



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 29 January 2022 - "Need to ensure disabled sector not left behind at red"

Wow I thought. Thank goodness that's over! After weeks of being at the level Red Traffic Light setting while the rest of New Zealand bathed in the warm glow of Orange, Northland was finally brought back in line with the rest of the country. Yes -we had been forgiven for dragging our collective knuckles to achieve the sanctity of the (very nearly) ninety percent vaccination rate. We were rewarded for nearly achieving it. We were at Orange! We could hold our "Getting Out There" Expo after all! Things are getting back to normal.... NO THEY BLOODY AIN'T! We were at the Orange setting for all of three days and now the whole country is in a sea of red trying to prepare ourselves for a tsunami of Omicron. Still, like my mother always says and still says (even now as she is in hospital undergoing elongated rehab after breaking her femur at the age of 89) and, speaking of tsunamis, THINGS COULD BE WORSE!

One could be living in Tonga right now. As we all know Tonga was almost obliterated two weeks ago by the volcano, Hunga-Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai which thoroughly rinsed the Kingdom of Islands and smothered the Island in toxic ash which contaminated Tonga's precious water supply and destroyed crops. Could it get worse?

Olivia Shivas (renowned reporter and winner of the ACC Supreme Award at the 2021 Attitude Awards) wrote an excellent article on the STUFF Website last week on the plight of disabled people living Tonga in aftermath of the destructive volcano and tsunami. She highlighted the vulnerability of disabled people in natural disasters. The article pointed out issues that compounded and exacerbated the situation. Scenarios about churches that are not accessible being used as places of refuge. Disabled people having to leave their mobility devices and equipment behind submerging them into an even more disabling

environment. The article went on to discuss a need to better plan for the needs of disabled people when a natural disaster occurs.

Back in New Zealand it feels like we are in waiting for another natural disaster to unfurl as warnings of the spread of Omicron get more frequent and more severe, with projections of over half of the population becoming infected. One starts to anticipate a far different situation with vast amounts of people self-isolating and many services grinding to a halt. I hope that we have done a enough planning to ensure that disabled people won't be left behind and their needs will be catered for or will we be collateral damage? Will we still have the resilience to take a moment and reflect that things could be worse?

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.