



Olympia Sarris lives with a condition that leaves her in pain; (below) Think Outside the Square's extra signage. Photo: Jason South

Hidden disabilities drive transport push

Nicole Precel

Catching the tram can be a confronting experience for Olympia Sarris.

Sometimes she takes a heat pack to ease the pain in her hip and the resulting nausea but often she is left standing in agony.

The 23-year-old from Coburg has an invisible condition: autoimmune thyroiditis and ankylosing spondylitis, which can result in reduced flexibility in her spine and pain in her joints and back. "As a young woman who appears fit and healthy on the outside, I am ashamed and afraid to ask for a seat," she said.

The hidden suffering of commuters like Ms Sarris is behind a push by advocacy group #thinkoutsidethechair for new public transport signs that acknowledge invisible disabilities such as rheumatoid arthritis, myalgic encephalomyelitis and



chronic fatigue syndrome or Meniere's disease that, while debilitating, are not outwardly obvious.

Ms Sarris thinks the sign that pictures a wheelchair split with a standing man would make it easier for her to travel on public transport.

Think Outside the Chair advocate Susan Sohn said the group was formed in response to the abuse people with invisible conditions had been subjected to when trying to use disability services. "We thought we need to do something about this because it

is not right," she said. The group is planning to launch a crowdfunding page in November to push for a campaign across national television and for councils and public transport to update signs. "We have to do better. We'd love to see Australian leading the way in this space."

Last year, the group launched a successful push to change disability signs at the Imperial Centre shopping complex in Gosford, NSW.

Disability Resource Centre executive officer Kerri Cassidy, who has multiple sclerosis, said it was a "great move" to make disability signage more inclusive.

"I think the existing stickers on public transport can place boundaries over who the public accept as 'eligible' for accessible seats," she said.

In the UK, lanyards and badges are available to make it easier for people with invisible illnesses.

Ms Sarris said a friend had offered to make her a badge that would read: "Hi, my name is Olympia, I have an invisible illness and sometimes I really need to sit down."

"It takes away having to justify needing to sit down or feeling guilty for listening to your body," she said.

But Ms Cassidy said she would not wear a badge and thinks an optional sticker on a travel card would be an easier and more discreet option. "Then, when I have to ask for that seat, that same image is above that seat itself," she said. "I think people are more than happy to move if they need to. It defuses that need to explain yourself."

A Victorian Department of Transport spokesperson said the department was working towards making public transport more accessible and inclusive for everyone.