

Case Study 4

Arts for everyone

Accessibility for profoundly disabled arts and culture patrons.

Country Arts WA in partnership with the National Disability Services WA.

Ensuring access to a venue is only the first step in ensuring the inclusiveness of an event. Some people with severe and profound disabilities need to be accompanied by a full time carer when attending arts performances.

Through the DAII Pilot Project, Country Arts WA and the National Disability Services WA partnered to introduce the Companion Card into regional areas of Western Australia.

The Companion Card allows people with a significant disability, who require lifelong attendant care, to participate in community activities and events. Cards are presented at participating organisations where cardholders are not required to pay an admission fee for their companion who is providing attendant care.

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Photo courtesy of Country Arts WA

As a facilitator rather than an arts organisation, Country Arts WA approached the DAII Pilot Program from the perspective of spreading awareness and opening up the programs they facilitate to a more inclusive audience.

“Our project was a bit different from most of the DAII projects in that it was a way of introducing our partners into our already established program in a promotional capacity. It was a recognition that not only could we do more, but that the community organisations that we deal with could be encouraged to work with the Companion Card program,” explains Philippa Maughan, Country Art’s Performing Arts Touring Officer.

The first step

Country Arts WA recognised that arts projects need more than just physically accessible venues to be inclusive. People with severe disabilities need around the clock care and often cannot attend artistic and cultural events partly because of the financial strain on their carers.

Country Arts WA then set about connecting with their partners in various regional and rural areas to increase awareness and encourage affiliation with the Companion Card program.

“The intent of our program was that we would have the community presenters (hosts of touring performance companies) sign up to the Companion Card program and the cardholders would buy their tickets with their

Companion Card, so the cardholder pays a concession price and their companion is free,” Ms Maughan says.

Regional access

As part of their focus on regional areas, Country Arts WA promoted the Companion Card through a tour of a theatre performance called **The Gun** by kompany M to regional areas of Western Australia.

“We were able to meet people and presenters and talk to community groups along the way, raising regional awareness of the Companion Card program and attracting more affiliates.”

As a promotional tool, Country Arts WA hosted a function at a performance by pianist David Helfgott in Albany and invited potential affiliates of the program so they could meet a family whose lives have been helped by the Companion Card program.

“We invited a local Companion Card holder, Natalie, with her family as well as potential affiliates so they could hear Natalie’s family speak about how they use the Companion Card and how it improves Natalie’s quality of life. And again, there were some services and venues around Albany that signed up as a result of that,” explains Ms Maughan.

Personal experiences

Natalie’s mother, Debbie explains that the advent of the Companion Card has opened up many more possibilities for Natalie and her family.

“Our goal as a family is to make sure Natalie has a happy life and experiences as much of life as she possibly can,” says Debbie. “Before the Companion Card was introduced, Nat would go out with a carer but it was expensive with the cost of the carer’s wage and entrance fees to venues. As a result Nat didn’t go out much with the carer, they mainly stayed at home.

“We definitely try more things now with Nat because if we have to leave unexpectedly, the cost of entry doesn’t matter as the companion with Nat doesn’t have to pay.”

Country Arts WA has also reviewed the way that the organisation supports programs, ensuring that events are held with inclusion in mind.

“We’re an affiliate with the Companion Card program and in our touring venues we encourage people to become affiliates. We have plans to include a clause in our contracts that require a funding recipient that is hosting a ticketed event to recognise the Companion Card. Our role has been as an instigator and awareness raising body. We’re reminding our clients that there are people in their community that need this service,” says Ms Maughan.

Venues in larger regional centres are already on board due to further advocacy and presentations.

“A presentation was made to the Country Arts WA Board and then to the CircuitWest network which are the major venues in WA, and they became Companion Card affiliates. Because the towns where they are based are larger centres with disability service coordinators and support services,

there are more cardholders in those towns and it's been of benefit to more people," says Ms Maughan.

For Debbie and Natalie, the Companion Card has brought many more benefits already.

"We have had some great experiences together using the Companion Card," Debbie explains. "We do generally go out more now that we have this card. For example, when we go to Perth to visit family, we always make time to take Nat to the movies. We choose something that we feel Nat would like or enjoy, even though we don't particularly feel this is what we want to watch, it doesn't matter because the companion gets in for free. She doesn't tend to watch TV much, but she loves going to the cinema. She seems to watch part of the movies, and she reacts to the action on screen. It's great to see her clap her hands and have a giggle even when no one else is. Quite often the family would rather watch Nat's reactions than the actual movie as she is having such a great time."

Outline of project

To support the attendance and participation of people with disabilities at live performance in regional WA through the Companion Card program.

Partners

Country Arts WA helps regional communities to access culture and the arts as part of their community development. They are an independent not-for-profit organisation and receive funding to deliver programs on behalf of the State and Federal Governments.

National Disability Services is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations.

Outcomes

A larger group of Companion Card affiliates in regional and rural WA and plans for a new clause in Country Arts WA funding contracts to ensure that the Companion Card is recognised at the funded event.