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Blind Citizens Australia

**Position Statement on Audio Description on Australian Television**

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The Australian Government has an obligation to provide information, including information that is broadcast on television, in formats that are accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired. This obligation is referenced under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [Article 9, Article 21, and Article 30], the federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992 [Section 24], and the National Disability Strategy [Outcome area 1).

The availability of audio description is the only equitable means of providing access to television content for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. Audio description (AD) is a service that involves the verbal narration of visual elements such as scenes, settings, actions, costumes, characters’ names and on-screen text, including credits. Audio description makes it easier for people who are blind or vision impaired to follow what is happening during a television programme; particularly when there are large sections of visual only content. When accessed on broadcast television, audio description can be turned on or off as needed and does not interrupt the experience of viewers who do not require the service.

Audio description is already available on broadcast television in many other developed nations, including the UK, Canada, USA, and New Zealand. While some of these countries currently broadcast Australian programmes with audio description, this content is still not accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired in Australia.

The Australian Government must commit to the establishment of a permanent audio description service on Australian television to ensure it is meeting its human rights obligations to people who are blind or vision impaired and keep up with international trends in disability access. Providing audio description solely via an online catch-up service will not be an adequate solution to this problem. This approach would not allow a person who is blind or vision impaired to watch a program in real time with family or friends; nor will it enable them to take part in discussions about the program immediately following its broadcast. There are also a number of technical barriers that prevent many people who are blind or vision impaired from using online catch up services. Not all people who are blind or vision impaired have a computer or smart device or internet access. Of those who do have internet access, many do not have internet plans large enough to allow for the download of multiple programs. Slow download speeds and connection drop-outs make it difficult, if not impossible to use catch up services. These issues will not be remedied by the introduction of the National Broadband Network (NBN), as the service has so far been unreliable and the packages can be cost-prohibitive.

Blind Citizens Australia notes that Australians who are Deaf or hearing impaired currently enjoy far higher levels of access to television content, with all free view and subscription television broadcasters now being required to provide captions under federal law. The Broadcasting Services Act 1992 outlines broadcaster’s obligations for compliance with the rules and standards relating to captioning of television programs for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) monitors and regulates the broadcasting industry through the Broadcasting Services Act. ACMA is therefore able to investigate breaches of the captioning obligations that have been established under the act.

In keeping with the precedent that has already been established for captioning, Blind Citizens Australia asserts that minimum targets for audio description must be legislated under the Broadcasting Services Act or otherwise regulated to guarantee permanent access for Australians who are blind or vision impaired. To this end, Blind Citizens Australia calls upon the federal government to:

* commit to allocating the necessary funds for the implementation of audio description on broadcast television services operated by the ABC and SBS
* Mandate minimum targets for the provision of audio description on all public and subscription television networks in Australia.

As the peak representative organisation of and for Australians who are blind or vision impaired, Blind Citizens Australia must be actively consulted in the future implementation and rollout of audio description on Australian television.