

# 30 years of Community Guardians



Office of the Public Advocate

# Beginnings

OPA was set up at a time when there was growing recognition that people with disabilities were generally excluded from society, frequently living in institutions with little or no contact with the wider community, and that this situation must change.

Starting in 1989, the Community Guardianship Program is part of the responsibility of the Public Advocate to find and appoint a suitable person to act as guardian when the Public Advocate has been appointed as guardian. With the Voluntary Guardianship Scheme (as it was originally called) in place, the Public Advocate could delegate that authority to either a paid guardian working at OPA or to a voluntary guardian in the Victorian community. The voluntary guardians helped to break down the isolation that so many people with disabilities experienced and gave the community the opportunity to accept responsibility and be involved in the lives of Victoria's forgotten citizens.

Through their work with individuals, voluntary guardians also brought systemic problems to OPA's attention which could then be acted on by OPA. By 1991, there were 30 community guardians

and 30 represented persons in the program.

The program had a full-time coordinator whose role was to recruit, train and support the Community Guardians. There was also an Advisory Group that provided policy direction and support and anchored the program within both the community and OPA.

At first, the initial work on a case was undertaken by a paid guardian who passed the matter to a Community Guardian for completion. However, by 1993, Community Guardians were directly allocated from the beginning. This benefitted the person with a disability who did not have to get to know a different person, gave greater satisfaction to the guardian and demonstrated that Community Guardians were able to carry out the full responsibilities of guardianship. OPA was able to report in 1994 that the program had attracted a wide range of efficient, compassionate and well-organised guardians.

## The middle years

Ten years on, a decision was made to rotate the coordinator position, thus giving the opportunity for OPA guardians to take on the role. The number of guardianship orders increased and a waiting list had to be introduced. Community Guardians, along with all guardians at OPA, responded by ensuring that, where possible, cases were closed promptly when there was no longer a need for guardianship. By 2014, there were 73 Community Guardians. The highest number of matters was 119 in 2016. However, it was recognised that such large numbers were not sustainable with the increased accountability and documentation required by the current guardianship standards.

### Cover artwork

*Beyond Blue* by Caroline Klein 2018

**Artist's statement** I find it relaxing to meet with friends and painting is a challenge. My favourite colour is blue and in my life experience nothing is as bad as you think it is going to be.

## The road ahead

In March 2020, a new Guardianship Act will come into effect. The Act has an explicit focus on human rights, individual advocacy and the involvement of members of the community in the work of OPA.

Following a review that concluded in August 2019, in the future the program will be known as the Community Advocacy and Guardianship Program. In addition to providing guardianship, the Community Advocate Guardians will also be able to take on individual advocacy and augment the work of OPA advocate guardians in both metropolitan and rural areas.

OPA is deeply grateful to the Community Guardians who have done so over more than 30 years and looks forward to supporting the community advocate guardians in upholding and promoting the human rights and dignity of all people with disabilities in the community into the future.

Honouring our history,  
looking to our future

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Victoria's Community Guardianship Program is unique in Australia. It was set up as part of the vision of the first Public Advocate, Ben Bodna AM, to give a represented person someone from their community who cared about them and would build a relationship of trust, giving their time and energy freely without any payment.

Thirty years on, Community Guardians continue to give this precious gift to people with a disability on behalf of the community. The Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) honours them and values all that they do in building a community of respect and inclusion for people with disabilities.

*Colleen Pearse*  
Public Advocate

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**Office of the Public Advocate**

Level 1, 204 Lygon Street

Carlton, Victoria 3053

DX 210293 Tel: 1300 309 337

TTY: 1300 305 612 Fax: 1300 787 510

[www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au](http://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au)