

Institutions

November 2025



“I want everyone to know what life has been like for people like me. I want people to remember what happened to us, how we were shut away and forgotten, and I want people never to forget this. ... I want to make sure what happened to me will never happen to anyone again.” – Kim Walker, *Forgotten and Found* (2015).

Goal: For the community to understand how people with intellectual disability suffered in institutions and learn from the mistakes so that they are not repeated.

What CID wants

1. To gather, record and publicise an honest history of the lives and suffering of people with intellectual disability who lived in institutions.
2. To make sure governments, service providers, professionals and the community learn from the past so that institutional practices are not repeated.
3. For the NSW Government to say sorry to people who lived in institutions.
4. For former institutional sites to be used in a respectful way, in particular by creating sites of conscience.
5. For the NSW Government to ensure that any residential development includes best practice housing for people with intellectual disability.

Where we have come from

Until the 1980s, there was very little supported accommodation in the community for people with intellectual disability. The only option was large institutions run by the NSW Government and private organisations. Parents often felt they had no choice but to place their family member there.

Thousands of people lived in these very basic, controlled and unstimulating environments. There was a lot of abuse.

Following the Richmond Report (1983), which recommended moving away from institutional accommodation towards supported accommodation in the general community, the NSW Government began to gradually close institutions. People living in institutions moved into group homes and other supported accommodation in the community.

Nearly all disability institutions in NSW have been closed over the last 40 years.



Where things stand

- There is a lack of appropriate housing for people with intellectual disability. Housing is considered best practice if:
 - The overall development models promote Universal Design with cognitive, physical and sensory access and inclusion.
 - Homes for people with disability are integrated throughout the community, are focused on individuals' wants and needs and provide options beyond group homes.
- The NSW Government is now deciding what to do with former institutional sites. They have handed over Kooroowall-Undi/Peat Island to the Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council. Some of the options they are pursuing for other sites include housing developments and community uses.

Case study

When Theo was a young child, his parents struggled to meet his high support needs. There were no significant disability support services. Theo's parents reluctantly put him into a government institution.

The supports and activities in the institution were basic and built around staff routines rather than the residents' individual needs. When Theo showed challenging behaviour, the doctor at his institution prescribed him anti-psychotic medication. This medication caused Theo to become listless and develop repetitive involuntary movements, known as tardive dyskinesia. Quite often, Theo's boredom and challenges with communication was followed by him being aggressive. Sometimes, he was then locked in a bare "seclusion room".

In later years, doctors prescribed Theo with modern psychotropic medication, but it did not stop Theo's movement disorder. A psychologist wrote a basic behaviour support plan, but institutional routines and embedded staff practices limited its implementation.

After 40 years in the institution, Theo moved out into a group home, where he received individualised support. When he was out in the community or doing activities he liked, he seldom showed any behaviours that his support workers considered "challenging".

However, some institutional practices moved with Theo to the group home. Daily routines were built around the staffing roster rather than around what individuals wanted. Most outings in the community were in a group rather than what each person wanted.

Theo's experience illustrates how people with intellectual disability suffered in institutions, and emphasises the need to ensure that institutional practices do not continue in community-based settings.

CID's key achievements

For over 45 years, CID has been at the forefront of the movement for all institutions to be closed, and for people with intellectual disability to be supported to live within their communities. As a result, nearly all of the institutions have now closed, including all the large government institutions in which thousands of people with intellectual disability were previously segregated.

Where to from here

In partnership with Hunter Circles, Action for People with Disability and researchers from the University of Technology Sydney, CID is undertaking research on institutions and working with the NSW Government on the future use of institutional sites.

We are also working with the Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council, who have taken rightful ownership of the Kooroowall-Undi/Peat Island site where many people with intellectual disabilities lived and experienced abuse and neglect.

“Bad things happened to me. Bad things happened to other people too. I did not get any choice in where I lived. I did not get any choice in who I lived with. I had no say on what happened in my life. I had no privacy or freedom. There were some good staff. There were some bad staff who were really mean and cruel. All my adult life, I wanted to move out and live in a home of my own. Now, I live in my own apartment in the city. I am the king of my castle. I spend a lot of time with my family and have a big circle of support. Living in institutions is something I cannot forget. It affects me every day. I want the government to stand up for people who used to live in institutions.”

- Rob King, who lived in institutions for over 50 years.