

**Building Circles of Support with people with  
disability from diverse communities –  
Lessons from the Circles Widen Initiative**



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Thanks to:

All of the Peer Circle facilitators and peers who were interviewed for sharing their learnings and rich experiences.

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## Executive Summary

Diversity and Disability Alliance (DDAlliance) is a user-led disability support organisation, run by people with disability from diverse backgrounds with the support of families and allies. Established in 2014, DDAlliance's mission is to support people to live the lives they choose.

DDAlliance strives for an inclusive, diverse and just society where people with disability have voice, choice and control over their lives. DDAlliance aims to:

- maximise the knowledge, skills, and capacity of people with disability, their families and allies from diverse backgrounds;
- build the capacity of all communities to include people with disability; and
- share our collective lived experiences.

In 2020, DDAlliance received a 12-month capacity building grant of \$ 110,000 through the Information Linkages and Capacity (ILC) from the Department of Social Services to establish a Circles of Support program with peers from diverse communities. The project called Circles Widen aimed too:

- Recruit, train and mentor a network of up to 5 peer facilitators from diverse backgrounds who can work with people in their communities to establish a circle of support;
- Support up to 8 people with disability from a diverse background to start to establish and develop a circle of support;

- Work in partnership with Inclusion Melbourne and the [National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards \(COSAM\)](#) to develop resources and materials that are accessible for people with disability from diverse backgrounds.
- Promote the experiences and benefits of circles of support in building the informal support networks for people with disability in diverse communities.
- Build awareness in diverse communities of the benefits of the Circle of Support model.

### What is a Circle of Support?

A Circle of Support is a group of people that come together, on a regular basis, to assist a person with a disability to develop, support and action their goals and aspirations. (Nicholas et al., 2015, p. 7). A Circle of Support aims to formalise informal networks to provide authentic and meaningful support to a person with a disability.

A Circle of Support is:

- **About the person** – the person at the centre of a circle approves and directs everything that is done by a circle;
- **About choice**- the person is provided with opportunities to experience informed choice and an expansive range of experiences and options in all areas of their life.
- **Is about self-determination** - The individual has the ability and motivation to make choices without interference and external influence.

- **Is about building community connections** - the Circle acts as a bridge for creating opportunities for greater involvement in the community (Nicholas et al., 2015)

## **Benefits and challenges of Circles of Support**

There have been limited formal evaluations of circles of support (National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards, 2021; Nicholas et al., 2015), however, there are some emerging evidence of their benefits and challenges. Circles of support can bring together people who care about the person and have different skills to those of the family (Burke, 2006), increase social participation and inclusion (Wistow, Perkins, Knapp, Bauer, & Bonin, 2016), be cost effective and help with the financial management of support packages (Wistow et al., 2016), provide a safety net of support into the future (Resourcing Families, 2015), contribute to the emotional support network of people with disability at the centre of circle and their families and supporters (Wistow et al., 2016), and support a person to achieve their goals and aspirations. However, there are challenges in terms of recruiting and supporting people to be part of a circle (Family Service Toronto, 2003), goals for people at the centre of a circle being limited and sometimes unmet ((Dumas, De La Garza, Seay & Becker, 2002), issues of professional control and funding if a paid facilitator is employed (Neill and Sanderson, 2015), and supports not understanding their role as ‘supporter’ and not ‘decision maker’ (Inclusion Melbourne, 2016).

## Challenges of peer support for people with disability from CALD backgrounds

Disability is diverse and unique to each individual as it varies in type and complexity across the population. Approximately 4.4 million or 1 in 6 (18%) people have disability in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022) This number is likely to continue rising as the population ages. Some population groups may also experience higher rates of disability than others such as people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. (Zhou, 2016)

Nationally, people with disability from CALD backgrounds make up 25% of the disability population (this percentage is higher in NSW), however, 4% of NDIS participants are from CALD backgrounds (NDIA, 2016) which increased to 9.3% as at June 2018 (NDIA, 2018). People with disability from CALD backgrounds face intersectional disadvantage and discrimination that inhibits their ability to participate fully in their communities (Ethnic Disability Advocacy Centre, 2003).

## About the Evaluation

There is limited research on creating and establishing Circles of Support with people with disability from diverse backgrounds.

This evaluation seeks to:

- Identify the benefits and challenges of using circles of support for inclusion of people with disability from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- Explore what enablers are required in using circles of support for inclusion of people with disability from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

## Research questions:

1. What are the benefits of the Circles Widen program for people with disability from diverse backgrounds?
2. What are the challenges of the Circles Widen program for people with disability from diverse backgrounds?
3. What are the benefits of the Circles Widen program for circle members and peer circle facilitators?

## Methodology

The methodology (see About the Evaluation) included:

- a pre and post survey for participants to complete before and after the Circles of Support training they attended (see Appendix One).
- Qualitative interviews with up to 8 people to explore what had changed for people who had been involved in



the Circles Widen project. The participants interviewed for this study included:

- 4 Peer facilitators
- 3 People at the centre of a circle
- 1 Project leader
- A focus group with peer leaders

This sample was selected to offer a range of different perspectives on the outcomes and impact of the Circles Widen Project.

The evaluation is based on the analysis of survey and qualitative data from March to November 2021.

## Key Findings

The outcomes of the Circles Widen project included:

- The creation of a network of 5 Circle Facilitators who have worked alongside people with disability from diverse backgrounds to create 7 circles of support within 12 months.
- Built on the existing networks of DDAlliance and their peer facilitators without this, it would not have succeeded.
- Creation of a learning network of Circle Facilitators who are deeply engaged and committed to working alongside peers in their communities to support and foster circles of support with people with disability and families from diverse communities;
- The development of resources (including videos and stories) that showcase the positive impact of Circles of Support for people with disability and their families from diverse communities;
- Supporting peers from diverse backgrounds to build skills, knowledge, and capabilities, increase their confidence in speaking up, facilitating and supporting circles of support in their peer networks.
- Engagement of diverse communities on the benefits of Circles of Support for people with disability and their families from diverse backgrounds.
- Working with COSAM to create and build greater awareness in diverse communities about Circles of Support, and the systems and processes that create a

way of working with diverse communities that build their capacity.

- In June 2022, the Circles of Support Initiative won a [ZEST Award](#) which showcases innovation and excellence in the Community Sector covering the region of Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Canterbury Bankstown, Cumberland, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith, the Hills, and Wollondilly. This is a significant recognition of impact of the Circles Widen project in circles of support around people with disability from diverse backgrounds.

The challenges of the Circles Widen program included the time needed to engage with people with disability and their families from diverse backgrounds to understand what a circle of support is and how that could benefit the person. Furthermore, in some diverse communities, disability is seen as a private issue, creating a circle of support takes time and deep engagement with people.

The need for ongoing funding to employ people with disability from diverse backgrounds as Circles Facilitators to continue to engage diverse communities about the benefits of a circle of support is critical. This funding was also important in providing mentoring and support to peers from diverse communities who can work as Circles Facilitators within diverse communities.

## Recommendations

That DDAlliance continue to build and promote Circles of Support in CALD communities, that builds capacity and the connections of people to circles of support. This should include:

- Exploring options for philanthropic funding to attract ongoing funding:
- Exploring possibilities of using Circles of Support to attract NDIS funding for individual participants:
- That DDAlliance write an Easy Read summary of the outcomes of the project and promote this on the DDAlliance website.

That DDAlliance apply for additional funding to the Department of Social Services for additional 2-4 years of funding to promote Circles of Support to a range of diverse communities. This should include:

- funding of the Project Leaders and peers for the continuation of the Community of Practice ongoing training with peers from diverse communities;
- Development of resources in a range of languages to promote Circles of Support to people from diverse communities; and
- Employment of peer circle facilitators from diverse backgrounds to recruit and support the creation of the Circles of Support in diverse communities.

## Background

### About Diversity and Disability Alliance (DDAlliance)

Diversity and Disability Alliance (DDAlliance) is a user-led disability support organisation, run by people with disability from diverse backgrounds with the support of families and allies. Established in 2014, DDAlliance's mission is to support people to live the lives they choose.

DDAlliance strives for an inclusive, diverse and just society where people with disability have voice, choice and control over their lives. DDA aims to:

- maximise the knowledge, skills, and capacity of people with disability, their families and allies from diverse backgrounds;
- build the capacity of all communities to include people with disability; and
- share the collective lived experiences of people with disability and their allies.

DDAlliance believes that each person with disability has the right to:

- genuine voice, choice, and control of their lives;
- genuine and meaningful inclusion in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the communities they choose to belong to;
- have a collective voice which promotes our common experiences, and recognises and values the diversity of our communities; and

- to live in line with the principles and articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

DDAlliance employs people with disability from diverse backgrounds and supports a model of peer to peer education where people who participate in their initiatives get to learn more skills and knowledge, build their capabilities and practice these skills in their communities.

DDAlliance believes that:

- People with disability from CALD backgrounds and their families need access to capacity building initiatives to build their skills, knowledge of peer to peer support;
- All information should be provided in accessible formats that is culturally meaningful.

Since 2014, DDAlliance has undertaken several capacity building initiatives that include:

- Peer led Peer to Peer Cafes for peers to connect and learn skills;
- A range of training and mentoring for peers, such as Introduction to Peer Support training, Peer facilitator and peer mentoring training;
- Mentoring of peers; and
- The Circles Widen project.

The Circles Widen project built on the existing networks of DDAlliance and their peer facilitators without this, it would not have succeeded.

## What is a Circle of Support?

A Circle of Support is a group of people that come together, on a regular basis, to assist a person with a disability to develop, support and action their goals and aspirations. (Nicholas et al., 2015, p. 7). A Circle of Support aims to formalise informal networks to provide authentic and meaningful support to a person with a disability.

A Circle of Support is:

- **About the person** - the person at the centre of a circle approves and directs everything that is done by a circle;
- **About choice** - the person is provided with opportunities to experience informed choice and an expansive range of experiences and options in all areas of their life;
- **Is about self-determination** - The individual has the ability and motivation to make choices without interference and external influence.
- **Is about building community connections** - the Circle acts as a bridge for creating opportunities for greater involvement in the community (Nicholas et al., 2015)

## The benefits and challenges of a Circle of Support

The benefits of a circle of support (Henderson & Pryor, 2018) include:

- Bringing together people who care about the person and have different skills to those of the family (Burke, 2006);
- Increased social participation and inclusion (Wistow, Perkins, Knapp, Bauer, & Bonin, 2016);
- Support with the financial management of support packages (Wistow et al., 2016);
- Provide a safety net of support into the future (Resourcing Families, 2015);
- Contributing to the emotional support network of families and supporters as well as the person at centre of a circle of support (Wistow et al., 2016); and
- The person at the centre of the circle of support feels respected, empowered and supported to achieve their goals
- It is a cost-effective mechanism for drawing on community capacities, extending opportunities and positive outcomes to disadvantaged groups (Wistow et al., 2016)

Some of the challenges of a circle of support (Henderson & Pryor, 2018: 7) include:

- Difficulty locating and involving supporters (Family Service Toronto, 2003)



- Goals remaining unmet (Dumas, De La Garza, Seay & Becker, 2002)
- Goals being limited to options previously available to service users (Dumas et al., 2002)
- If a paid facilitator is employed, issues of professional control and funding can occur (Neill & Sanderson, 2015).
- Issues regarding the maintenance of professional boundaries if support staff join on a voluntary basis (Neill & Sanderson, 2015)
- Supporters not understanding their role as ‘supporter’ and not a ‘decision maker’ (Inclusion Melbourne, 2016)

The existing literature includes unpublished reports and personal stories presenting anecdotes and desirable outcomes of various models for organising circles of support, and there is little empirical evidence about effectiveness or outcomes for people with disability, their families and services (Wistow et al., 2016).

There has been limited formal evaluation or review of the ways that circles of support work in practice or organisational strategies necessary to develop and support them. Furthermore, there is also a lack of research on how circles of support can work for people with disability from diverse backgrounds.

## About the evaluation

Our methodology included:

- a pre and post surveys for participants to complete before and after the Circles of Support training they attended (see Appendix One).
- Qualitative interviews with 8 people to explore what had changed for people who had been involved in the Circles Widen project (See Appendix Two and Three).  
The participants interviewed for this study included:
  - 4 Peer facilitators
  - 3 People at the centre of a circle
  - 1 Project leader
  - A focus group with peer leaders

This sample was selected to offer a range of different perspectives on the outcomes and impact of the Circles Widen Project .

The evaluation is based on the analysis of survey and qualitative data from March to November 2021. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Leximancer a qualitative software analysis tool.

### Evaluation limitations

The study did not recruit people who were part of people's circle. This was largely because participants circles were in the beginning phases of forming, some people at the centre of circles did not feel comfortable asking people in their circle to be interviewed.

## Key Findings

### Capacity building of Circles Facilitators who are peers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds

The project recruited 5 people with disability (peer facilitators) from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and supported them to become Circle Facilitators. This was supported by two project leaders/mentors (see Table 1).

**Table 1 – Number of peer facilitators supported and cultural background**

Total	Male	Female	Cultural Background	Language Spoken at home
5 peers	2	3	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
			Lebanese	Arabic and English
			Indian Singaporean background	English
			Australian of Fijian heritage	English
2 Mentors	1	1	Lebanese	Arabic and English
			Australian	English

Peers described their motivation for becoming a circle of support facilitator as: seeing the potential of a circle of support, working alongside a person to support them to achieve a goal, as well as learning more about circles of support and using this in their own lives.

*“The idea of having people around you, of supporting you in your different goals, and achievements and aspirations moving forward.”*

Circle Facilitator

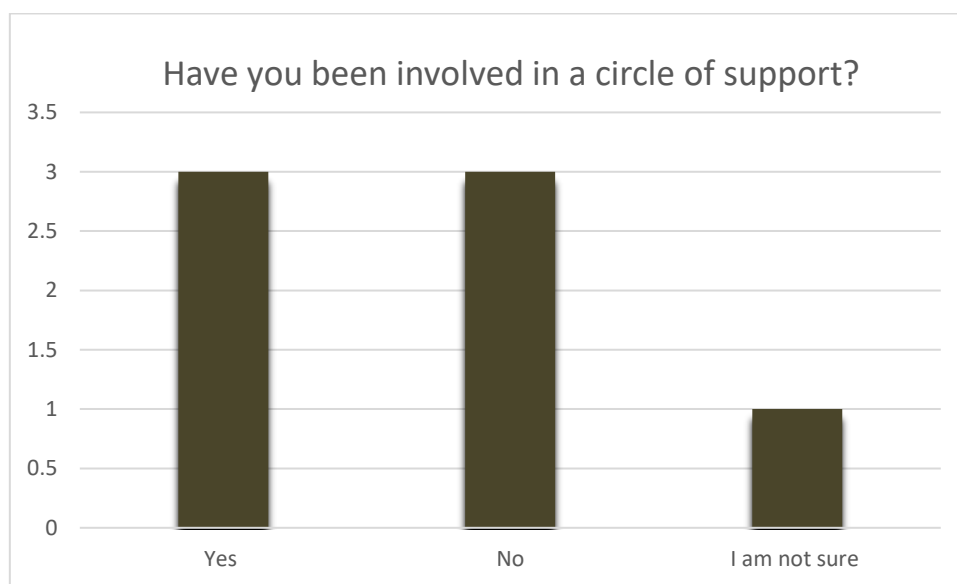
*“I was wanting to set up my own circles of support to support me to get access to the NDIS, because I am a person with disability, but unfortunately, I was declined a couple of years ago.”*

Circle Facilitator

Circles Facilitators reported that the training and mentoring provided throughout the project was extremely useful. Introductory training with peer facilitators on Circles of Support was delivered between February and June 2021. Circle facilitators were also mentored and supported by people who had been in a circle of support, to learn more about a circle, how it works, and to learn by observing, listening and watching. This was also supported by the project leaders in creating a community of practice, that met weekly to share experiences and learn from each other. The Project Leaders also provided individual one on mentoring to Circles Facilitators in working alongside people to create circles with specific communities.

Seven participants completed the training survey. Three people had been involved in a circle of support before attending the training and 3 had not and one was not sure (see Figure1)

Figure 1 – Have you been involved in a circle of support?



N-7

Participants said they would like to learn skills in how to create a circle of support:

*“I would like to learn, more about how family, friends, community groups and former work colleagues fit into the “Circle”*

*“To support persons with a disability to create a dream and achieve it with a circle of support”*

*“How to start and maintain a circle”*

Participants described what they learned at the training as learning what is a Circle of Support, how to facilitate an individual's circle, and the potential of Circles of Support.

*"I think the Circles of Support is an excellent initiative, and I see a lot of "potential possibilities" of other opportunities opening up. To learn and develop new skills. That there is the support there from family, close friends, relatives and peers can support the person around to achieve their goals and dreams."*

*[I learnt ]"What is a Circle of Support? What does the Circles of Support model mean to me? Listening to others about their experiences in Circles of Support, and who is in their circle?"*

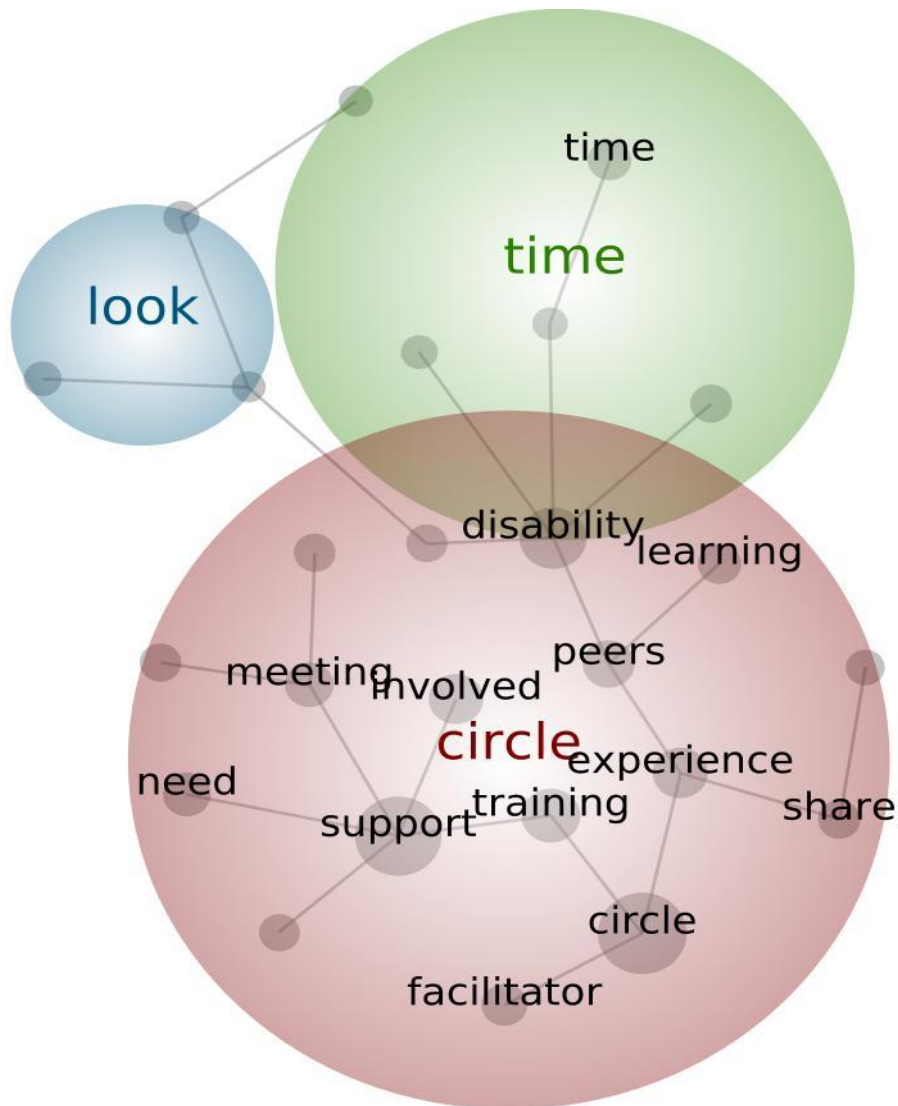
Participants reported that the training sessions were well structured and the content was excellent as was the support from the training facilitators. Things that could be improved for future training included: providing copies of the PowerPoint Slides and interpreters speaking slower when interpreting information for some participants.

Peers who are circles facilitators also reported that the weekly meeting with other peer facilitators and mentors, supported people to be accountable, share learnings as well as provide opportunities to express their frustrations. Peers reported being well supported by the Project Leaders and mentors.

Feedback from the Circle Facilitators, in one-on-one interviews and two focus groups, identified the importance of the Community of Practice and the peer facilitators group to talk about their experiences, identify challenges and support each other to work through challenges. The additional support and mentoring of the Project Leaders who have deep experience in creating and being part of circles has provided guidance, mentoring, and support for people.

The concepts that were most mentioned by the Peer Circles Facilitators in interviews are highlighted in Figure 1. The red circles are the concepts that are mentioned most frequently in the interviews, followed by the green and the blue circle. The words learning, involved, support, share, involved, training and facilitator were all the concepts related to the creation of a circle.

Figure 1 – Key concepts for Circle Facilitators Interviews





## Creation of Circles of Support in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities

From June 2021, peers who had been trained as circle facilitators started to do community engagement about circles through their existing peer networks, this created the opportunity to showcase stories about circles of support and share this through a range of networks.

The five peer facilitators attended 15 events to promote the Circles of Support to diverse communities between June and December 2022. The presentations by peer Circle Facilitators telling the stories of the potential of Circles of Support to communities. These included:

- peer cafes hosted by DDAlliance,
- presentation at the National Resource Centre for COSAM Circles of Support and Microboards ,
- presentation at the Council for Intellectual Disability,
- The Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association,
- to the African Community,
- and peer networks across NSW including in Wollongong and Coffs Harbour

Two Peer Circles Facilitators also created their own Circle of Support during the project and one peer shared their story with DDAlliance (see Phuong's story and Julie's story).

The engagement strategies that were led by the peer circle facilitators led to the creation of 7 circles of support for people from a range of cultural and language backgrounds (see Table 2).

**Table 2 – Circles of Support created and cultural background and language spoken at home**

<b>Total numbers of circles established</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Cultural Background</b>	<b>Language Spoken at home</b>
7	2	5	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
			Australian of Fijian heritage	English
			Lebanese	Arabic and English
			Chinese	Cantonese, Mandarin and English

The ongoing engagement of peer circle facilitators in their communities worked to create a significant interest in circles of support. As at January 2022, 7 people have expressed an interest in working with a peer facilitator to develop a Circle of Support.

**Table 3 – The waiting list for Circles of Support**

<b>Total numbers of people on the wait list for a circle</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Cultural Backgrounds</b>	<b>Language Spoken at home</b>
7	4	3	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
			Lebanese	
			Iraqi/ Assyrian	

## Building skills and confidence of peer facilitators and people at the centre of a circle

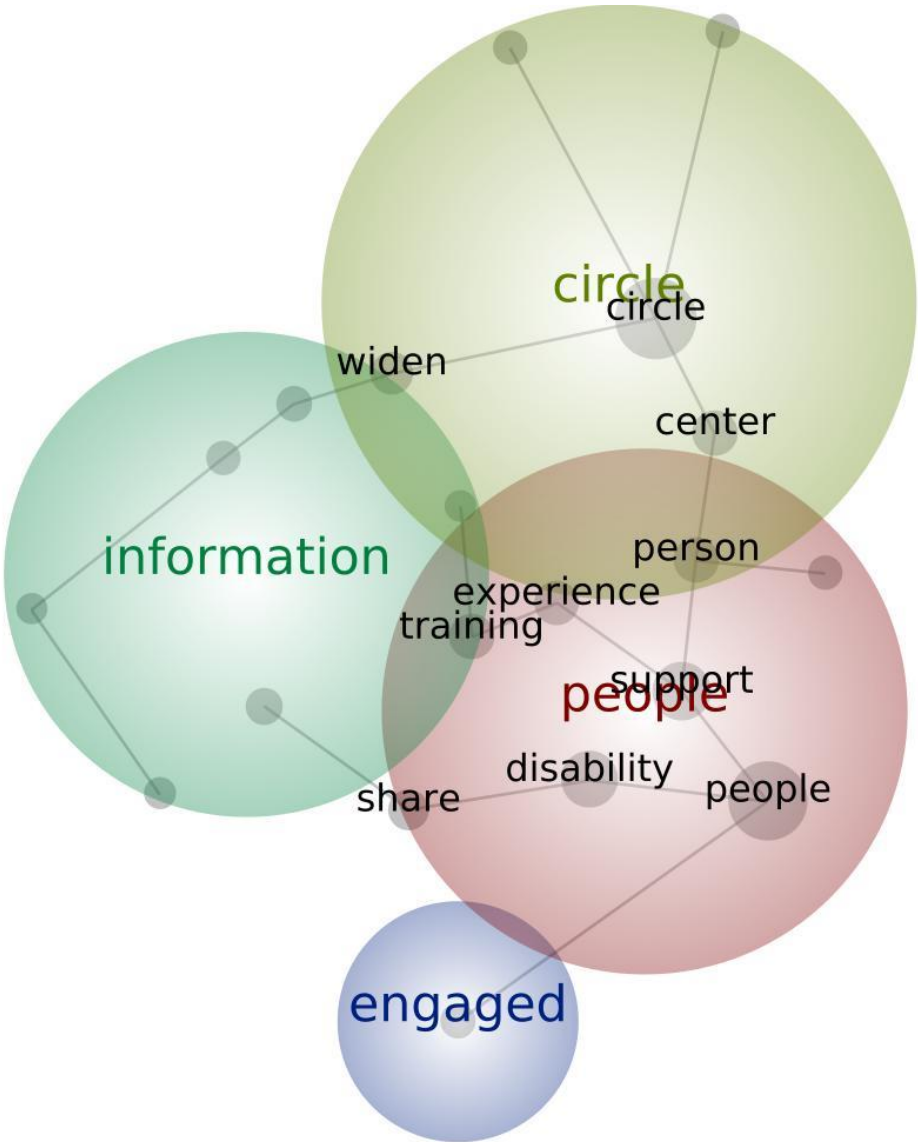
Peer Circle facilitators talked about how the experience of being a circles facilitator built their confidence and provided opportunities for skill development. This was supported by the project leaders and mentors and the weekly Community of Practice, that provided the opportunity for peer facilitators to connect and talk through successes but also the challenges of creating circles of support.

*“And thanks to the learning, the knowledge, the training from DDA, I'm in a better position to give them information to share with them about my own experience, and I can inspire them to open the gate for their own life or their relatives who have disability because they I can be used as a good model to inspire them”*

Peer Circle Facilitator

The key concepts that were highlighted in the interviews with people who were at the Centre of the Circle is at Figure 2. The red circle highlights the key concepts mentioned most frequently by interview participants which includes: people, share, support and disability, the second key concept was ‘circle’ (the olive circle) followed by information (the green circle) and engaged in the purple circle.

Figure 2 – Key concepts for people at the centre of a circle



The people interviewed at the Centre of a Circle described how things had changed for them since the Circle of Support had been created. Themes including seeing what is possible, having more confidence, not being afraid to ask for support, changing the relationships with family members who are part of a circle.

*“They have helped me see that there is a lot of potential and things that I could be doing. People in the circle are assigned tasks to do and we go away and do the work”*

Person at the Centre of the Circle

*“ I am not as afraid to ring up and ask people to work with me to do things that I want to do”*

Person at the Centre of the Circle

*“My sister goes away and does some research, we come back and talk about it in our Circle, it keeps me and the people in my circle accountable”*

Person at the Centre of the Circle

**Julie’s story** ( a woman with disability living in Canterbury/Bankstown in Sydney) highlights how the creation of a Circle of Support built a support structure and self-confidence.

## ***Julie's Story***

“I am a Canterbury Bankstown local resident, sudoku master, lover of all things sports, and an advocate for people with disability.

I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when I was ten months old. I'm looking to apply to the NDIS as a participant. At the moment I live with my sister and she assists me with everyday tasks, personal care, shopping and other activities.

What do I feel my life is like? I feel sometimes that like I'm a burden if that makes sense. Only because I feel I'd like to be more independent in my community. Just those everyday things that NDIS participants do. Also being able to live more independently and have that support.

My Circle has supported me to keep fighting. I have applied twice to join the NDIS and I've been knocked back twice. Even my Circle members are really confused. One of them said, “Julie, you've got what the NDIA consider a long term permanent disability and you don't have the NDIS.” They just shake their heads. Building confidence has been one of the outcomes of my Circle.

The main focus for me in having a Circle is talking about things that you wouldn't necessarily talk about. It's given me the opportunity to identify goals that I really want to achieve. The great benefit and purpose of having a Circle is that you've got that family support, peers, close friends and

people that you know in the community being part of your Circle. It's a safe place to talk about goals and ideas and other things as well. There's a lot of trust and respect there and what I like about it is that you are able to share things in a safe space.

One of the things we have discussed is about living independently. We also talk about paid work versus volunteer work. In the future we might talk about further education.

Having peers with disability in my Circle has been really good, really supportive in terms of identifying the goals I want to achieve, especially accessing the NDIS. My peers have knowledge and expertise and understand the language of the NDIS. For example, the questions they ask in the form: we recently had a meeting and they explained that the best way to go about it is to outline what you do on a daily basis, have a think about how would you go with your daily activities without support. They told me to think about my worst day. Sometimes I find that stuff really quite traumatising. I've come from the 'medical model' which is sort of "You can't do this and you can't do that," and the application form process is unfortunately in the medical model.



## **Objectives:**

My first objective was to identify goals. Including my first (and most urgent) goal: to access the NDIS. Circle members are mostly part of the scheme already, so have relevant knowledge and expertise. That is why I chose them to be part of my Circle.

As part of this discussion, we talked about various aspects of my life. For example, paid work, home modifications, ideally what support would be necessary to live independently, advocacy, community involvement and travel

## **Outcomes so far:**

Built self-confidence and communication skills. Become a paid facilitator and peer mentor. Being part of an inclusive evaluation research team (all paid positions after some less positive work history experiences).

1. One of my achievements has been the advocacy work that I do in my local community. I am involved with two advisory committees for Canterbury Bankstown Council. I've worked alongside them on projects such as the Disability Inclusion and Action Plan and I'm also involved in a couple of their reference groups for International Day of People with Disability events that we have in our local area.

2. In the last couple of months (now feeling a little more COVID-19 safe) I have increased independence and go out into the community e.g. attending a First Nation workshop,

cultural celebration, photo shoot and lunch to celebrate an award given to the Circles Widen project (ZEST Award for innovation).

The benefits of having a Circle is that you are the person at the centre of the circle. It has helped me to identify my goals. The people who are in my Circle assist me with my goals, also I know they are there to support me. The last 18 months has been a really good experience and that's why I'd like to continue my Circle. It is a safety net as well. It's sort of like a family."

## Challenging attitudes about disability in diverse communities

The Peer Circle Facilitators, Project Leaders and Mentors and one person at the centre of a circle described how the creation of circles in specific communities worked to challenge attitudes about people with disability and people's capabilities in diverse communities. This included creating circles of support that included family and other trusted members of their community to provide support that met the future goals of the Circles Participant. In creating the Circle, the person can be supported in a range of ways which can be shared across the circle network (which is often family and friends). This is highlighted by **Phuong's story** (a Vietnamese woman with disability who is a Peer Circle Facilitator and also has a circle of support) and **Julie's story** (a woman with disability and advocate)

## **Phuong's Story**

“I am going to tell you about the journey that has helped me become more confident and empowered. I love, cherish and value myself and have striven forward to change my life into a more active and happy one since I engaged in Diversity Disability Association (DDAlliance), a peer led organisation providing peer support.

More than three years ago, on an unfortunate night, I had a severe fall. Since then, I have been in a wheelchair, there was no other choice for me. I was feeling lost and suffering emotionally, confining my life within the four white walls of my house, which for me was like a prison because it was located in a quiet corner of a secluded street. My parents, who were then in their 90s, and my younger brother had to bring me items and ready-made food, but only once a week. Then my mobile phone fell on the bathroom floor and was not working. I was not able to connect with the outside world for one week. There was no television nor landline telephone. All that I was experiencing was just fear and fear. I had never expected that I could fall into that situation.

For one year after my fall, I lived in melancholy, idleness, sadness, crying and fear of everything. I was fearful that my parents could die anytime, that I had to live like this

forever. At that time, I had to depend on the care provided by my elderly parents and my younger brother. I could see that my Mum was very sad and quiet.

Then one day, I suddenly realized that my parents are too old to take care of me forever. They deserved a rest. They themselves were relying on walking sticks due to their old age, and my younger brother had to care for his own family. I was awakened by that insight. I tried my best to overcome the language barrier, made phone calls to get relevant information and applied for NDIS funding for support persons and also for wider social connections.

While waiting for my application to be processed, I accessed an information network in order to gain knowledge and relieve stress and boredom. About one year later, my niece came to help me and in the same year, I was introduced to DDA, an organisation supporting the disability community. Since then, I have engaged in DDA activities with other peers. We share experiences, inspire and provide support to each other.

I join in DDA 's weekly activities, including different group meetings and peer support training courses. Then came the rolling out of Circles Widen, a new pilot project undertaken by DDA. I am lucky to participate in this project and have opportunities to create a Circle of support for myself. This involved establishing and

building up the foundations for a well-managed model of support.

Firstly, there must be a network of close family relatives or friends or people who have some connections already, who know each other well. They must be trustworthy and when invited into the Circle, everybody works together with the spirit of volunteerism and unity. It is all the better if we can find several people who have skills in different areas to support the person with disability.

Secondly, building self-confidence is very important in that it will help with social interaction skills through a safe information network. Participation in group activities will help widen our vision.

Thirdly, self-awareness is essential in that we have to deal with whatever happens to us. Life is full of changes and we have to adapt to changes positively in order to achieve self-development.

I invited four people who care about me, including my siblings, close friends and kind hearted volunteers to support my life and meet my needs. Thanks to all these connections, I have been able to live more independently and problems have been addressed quickly. These people are my companions and supporters, each of them has their own duties and responsibilities.

We hold monthly or ad hoc meetings to discuss issues related to my needs. Thanks to that, I can look forward to achieving my bigger dreams. For example, if I want to buy a new car, there will be plenty of sources of information about car related makes, models, sizes, advantages and disadvantages. Everybody makes sure I can make the best informed choice.

If I want to go shopping, or eat at a restaurant, they will be the ones who provide information whereas I am the one who makes the decision. My brothers often discuss up-to-date health information with me, and I am the expert who knows what to choose.

Now I can see that my parents can enjoy peace of mind because I have settled my life and get support from people around me. I am very thankful to everybody for all the opportunities I have. Thank you all for teaching me how to fish so that I can feed myself.

Now the Circles Widen project has a team of professional consultants who work together to provide support to people with disability who want to have a Circle of Support for themselves. I have decided to introduce Circle Widens to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities. The knowledge and training I have, together with the benefits I am receiving from my own Circle will be utilised to support people in need.

I strongly encourage people with disability in the community to be in control of their life and to consider creating a Circle of Support for themselves. I would like to share with everybody the benefits, which include enhancing the values of living independently, leading to the opportunity of becoming the real master of your life. A Circle can boost your social skills and help you in achieving the dreams and goals you are longing for. You will be surrounded with happiness.

I am a facilitator, working side by side with the consultants of the project, as we work to connect all sources of support together. We also benefit from the language services of a very friendly Vietnamese interpreter.”



## Creating safe spaces for people from diverse communities connect and learn skills

Peer Circle Facilitators said that training and the one-on-one support from the mentors and project leaders was vital to support them in working to create circles of support with people.

The mentors and project leaders worked to support peer facilitators in creating circles with people and acted as mentors and provided guidance and advice.

Peer Facilitators talked about the way they were supported by the Project Leaders, the support was personalised and supporting them to build their skills and knowledge in creating and establishing a Circle.

The individual support was complemented by weekly group meetings where Peer Facilitators could share their experiences and discuss issues and challenges as they emerged. This model of support worked to support Peer Facilitators in translating the ideas they had learnt in training into their practice.

Providing the space for peers to reflect on their learnings as well as collectively share and discuss potential barriers was seen as a powerful enabler of peer led learning.

## Inclusion in community

The Peer Facilitators and people at the centre of the circles described how involvement in the Circles Widen project supported their broader inclusion in the community. Some examples included:

- A person at the centre of a circle attending a Disability Inclusion Access panel at the local Council, they participated in the event through encouragement from the peer Circle Facilitator and the people in their Circle of Support;
- A person at the centre of a circle reached out to a range of arts and crafts group to find out how they could attend local classes (one of the challenges was finding a venue that was accessible);
- Peer Facilitators attended a range of events to promote circles to diverse communities and also talk about the benefits of a circle of support. They become role models for Circles of Support in their specific community ( eg Vietnamese, Lebanese and or Arabic community); and
- Three Peer Facilitators have become leaders on Disability Inclusion Access Panels run and hosted by local councils, they are actively promoting inclusion in local communities.

## Challenges

The challenges in the project included engaging CALD communities to understand what a circle of support means, the time limited nature of the project, working with people at their pace in creating a circle of support.

In many diverse communities, disability is a private issue in families, creating a circle of support requires an understand of the cultural dynamics of disability in working with diverse families. The project team acknowledged this challenge by recruiting Peer Circle Facilitators from diverse cultural backgrounds and providing intensive support to understand and work with these dynamics.

Secondly, communicating what a circle is to a person and their circle takes time to build trust and relationships, people need time to ask questions and explore what it means for them and also for people who have experiences of circles (from diverse backgrounds) to keep talking about what it means. For example, some peer circle facilitators spent a lot of time just meeting with people who were interested in creating a circle and allowing people time to process the information. The strength of this approach was that peers from diverse backgrounds were talking to people in their diverse community.

Thirdly, engaging with people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities takes time, this project built on the existing networks of DDAlliance and the Peer Circle Facilitators connected with their existing diverse communities and without these networks this project would not have achieved the outcomes of the project.

The training and support of Peer Circle Facilitators requires more than one-off training. The one-off Circles of Support training provided a good introduction to what is a circle of support. This was further supported by weekly meetings of project leaders and mentors to support people to work with people to create and develop Circles of Support. The intensive support and mentoring was critical for supporting Peer Circle Facilitators in working with people to support them in creating a circle of support. The training followed by mentoring and supporting requires ongoing funding to build future sustainability of this project in the future.

## Conclusion/Future Directions

The Circles Widen Project has met all the outcomes of their project tender and far exceeded these outcomes.

DDAlliance has an existing record of understanding engagement in CALD communities and how to connect and build the capacity of peers from diverse backgrounds.

DDAlliance built on the peers existing networks of working with diverse peers with a disability to support this 12-month project, without these existing networks and relationships the project would not have achieved all of these outcomes.

The outcomes include:

- the creation of a network of 5 Circle Facilitators who have worked alongside people with disability from diverse backgrounds to create 7 circles of support within 12 months.
- Creation of a learning network of Circle Facilitators who are deeply engaged and committed to working alongside peers in their communities to support and foster circles of support with people with disability and families from diverse communities;
- The development of resources (including videos and stories) that showcase the positive impact of Circles of Support for people with disability and their families from diverse communities;
- Supporting peers from diverse backgrounds to build skills, knowledge, and capabilities, increase their

confidence in speaking up, facilitating and supporting circles of support in their peer networks.

- Engagement of diverse communities on the benefits of Circles of Support for people with disability and their families from diverse backgrounds.
- Working with National Resource Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards (COSAM) to create and build greater awareness in diverse communities about Circles of Support, and the systems and processes that create a way of working with diverse communities that build their capacity
- Supporting the inclusion of people with disability from diverse backgrounds in their local community.

In June 2022, the Circles of Support Initiative won a [ZEST Award](#) which showcases innovation and excellence in the Community Sector covering the region of Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Canterbury Bankstown, Cumberland, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith, the Hills, and Wollondilly. This is a significant recognition of impact of the Circles Widen project in circles of support around people with disability from diverse backgrounds.

## Recommendations

That DDAlliance continue to build and promote Circles of Support in CALD communities, that builds capacity and the connections of people to circles of support. This should include:

- Exploring options for philanthropic funding to attract ongoing funding:
- Exploring possibilities of using Circles of Support to attract NDIS funding for individual participants:
- That DDAlliance write an Easy Read summary of the outcomes of the project and promote this on the DDAlliance website.

That DDA apply for additional funding to the Department of Social Services for additional 2-4 years of funding to promote Circles of Support to a range of diverse communities. This should include:

- The funding of the Project Leaders and peers for the continuation of the Community of Practice ongoing training with peers from diverse communities;
- Development of resources in a range of languages to promote Circles of Support to people from diverse communities; and
- Employment of peer circle facilitators from diverse backgrounds to recruit and support the creation of the Circles of Support in diverse communities.

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## Resources

Diversity Disability Alliance has produced a video and some resources on Circles of Support in diverse communities. Find out more on the link below

<http://www.ddalliance.org.au/circles-widen.html>

Further information about Circles of Support can be found at the National Centre for Circles of Support and Microboards. Find out more on the link below

<https://cosam.org.au/>

## Appendix One Pre and Post Training Surveys



### Training Feedback Form – before the training

This form is about what you think **before** the training starts.

You should fill it in **before** the training starts.

You need to also sign the **consent form**.



The survey data will help DDA improve our circles of support training. A circle of support is a group of people who come together, to support a person with disability to develop and action their goals.

The data from this survey is anonymous and only combined findings will be reported on.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact Carrie Hayter on 0415 348 057 or via email at

[carriehayter@gmail.com](mailto:carriehayter@gmail.com).

You can get support to fill in this form.



Please contact Ace Boncato from DDA via phone on 0434 354 114 or via email [ace@ddalliance.org.au](mailto:ace@ddalliance.org.au) if you need support to fill it in.

## **PART 1 - Background Information**

This part has questions about you.

1. Are you: (Please tick)

- A person with disability
- A family member

2. Are you: (Please tick)

- Male
- Female
- Non binary/other

3. How old are you? (Please write below)

\_\_\_\_\_ years old

4. Which country were you born in? (Please write below)

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How would you describe your cultural background? (Please write below)

Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic groups or identities to which you feel you belong. For example, your cultural background might be Italian, Korean, Chinese, etc. It can be the same as your parents, grandparents, or it may be the country you were born in. You can choose more than one.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What language(s) do you speak at home? (Please write below)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? (Please tick)

Yes

No

8. Do you identify as: (Please tick)

Lesbian

Gay

- Bisexual
- Transgender
- Intersex
- Queer

9. How much do you think your own life experiences can be of value to others? (Please circle your answer)



**A lot**



**A little**



**Not at all**



**I don't know**

## **PART 2 - Circles of Support**

This part has questions about Circles of Support. A circle of support is a group of people who come together, to support a person with disability to develop and action their goals.

10. Have you been involved in a circle of support? (Please tick)

- Yes
- No

11. If, yes, how have you been involved? (Please write below)

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12. Have you done any circle of support training before? (Please tick)

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If yes –

a) What was the name of the training? (Please write below)

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b) Who ran the training? (Please write below)

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13. What do you want to learn in the training (Please write below)

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**Thank you for completing this survey**

## Post Training Survey



### Circles of Support Post Training Survey

This form is about what you thought of the circles of support training. You should fill it in **after** the training has finished.

You need to also sign the **consent form**.



The survey data will help DDA improve our circles of support training. A circle of support is a group of people who come together, to support a person with disability to develop and action their goals.

The data from this survey is anonymous and only combined findings will be reported on.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact Carrie Hayter on 0415 348 057 or via email at [carriehayter@gmail.com](mailto:carriehayter@gmail.com).

You can get support to fill in this form.



Please contact Ace Boncato from DDA via phone on 0434 354 114 or via email [ace@ddalliance.org.au](mailto:ace@ddalliance.org.au) if you need support to fill it in.

## **PART 1 - Background Information**

This part has questions about you.

14. Are you: (Please tick)

- A person with disability
- A family member
- Other

15. Are you: (Please tick)

- Male
- Female
- Non binary/other

16. How old are you? (Please write below)

\_\_\_\_\_ years old

17. How would you describe your cultural background?  
(Please write below)

Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic groups or identities to which you feel you belong. For example, your cultural background might be Italian, Korean, Chinese, etc. It can be the same as your parents, grandparents, or it may be the country you were born in. You can choose more than one.

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18. What language(s) do you speak at home? (Please write below)

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19. Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? (Please tick)

Yes

No

20. Do you identify as: (Please tick)

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Transgender

Intersex

Queer

21. How much do you think your own life experiences can be of value to others? (Please circle your answer)



**I don't know**

**A lot**

**A little**

**Not at all**

## **PART 2 – About the training**

This part has questions about Circles of Support.

22. Was the training easy to follow and accessible? (Please tick)

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure

23. Did you get the support you needed at the training? (Please tick)

- Yes
- No
- I am not sure

24. Did the peers at the training listen to what you had to say? (Please tick)

- They listened a lot
- They listened a little
- They did not listen
- I did not have anything to say

25. Did the facilitators listen to what you had to say? (Please tick)

- They listened a lot
- They listened a little
- They did not listen

I did not have anything to say

26. What did you learn at the training? (Please write below)

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27. Did the training change what you think about circles of support? How? (Please write below)

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28. What did you like about the training (Please write below)

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29. What did you now like about the training (Please write below)

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30. What would make the training better for you (Please write below)?

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31. Is there anything else you would like to tell us (Please write below)?

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**PART 3 – Further Support**

32. What further support do you need to be a circles facilitator?

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33. Do you have any further comments?

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Thank you for completing this survey. The information collected in this survey will form part of the evaluation of the Circles of Support project for DDA



## Appendix Two – Qualitative Interview Questions Circles Facilitators

### Interview Schedule for Circles Facilitators

#### Project Name: Exploring the benefits and challenges of Circles of Support

Focus Area	Examples of questions and prompts
<b>Participant Introduction</b>	<p>The Diversity Disability Alliance are doing some research.</p> <p>Research is asking people what they think and using this information to change things.</p> <p>This research is about what people think about circles of support. A circle of support is group of people that come together, on a regular basis, to assist a person with a disability to develop, support and action their goals and aspirations.</p> <p>You have been given a copy of the consent form for the research. I will go through the consent form with you.</p> <p>It should take up to 45 minutes for this interview. You can stop at any time if you are uncomfortable.</p>
<b>About you</b>	<p>Can you tell me a bit about you?</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where were you born or where do you live?</li> <li>• What you like to do?</li> <li>• How would you describe your cultural background?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Involvement in Circles of Support</b></p>	<p>How have you been involved in circles of support?</p> <p>Why did you choose to become involved in a circle of support?</p> <p>Prompt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wanted to learn more</li> <li>• I was curious about how circles of support work?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Benefits and challenges of Circles of Support</b></p>	<p>What is good about being involved in a circle of support?</p> <p>How have things changed for you since you have been involved in circles of support?</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel more confident</li> <li>• I feel more confident to speak up</li> <li>• I feel more connected to people</li> <li>• I don't think anything has changed for me</li> </ul> <p>What could be better about circles of support?</p> <p>What makes circles of support hard?</p> <p>What don't you like about circles of support?</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I need more support to facilitate a circle</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support provided by DDA</b></p>	<p>How has the Diversity Disability Alliance supported you in your role as a Circles Facilitator?</p> <p>What other support could have been provided to you?</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I needed some more support or training</li> <li>• I needed to talk to other peers</li> </ul>

<p><b>Engagement of people with disability from CALD communities in Circles of Support</b></p>	<p>What needs to happen to support circles of support for people with disability from CALD backgrounds?</p>
<p><b>What is it like to live with a disability?</b></p>	<p>Can you tell me a bit about what it is like to live with a disability?</p> <p>What are the good things?</p> <p>What are the things that are hard?</p> <p>Who do you go to to talk about disability things?</p> <p>What role do you think a circle of support could play in supporting a person with disability ?</p>
<p><b>Any other comments</b></p>	<p>Do you have any other comments or questions</p> <p>Thank you for participating in this interview</p>

## Appendix Three– Qualitative Interview Questions for people at the centre of a circle

### Interview Schedule for People at the Centre of a Circle

#### Project Name: Exploring the benefits and challenges of Circles of Support

Focus Area	Examples of questions and prompts
<p><b>Participant Introduction</b></p>	<p>The Diversity Disability Alliance are doing some research.</p> <p>Research is asking people what they think and using this information to change things.</p> <p>This research is about what people think about circles of support. A circle of support is group of people that come together, on a regular basis, to assist a person with a disability to develop, support and action their goals and aspirations.</p> <p>You have been given a copy of the consent form for the research. I will go through the consent form with you.</p> <p>It should take up to 45 minutes for this interview. You can stop at any time if you are uncomfortable.</p>
<p><b>About you</b></p>	<p>Can you tell me a bit about you?</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where were you born or where do you live?</li> <li>• What you like to do?</li> <li>• How would you describe your cultural background?</li> </ul>

<p><b>What is it like to live with a disability?</b></p>	<p>Can you tell me a bit about what it is like to live with a disability?</p> <p>What are the good things?</p> <p>What are the things that are hard?</p> <p>Who do you go to to talk about disability things?</p>
<p><b>Involvement in Circles of Support</b></p>	<p>How have you been involved in circles of support?</p> <p>Why did you choose to become involved in a circle of support?</p> <p>Prompt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wanted to learn more</li> <li>• I was curious about how circles of support work?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Benefits and challenges of Circles of Support</b></p>	<p>What is good about being involved in a circle of support?</p> <p>How have things changed for you since you have been involved in circles of support?</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel more confident</li> <li>• I feel more confident to speak up</li> <li>• I feel more connected to people</li> <li>• I don't think anything has changed for me</li> </ul> <p>What could be better about circles of support?</p> <p>What makes circles of support hard?</p> <p>What don't you like about circles of support?</p>

	<p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I need more support to facilitate a circle</li> </ul> <p>What role do you think a circle of support could play in supporting a person with disability ?</p>
<b>Support provided by DDA</b>	<p>How has the Circles Facilitator supported you in your circle?</p> <p>What other support could have been provided to you?</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I needed some more support or training</li> <li>• I needed to talk to other peers</li> </ul>
<b>Engagement of people with disability from CALD communities in Circles of Support</b>	<p>What needs to happen to support circles of support for people with disability from CALD backgrounds?</p>
<b>Any other comments</b>	<p>Do you have any other comments or questions</p> <p>Thank you for participating in this interview</p>