

FIJI DISABLED PEOPLES ASSOCIATION ADVOCACY WORKSHOP

In May 2011, 13 women and young people who are members of Fiji Disabled Peoples Association (FDPA) attended a two week advocacy course run by FDPA and Robyn James from Australia Pacific Islands Disability Support (APIDS). Most funding for the workshop expenses (transport and food for participants, administration costs) was provided by APIDS.

Participants came from all over the main island of Fiji – Viti Levu – and represented Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA), United Blind Persons (UBP), Spinal Injuries Association (SIA), Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD), FDPA Womens Group, FDPA Youth Group, and branches in Ba, Cuvu, Ra, Sigatoka and Tavua.



Participants at the end of Week One of the Course

Participants learnt about how to speak up about their rights- rights to take part in all parts of community life that many people without disabilities do not even think about. They learnt skills such as how to talk to people from government and NGOs, how to write advocacy letters to papers and to organisations & how to speak in public.

Participants worked in four groups investigating a different issue and practicing the skills learned. The issues were education, sports, access to buildings and transport and health.

Writing advocacy letters to the daily newspapers was an important daily activity. There are two English daily's and one of them, The Fiji Times, was very supportive of our letter writing. Over the two weeks of the course they published 19 letters. Among the issues raised were:

We are learning that all people with disabilities should work as a team

- applauding the publicity of a new system of traffic lights “which will feature buzzers for the handicapped and blind”, while suggesting the use of more positive language
- mental health discrimination
- poor road conditions in villages and in Suva
- the need for subsidies for people with disabilities using taxis
- difficulties in finding employment as a person with a disability
- sign language interpreters on a free to air television station, Mai TV

I am excited to have my letter and name in the paper

The Fiji Sun published one letter on mental health discrimination.

On the last day, participants in their four groups gave 15-30 minute PowerPoint presentations to the group. This was followed by a closing ceremony attended by members of FDP, FAD, SIA and UBP. The chief guest was Christina Parasyn from AusAID. Christina has a newly created position based in Suva, with the responsibility of developing disability inclusive practices in all aspects of AusAID's work in the Pacific.

When asked what they gained from the course participants said:

- *How to work together with people of different abilities*
- *Learn about going out to the public*
- *Learning more about advocacy, especially the principles*
- *Having the confidence to write letters to the editor*
- *Speaking up on the rights of people with disabilities*



Participants working in groups to plan their presentations