

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
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Your details

Title Ms

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Submission details

I am making this submission as A resident in a flood-affected area

Submission type I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story I live in Mullumbimby, Northern NSW. The day before the flood it was raining a lot and water rising a little but nothing out of the ordinary. We have lots of low lying land that we expect to flood, and then a significant bank of over 1 metre high beyond which we did not expect water to rise - it's past the 100 year flood level. On Monday morning, 28 February 2022, we

woke to find we were completely surrounded, water above the bank and rising quickly towards the house (which is raised a further 1 metre from the ground), cars submerged, and an evacuation order had been made for Mullumbimby before we even woke. It was too late to leave. [redacted], who lives on my land in her caravan, came in as waters were rising and entering her caravan, while my house was still dry. She and I just did the best we could to move stuff up, and watch the water rising, which it did rapidly. I wanted to move my motorised wheelchair somewhere higher but NDIA hasn't approved a ramp yet so I couldn't put it on my veranda or house. I had to leave it in my art studio and water was already covering the floor in there by the time I left to return to the house. (I can walk a short way without my wheelchair.) It wasn't long before it was flowing fully under the house and only centimetres from the floor level.

We were scared because if the water continued to rise at this rate it would only be another hour before it entered the house. Another friend who lived interstate was texting with me and searching online to try and understand the flood forecast and how much further the waters might rise. All he could find was that an hour away in Lismore, another two metres of water rise was expected.

We made plans to move into the roof cavity and worked on creating a survival nest there and saving my artworks and journals. Predicting power to go out we also prepared food, tea light candles, water and a toilet bucket. If the waters rose by more than another two metres, the roof cavity would not be high enough, so in that case, we would have to swim to the roof of our art studio - the highest point we could reach. So we also prepared a plastic bottle of clean water to tie to us to bring with us, and a series of ziploc bags in the hope we could bring our phones and my hearing aids and have them survive. Also in the hope of being evacuated before all this happened, I packed us each a small bag of

absolute essentials, including some of my clothes for . It was tricky trying to be ready for three possible scenarios at the same time but I managed to come up with a workable plan for each.

At the same time, I wanted to call 000 or SES and let them know we were trapped and wanted to be rescued. Being Deaf, I can't just call 000 myself, and I have problems using the National Relay Service. I texted a hearing friend who lives in Brisbane and asked her to call for me. She did but was only routed to Queensland emergency services. She couldn't talk to services in New South Wales. She asked her mum, who lives in NSW, to call for me. Her mum called but was on hold to the SES for over an hour. I could not have done that through the relay service and simultaneously done all the preparation that needed doing. A local friend texted to check on me - she was herself flooded in but safe from risk due to being on a hill. She called 000 on my behalf and likewise was on the phone for about an hour trying to get through. She did eventually get through and they told her that they had 300 others requiring rescuing and some of them were on the roof with water up to the gutter, so they were going to close our call for now and we should ring back if things became more dire. I was worried about losing internet, power and phone, and wanted them to keep us on a list of lower priority people, just in case we couldn't contact them later, but they refused. They just said, call back if you need. My friend had to go then to help her neighbours with their flooding issues. Shortly after that we lost power and internet and had no way of contacting anyone. I wondered, if we ended up stranded on the roof of the art studio, and my phone didn't survive the swim there, how long would it take for someone to find us and rescue us? I tried not to think about that rather terrifying scenario.

Given that I am usually bed-bound, my body was amazing! I got up several times and managed to do so much more than I could have thought was

possible! It came at a good time as just the day before I was thinking my health had improved and I could do a bit more. But then I was spent and I just had to rest. [redacted] was incredible - so calm, so hard working. And we both kept our spirits up really well, encouraging each other, with positive talk.

Flood waters stopped rising so fast and held steady for a while just below floor level which was good, though we lost power to the power points and internet reception and phone signal. Then we saw the family who lives in other house on my land being evacuated .. we could just make out activity through the window so we quickly prepared. I threw on some extra clothes so that I would have some more with us as the bag I had packed only had space for a top and pair of pants.

Sure enough, just after that, two guys turned up with a lilo. They said the tide would rise again at 7pm and didn't think we would be safe then and we should leave now. So we put our bags inside plastic bags and crawled onto the lilo together. I felt a bit confronted leaving a safe dry house to go out into the rain, especially without my wheelchair, but the prospect of staying was quite terrifying so this was our only option. The guys walked through the flood water, pulling us. I couldn't help but worry about them absorbing all the toxicity. I had read online that sewerage alarms had gone off in Mullumbimby and Brunswick Heads and assumed that the water was full of that sewerage and also that from our own septic system, which was way under water. I think they were civilians just helping out, not part of a co-ordinated official rescue effort. A particularly creepy thing was floating past Sky's car and the wheelchair accessible van and seeing them full of water... something about that made me feel a bit sick. I don't know why that image in particular was so disturbing.

They led us on the lilo up to the main road. A bit of a way along it was low water.. only ankle deep. It was still raining heavily. Not knowing I

usually use a wheelchair, they told us to walk through that and that there was unflooded road further up. So we each carried our bags as a parcel in our arms and walked. We had to walk a long way, much further than I usually walk. The rescue guys said that at the unflooded bit of road there were lots of cars and someone would take us somewhere. We got to the unflooded road but there was no-one in any of the cars.. just abandoned cars. There was a house on a hill with a man on the veranda and we went up there but he didn't want to help so we left. We walked and walked and then I couldn't walk any more and sat down on the road. Every muscle was aching.

There was a car with a grumpy woman in it who didn't want to help. Our neighbours had disappeared. They must have gotten in one of the promised cars and gone somewhere. After a while the rescue people drove past in a 4WD towing a boat. They stopped and talked to us. I asked for a lift to somewhere. They had no space in the car - it was indeed full. They said they would take their boat home then come back for us. Eventually the grumpy woman got out of her car - she was waiting for her husband to sort out their horses and was also sodden, like us. She opened the back of her car with a fold down section and fold up roof, and sat on that and I lay with my head in her lap. We were still in the rain though, soaked through to our underwear, and it was still raining fairly heavily.

We waited and waited there... fully wet and being rained on. The woman's husband came and they were to leave soon. They kindly said we could go with them to South Golden Beach but I thought they'd be flooded too. I know South Golden Beach is particularly low lying and I thought it would be under water. They didn't know if their place was flooded but her kids were there so they had to try and get there to get their kids. They were also waiting for a friend so we all just waited more.

After a long time a rescue person came past and

flagged him down. He then organised a lift for us. A nice woman and man turned up in a 4 wheel drive and said we could get in. We were SO WET and cold. I had to take off my top and they put on their heating so I could dry off. They had a towel, thankfully. They were driving to Lennox Heads. They tried to take us to the home of one of my friends, but didn't think we could pass the roads to get there. The amount of deep water they drove through in their 4WD to get through was scary! They were building a house in Mullumbimby but living in Lennox Head while building, so were trying to get back there. They ended up taking us to Byron Bay. Both were kind and friendly and sweet. The woman found us a cabin in a caravan park and dropped us off there.

and I had to shower to warm up and clean off all the dirty flood water. We hadn't been able to bring any water or food. Only a small bag each. But I was so happy with what I packed. I got my computer, ipad, hearing aids, and phone out safely and dry! Amazing!

Having made it out, we still had challenges, such as getting food. We each had exactly one dry outfit, one sodden outfit, and were exhausted. We couldn't risk going out into the rain again and getting our dry outfit wet and the thought of putting on the wet one again when we were still cold to the bone was untenable. Also, I was finished. There was nothing more I could wrest from my body so it depended on what could do. Woolworths was closed as there were no staff due to flooding, and delivery services likewise were not operating. A Mullumbimby taxi driver who was also flooded out and staying at the same place as us let us hire him to drive to get some food.

We remained in the cabin for two days, unable to find out what was happening as there was no internet or phone reception in Mullumbimby so we couldn't communicate with friends. We had no vehicle and knew the car and van were lost. I assumed my wheelchair was lost too which

frightened me. I tried walking in Byron Bay, just as I had during the evacuation, but it made me feel so sick I had to give up and lie down. In the end all I could do was wait in bed. I felt sick thinking of having to wait in bed again for the months it would take to arrange a replacement wheelchair.

Eventually a text got through from a friend who lives just out of Mullimbimby and had some reception. She immediately came to pick us up so we could stay with her. She took us to our place to see what had happened. I assumed my wheelchair was a goner but was waiting to see if the water had entered my house, and if it had gone high enough to destroy my electric bed. To my amazement and immense relief, water hadn't entered the house. The wheelchair had been partially submerged and I couldn't believe it when it started! Suddenly I could see freedom again! I could use the wheelchair to check out the rest of the place and orchestrate the clean up.

We had a huge clean up job to do as the garage, art studio and caravan had been flooded, paths damaged, trees fallen, chooks died, and garden features such as our compost bays destroyed or entirely missing. The swimming pool was full of sewerage-laced mud. In the coming days friends, especially those I knew through the Deaf community, just turned up to help us clean up. We didn't even ask. I am so touched by their generosity. It was a strange time for me as I wanted to get out of my wheelchair and work on the clean up myself, but could do so little. What I did was project-manage and direct people, which turned out to be a draining and full time job in itself. By the time the clean up was done I was exhausted. This caused a significant set back in my health, and I am still thinking longingly of the health gains I had made before the flood.

Only two weeks later we had to evacuate again. This time I had none of the energy and capacity I had had the first time, though we had enough

warning to leave before it was too late. The same friend came and picked me up and again it was heart wrenching and scary to leave my wheelchair behind, as I still had no way to raise it up nor transport it. I was not in a good place physically as I hadn't recovered from the previous flood, and although in the end the waters didn't rise enough to do further damage, I found myself particularly mentally and physically drained by the stress of the evacuation. I am still recovering in terms of my health, and we are not yet back to where we were before in terms of lost possessions and infrastructure.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

1.2 Preparation and planning

I would like to say to emergency services that the following measures would be helpful when planning for future disasters:

- a text message 000 service for Deaf people. This would also be useful for hearing people when there is limited reception, which is often the case during disasters. This should be available always, not just during disasters. It has been an ongoing problem for me that I am not able to call in an emergency.
- when emergency services are inundated, the capacity to leave a message, as it is not feasible to be on hold for lengthy periods when dealing with a disaster, and power/phone services can easily be lost. In terms of return contact, it would be good to be able to specify that it needs to be by text message or email, rather than assuming it will be a voice call, because Deaf people can't answer the phone, and because hearing people may lose reception and would be able to pick up a text message when reception is gained.
- the capacity for people to register their need and circumstances without needing to call back. For example, our names and address could have been placed on a list and emergency services could have tended to us when more urgent

cases had been dealt with. We would have had assurance that they knew we were there and would eventually come looking for us.

- it would be good for people with a disability or serious health condition to have the capacity to register with local emergency services and specify their needs, and have these needs factored in to rescue arrangements. For example, people who use wheelchairs need additional assistance with mobility, people who are deaf need assistance with communication and so on. Ideally we would have the capacity to register ahead of time as well as in the midst of an emergency. Then emergency services would be aware, for example, when there is a fire or flood warning, to check the various deaf people in their area have received the warning. They could also make an appropriate plan for evacuating people with mobility and health issues who have additional needs.

- during and immediately after the flooding, I was unable to access information regarding forecast flood level and what that would mean for me on my property. For the second evacuation, I received a text message saying 'Low lying parts of Mullumbimby should evacuate' but I did not know if my property was considered low lying or not. It would be good to have a standardised method of communication about flood levels and for people to be able to access information about the land height of the property they live on in relation to the flood level, so they can work out how a flood of a particular height will affect them. While evacuated, it was reported that waters reached a certain height at Federation Bridge, and I made a note of that and the height the water reached on my land, for future reference. But for the next evacuation there was no reporting regarding how high the water level became at Federation Bridge so I had no way to understand what the flooding meant for my property. Most people would not have known to make a note for future reference, so a

standardised way for people to understand flood heights and their impacts would be valuable.

1.3 Response to floods

- it would be good for emergency rescue services to be more cohesive and streamlined. We were rescued by kind civilians and it is not their fault that we were left stranded in the rain for a long period. But surely planning could be done to facilitate a practical rescue service that results in people being taken to an evacuation centre or somewhere where their needs will be taken care of.

- in addition, NDIA published on their website that they would fund up to \$3,000 for assistive technology replacement and repairs for participants. My wheelchair needed repair as despite it still working, many of the buttons had failed, it needed a service to clean and remove all the mud, and some of my tools to replace the tyre were lost in the mud. The bill came to over \$1,500. However, when I asked NDIA for the funding as promised on their website, they insisted that I use the funding already in my plan. This has resulted in an overspend and NDIA have not given assurances about what they will do about this. This seems to be false advertising of support on behalf of the NDIA. I also asked them if they could support me in any way due to the complications of evacuation without a wheelchair, needing to arrange a clean up without being able to do the physical work myself etc, but they could not offer any assistance, and instead created obstacles, such as insisting I contact them a certain way which was difficult without adequate internet reception.

Supporting documents or images
