



## Blind Citizens Australia

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### Media Release

## Fifield Snubs People Who are Blind or Vision-impaired

Minister for Communications, Mitch Fifield continues Australia's shameful track record of keeping Australians who are blind or vision-impaired waiting to find out when they will have the right to enjoy the full experience of television which sighted viewers take for granted.

Audio description, (AD), is available in all other OECD countries, yet here in Australia, people who are blind or vision-impaired are denied it because the Federal Government refuses to regulate for its implementation as they did many years ago for captioning for those who are deaf or hearing-impaired.

AD brings television to life for people with little or no sight. It is a second audio track that can be turned on or off (like captions) which describes the important visual elements of a television program. It is essential for providing equality to viewers who are blind or vision impaired. It is relatively inexpensive to deliver and, in fact, is already integrated into many of the programs that are imported from overseas. Even Australian productions such as Neighbours and Home and Away are produced with AD for overseas release.

Following two trials of audio description on the ABC, the Government established a working group to explore options for the permanent provision of AD on Australian television last April.

The working group's report, (finalised in December), was only released yesterday, along with a short statement pointing to the need for additional "policy work" but with no indication of the time-frame or proposed pathway to facilitate the implementation of a service.

Emma Bennison, CEO of Blind Citizens Australia said that people who are blind or vision-impaired have run out of patience.

"Blind Citizens Australia and other organisations across the blindness sector have been advocating for twenty years to get an AD service on Australian television. We have shown extraordinary patience and a willingness to work collaboratively with Government through the various trials and consultation processes, but twenty years is too long, and we will no longer allow Governments to ignore us," she said.

“We are angry that we are being treated as second class citizens. We are frustrated that we are being asked to continue waiting, while our friends and colleagues around the world enjoy access to AD and have done for many years. We are perplexed by the fact that we are being treated less favourably than our Australian friends and colleagues who are deaf or hearing-impaired who enjoy access to captioning right now. Meanwhile, we are expected to patiently wait and to believe our Government when they tell us it is difficult to figure out how to deliver a service which has been available overseas for many years,” said Ms Bennison.

“By releasing this report without a road map for implementation of an AD service, the Minister continues to disrespect people who are blind or vision-impaired and insults our intelligence as voters.”

Ms Bennison says that audio description profoundly impacts the ability of people who are blind or vision-impaired to participate fully in the cultural and social life of their communities.

“When I watch a movie with Audio Description at the cinema or on DVD I am included. Things like being able to know the details about scenery (the beach, a lush forest, a crowded restaurant), backdrops, features of individual characters (clothing, hair colour, age), their gestures, and other visual information that gives context to a program, and its characters’ words and actions, make a show as rich and vibrant as it is for a person with full sight. It also means I can take part in conversations about the movie with my children, with friends or at work. In short, I am no longer excluded,” she said.

As the national voice of people who are blind or vision-impaired, Blind Citizens Australia calls on the Minister to demonstrate the commitment to people with disability that his Government espouses, by enlightening us as to the nature of the policy work which still needs to be done and when we can expect an AD service on Australian television. We stand ready to work collaboratively with the Federal government, but only when we can be confident that the Minister is doing more than paying lip service to our right to watch television.

For more information please contact:

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## **Background Info**

### **Who is Blind Citizens Australia?**

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the national organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired and is recognised as the major peak representative body for this constituency. Since 1975, BCA has provided information, peer support, individual and systemic advocacy, and consultancy services to its members and the wider community.

BCA Branches act as local representative groups and provide opportunities for social interaction for members. It has grown to an organisation of 3000 individual members and seven affiliated organisations.

Our mission is “to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs”.

With over forty years of history, BCA has worked tirelessly “To Change What it Means to be Blind” both for Australians who experience vision loss and for blind and vision impaired people throughout the world.

Specifically this has included:

- providing peer support
- providing individual and systemic advocacy
- facilitating information exchange
- empowering its members
- promoting positive community attitudes
- striving for high quality and accessible services which meet individual needs
- promoting research into the causes and amelioration of the impact of blindness and vision impairment

As the national voice of people who are blind or vision impaired BCA has a seat on many Government, commercial and community sector advisory bodies. BCA’s individual advocacy service is available to all Australians who experience vision loss. With a focus on issues that impact on the individual because of their blindness/vision impairment, BCA works both directly and through specialist community advocates, to resolve issues in a constructive and educative manner and draws on more formal processes where a mutually agreeable solution cannot be found.

BCA has been an active member of the World Blind Union at both the World and Regional levels since its creation in 1984. Over that period two of the senior members have held office as World President and several more have served on the World and Regional Executives and various standing committees. In November 2000 BCA was the lead organisation for the hosting in Melbourne of the WBU 5th General Assembly. BCA has also lead capacity building projects in Fiji and Vietnam and has participated in many international conferences and forums.

In association with its policy development and advocacy work, BCA has undertaken a range of blindness related research projects. Several of these resulted in published papers.

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