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# Here to help

## **In March 2020, Inspector Chris Allen set out on a mission to amplify the voices of his local disability community.**

But when COVID-19 began to spread across the state, the former Community Engagement and Road Policing Inspector was forced to go back to the drawing board.

"We were just about ready to go," Insp Allen said.

"I'd spent several months working with my colleagues and external stakeholders to set up a series of forums for members of the community with intellectual or physical disability.

"The program was designed for residents of the Moreland, Moonee Valley and Hume local government areas and was going to be delivered in-person at Fawcner Police Station."

But things just didn't go to plan.

"When the first state-wide lockdown was announced, it quickly became clear that the forums would have to be postponed," Insp Allen said.

"Like everyone else, we weren't sure what the future held – but what we were sure of was that we wanted to come up with something new."

Within just a few weeks, Insp Allen and his colleagues had gathered the names and contact details of almost 60 locals with disability.

A team of 15 police officers was then assembled to conduct regular 'check-ins' with each and every person.

"We contacted these members of the community via phone," Insp Allen said.

"This allowed us to gauge how the pandemic was affecting them and listen to their community safety concerns without coming into physical contact."

While some individuals used the check-ins as an opportunity to bring officers' attention to issues such as poor street lighting, others just answered the phone for a chat.

"We didn't make the calls with any expectations," Insp Allen said.

"We just wanted to make sure members of the disability community knew we were there to listen."

The outreach initiative was so successful that the Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) presented Insp Allen with the 2021 Ben Bodna award for 'Outstanding Police Service to People with Disability' in March this year.

Victorian Public Advocate Dr Colleen Pearce told Police Life that the award was well-deserved.

"The human stories behind all of the recipients' work is incredibly moving," Dr Pearce said.

"It showcases police in an impressive light which gives a lot of confidence in the system and its evolution towards a more compassionate approach to people with a disability."

But Victoria Police's connection with the OPA extends further than this award.

The organisation works closely with the OPA to deliver a range of disability services – including the Independent Third Persons (ITP) program.

ITPs provide assistance to members of the disability community during the police interview and statement-taking process.

They work with people of all ages and are trained to support individuals with various cognitive impairments, such as an intellectual disability, acquired brain injury, dementia or mental illness.

"The ITP program is a human rights safeguard for members of the disability community," Dr Pearce said.

"Whether an individual is a witness, victim or alleged offender, they should have access to this service."



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Because of this, ITPs are in high demand across the state.

"Victoria Police called for an ITP more than 3800 times this year," Dr Pearce said.

"But we're anticipating next year will be the program's busiest year since its launch 34 years ago.

"To prepare for the projected increase in requests, the OPA will continue to work with Victoria Police to help grow the number of ITP volunteers across the state."

That's where Victoria Police's Disability Portfolio team comes in.

Sitting within the Priority and Safer Communities Division (PSCD), the Disability Portfolio acts as an internal point of contact for all enquiries relating to the disability community.

"The portfolio's responsibility is to raise police capability in engaging with members of the community who have an intellectual or physical disability," PSCD Commander Lisa Hardeman said.

"Part of our work is developing action plans and guidelines to ensure members of the disability community are provided with the support and adjustments they need, both within the organisation and the community at large.

"But working directly with frontline employees is another big part of what we do – whether it's to help deliver services like the ITP program or to assist stations with training days."

As chairperson of the Disability Portfolio Reference Group, Cmdr Hardeman is also a proud supporter of employee initiatives designed to serve the disability community.

"The outreach program led by Insp Allen was fantastic," she said.

"It's work like this that demonstrates Victoria Police's continued commitment to support and learn from members of the disability community."

Despite only starting in his new role as Whittlesea Local Area Commander 12 months ago, Insp Allen has already reached out to local disability services to form connections.

"I haven't been here long, but I've already been fortunate enough to meet and spend time with members of the disability community at local events and gatherings," Insp Allen said.

"Engaging with these individuals is one of the best parts of my job and it's something I'm really passionate about.

"So I can't tell you how fantastic it is to work alongside so many others who feel the same way."



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Image **Connecting with community**

**01** Insp Allen spending time with members of the disability community at Lifetrobe Lifeskills

**02** A young male with intellectual disability tries on Insp Allen's ballistics vest.

**03** Insp Allen pictured with his 2021 Public Advocate Award for Outstanding Police Service to People with Disability.

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