we all go to health professionals and we get advice and we think we should follow it. And so, you know, you go to professionals and they give you advice. You follow it. And I'm not looking families because they do what they think is the right thing and what's said to them. But I



think it's really important that where I've seen it work is when families connect with other families who've been through it and they listen to what other families have done.

And you know, I reckon it's more powerful listening to, for a person to listen to someone who's been through the same thing than they talk to a professional or bureaucrats or, you know, they should talk to everyone if they want to. But I reckon just knowing that someone else has gone through the same thing and they've made some choices that have worked. Which is why I think, you know, the really a powerful voice of self-advocacy and advocacy and peer networks.

JOHN MCKENNA:

It is all about having that conversation, isn't it?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

It is and connecting with people. So, you're not alone. You know, you're not feeling that you're the only one who's going through it so. So, I think, you know, the groups that connect people and with each other is really powerful. And you know, we've probably got much better opportunities today with sort of social media and other things to do that so people can reach out. So, probably, you know, that for me is the potential that we need to see some more happening around how people connect, not just in their own suburb but in their own country or maybe around the world.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure. I think decision making is a really complex topic, isn't it?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Mm-hmm.

JOHN MCKENNA:

About whose decision is it and why and what's feeding that decision. And I know families break up because of it.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah. And it takes a toll on people, doesn't it? I've seen it myself. It's also a bit about I think not assuming that a person with an intellectual disability or any other disability can't make the decisions for themselves. I think you've got to assume they can. And sometimes they need some support to make decisions. And sometimes I guess, you know, you might need a substitute decision maker. But I think it should all start from the point of view that a person can make some calls for themselves, and if they can't then help them to do it in a way that helps them do it.



JOHN MCKENNA:

I think these days with technology, different types of devices, to say they don't communicate, you've got to take care to say this off air.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

I mean some people may not verbally communicate, but people do communicate and can communicate. You just have to work out what's the way they wanna communicate and help them do it. And it's important I think whilst, you know, people who run services and community groups actually understand that, you know, you probably just need to work out how to communicate because that's the start.

Now if you start, if you meet someone or you start supporting someone, I reckon the first thing you got to do is work out how you're gonna communicate with them. Because you need to know from them what's important for them, and also you need to know that they can express where they're not feeling well or things are going right or they wanna do something. So, I reckon, you know, if you can't do that with a person with a disability work out how you can hear them working you got a problem. It's also helping people have the confidence to speak up which is, you know, I think some of the advocacy groups and other things just do such a great job to create a space where and a view that people can speak up. It's also families speaking up as well about what they want and knowing where to go and who to speak to.

JOHN MCKENNA:

What areas of empowerment are exciting to you? Or perhaps to rephrase the question, but when you see and hear things, when you sort of say that's amazing or what excites you to hear and a particular initiative that's happened?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Well, you know, what I find exciting is when a person says, "You know I've put up with things and now I can speak up." And the fact that they've come to the view they can speak up when probably for years they didn't, and there might have been little bad things happen to them and big bad things happen to them or things just not what they want. And so when someone decides they can speak up and they're supported to speak up, and they they'll link with a group that helps them to do that, that's pretty exciting. Because again, it's about communication is pretty important.

But the other thing is I think there's, you know, there's some groups in Australia like VALID and others that actually create a space where people feel they can just say what they need to say. And I reckon that's pretty exciting and I think we're seeing more and more of that in Australia. The fact that now people with a disability, you know, it's about choice and control for them, which is what federal and state governments have signed up to. We're not there yet but it's a great sort of empowering space and it's a great enabling space I reckon.





JOHN MCKENNA:

So, we talk a lot about the disability sector. On the outside of that, you've got society. You've got consumers who don't have not only some influence, but they perhaps haven't experienced disability. If I was to give you a magic wand right now, how do we change attitude about the people sitting in restaurants and hotels and who have not been touched by disability, what do they need to know? How do we teach them?

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Well, it's a good question, John, and I wish I knew the, I can say the answer.

JOHN MCKENNA:

It's a magic wand.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah. I mean one thing is I think the more and more people with disability are out doing the things they wanna do and go into the places they wanna go to. You know, it's the visibility. The fact they're not locked away, they're not segregated in the community. They're just part of the community. The more that happens, I think the more people get used to the concept. Because you know, 30 years ago, people with a disability didn't get out in the community.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Sure.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

In some places, they still don't. But I reckon just being in the community and being seen as just part of the community is pretty powerful. I think some people need, businesses need to understand actually it's good business to cater for people with a disability, make it accessible. Because a lot of people have a disability and they'll come and use businesses that are accessible. So, it's not about them doing someone a favour, it's about good business. And the same as, you know, buildings and other things. If you can't get in you can't go and participate. So, I don't know what I think we've just got to keep on educating the community. But I'd start with making sure that people are out in the community doing the things they wanna do.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Do you have a view on another sector that's called the aged care sector, how they overlap and where you can see working together if that makes sense? What are we learning, what are we doing right, what are we not doing right now especially when people with disabilities become older?



ARTHUR ROGERS:

Yeah, yeah, well, it's one of the things, you know, we all do, when I say we governments all do around the world, is they create programs which separate people's lives. So you know, a person with a disability will get older, and they're getting older like they're living longer which is fantastic. And so you do have to create programs, you got to work about how a person can transition from one program to another if that's what they need to do or stay in the program they're in and keep the sort of same support.

So, now I think over the years aged care has not been as empowering as disability, not been as individualized. And that's changing. I think that's good to see. So, it's a bit about making sure the systems if the people got to move one system to another that they actually don't lose the freedoms they've got.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Yes, for sure.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

And they don't lose the support. They might need to change as they age as we all do, but you know, you don't wanna make it that something stops and something else completely different has to start for them. It's about a smooth transition and keeping people active as they get older and doing the things they want to when they get older as well. And if it's if choice and control is right for the community and right for people with disabilities, then it's right for older people too.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Arthur Rogers, thank you very much for coming on to the VALID Podcast.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

John, it's so thanks mate. It's been good to talk to you. Thank you.

JOHN MCKENNA:

Me too. Thank you.

ARTHUR ROGERS:

All the best. Bye.

JOHN MCKENNA:



We hope you enjoyed the VALID Podcast. For more details about VALID, please have a look at our website [www.valid.org.au](http://www.valid.org.au).