



YWCA CANBERRA

## **YWCA Canberra 2015-16 ACT Government Budget Consultation Submission**

YWCA Canberra is a feminist, not-for-profit organisation that has been providing community services and representing women's issues in Canberra since its establishment in 1929. We employ more than 350 staff across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and deliver 30 quality programs in children's services, community development, housing, youth services, women's leadership, advocacy, and training and education.

YWCA Canberra is a member of the World YWCA, one of the world's largest and oldest women's organisations. Represented in 122 countries, the YWCA has a global reach of 25 million women and girls. As part of this international movement, we work for a world where reconciliation, justice, peace, health, human dignity, freedom and care for the environment are promoted and sustained through women's leadership.

The 2016-17 ACT Budget will be delivered in the context of a tight fiscal environment, high youth unemployment, growing pressures on frontline community services, and increasing numbers of households experiencing cost of living pressures. As the 2016 ACT Election looms, the forthcoming budget provides an opportunity for the government to tangibly demonstrate how it will provide for its most vulnerable citizens and make long-term investments in social support programs and services. This budget submission builds on the submission YWCA Canberra provided to the 2015-16 ACT Budget, highlighting ongoing and emerging areas of need and encapsulating those recommendations that were not addressed in the 2015-16 Budget.

### **Recommendations**

The ACT's image as an affluent society often means that the individuals and families in our community who live in poverty are overlooked.<sup>1</sup> In 2011 "there were 21,528 people living in poverty; 9,910 households experiencing housing stress; 14,148 people experiencing financial stress; 1,785 experiencing homelessness; and 28,639 disadvantaged people" in the ACT.<sup>2</sup>

YWCA Canberra believes that investment in sound and sustainable services to meet the needs of vulnerable people in our community must remain a key priority for the 2016-17 ACT Budget.

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<sup>1</sup> ACT Government, (2012). *Detecting Disadvantage in the ACT: Report on the comparative analysis of the SEIFI and SEIFA indexes of relative socioeconomic disadvantage in the Australian Capital Territory*. Data and Research Unit, Community Services Directorate: Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Tanton, R, Vidyattama, Y, & Mohanty, I, (2013). *Disadvantage in the ACT: Report for ACT Anti-Poverty Week*. Canberra: NATSEM.

As Federal funding cuts continue to make a significant impact on the provision of community services, the ACT Government has an important role to play in ensuring that our local community does not suffer.

In particular, domestic violence prevention and support for victims is critical, including ensuring that housing support services are able to adequately address the needs of women and children fleeing violence.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government:**

1. Ensure the benefits of Digital CBR reach young people from underserved communities.
2. Ensure that children and young people are educated on respectful relationships, through best-practice primary prevention programs.
3. Provide support for at-risk young people through:
  - a. Extending current youth engagement activities in the ACT to support programs that re-engage young people in education or employment pathways; and
  - b. Provide funding for secondary intervention counselling services both inside and outside of the care and protection system, and school environments, for young people and their families, to prevent youth homelessness and disengagement from school in the middle-years.
4. Support women fleeing domestic violence by:
  - a. Reinstate to prior levels funding for gendered services to provide transitional housing support for families escaping domestic violence, acknowledging that gender-aware services are necessary to provide meaningful support to help break the cycle of violence; and
  - b. Increase provision of safe, affordable, single unit housing for single women in Canberra, of all ages, recognising that not all women are in a position to share housing.
5. Make community inclusion and equality a priority for the ACT by:
  - a. Reinstate emergency relief funding for all providers in the ACT.
6. Maintain quality early childhood education by:
  - a. Call on ACT Government not to move NFP childcare providers off current peppercorn lease arrangements, and to make a holistic cost-benefit analysis of the cost of concessions vs the impact on the community by NFPs; and
  - b. Ensure that ACT Government continues to implement the National Quality Framework.

We have grouped our recommendations under the relevant Strategic Priorities of the Act Government below.

## ACT Strategic Priority 1: Economic Growth and Diversification

### **Recommendation 1. Ensure young people from underserved communities have access to technology, and are supported to pursue careers in STEM.**

Digital technologies are having an increasing impact on Australia's economy. Deloitte estimates that one third of Australia's economy is facing significant digital disruption in the short term<sup>3</sup> through the increasing impact of technology on modes of work, consumers, and access. Whilst this disruption can be both positive and negative, what this highlights is the need for young people to have access to digital literacy skills, and the capacity to engage with careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in order to viably participate economically as adults.

Even as the impact of digital technologies grows, the divide between those who have access to technology and those who don't continues to widen. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported through their report *Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2012-13* that households with higher incomes are more likely to have access to the internet at home – in fact, almost half of the lowest income earners don't have access to the internet at home at all.

YWCA Canberra operates a Computer Clubhouse program in Richardson, Tuggeranong. Founded in Boston in 1993, the Computer Clubhouse Network comprises over 100 Clubhouses in 20 countries, reaching thousands of young people from underserved communities. The YWCA Computer Clubhouse opened its doors in October 2014. Our 117 members have the opportunity to work with high-tech tools, industry mentors, and to drive their own projects.

Richardson has the highest number of people in the ACT (24 percent) who fall into the most disadvantaged 20 percent of all 15-64 year old Australians. Many of our members don't have access to the internet at home, and are unable to engage with the benefits of Canberra's innovation sector.

The ACT Government is currently engaging in exciting work through the CBR Innovation Network to harness the energy and skills of young entrepreneurs, and support new ventures, to help build capacity in young people to engage in careers in STEM industries.

However, it is crucial that the benefits of these programs reach young people from underserved communities, who may not be able to access services that focus on the CBD geographically, and that require existing access to technology in order to participate.

According to research from PwC, 5.1 million Australian jobs are at risk from digital disruption in the near future<sup>4</sup>. Building skills in young people today to enter STEM industries is crucial to the long term economic sustainability of the ACT.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government ensure that young people from underserved communities have access to technology, and are supported to pursue careers in STEM, by increasing the reach and capacity of existing programs to engage with geographic areas outside of Civic and its immediate surrounds.**

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Building%20Lucky%20Country/deloitte-au-consulting-digital-disruption-whitepaper-0912.pdf?\\_ga=1.245769996.988137171.1443568385](http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Building%20Lucky%20Country/deloitte-au-consulting-digital-disruption-whitepaper-0912.pdf?_ga=1.245769996.988137171.1443568385)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pwc.com.au/media-centre/2015/stem-skills-apr15.htm>

## ACT Strategic Priority 2: Enhancing Liveability and Social Inclusion

**Recommendation 2. Ensure that any primary prevention initiatives implemented in the ACT (following 2015-16 Budget announcement of \$615,000 in funding), are best-practice and include gender equality and diversity principles.**

Violence against women (VAW) is a significant issue in the ACT. It is estimated that across Australia, 1 in 3 women will experience an incident of domestic violence in their lifetime. The ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service responded to 15,109 requests for service in 2014, and 84.5 percent of requests were from women. In addition, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre received 15,315 crisis calls in 2013-14, a 29 percent increase from 2012-13.

Diverse groups of women are more likely to be disproportionately affected by violence. This includes women from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse women, women living with disability, young women and women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Effective primary prevention is critical to ending domestic violence in the long term. Recent research into the attitudes of young people towards violence against women and gender equality has revealed troubling findings.

The University of New South Wales and White Ribbon's 2015 report into young people's attitudes toward domestic violence noted men were 'more likely than females to agree with statements supporting gender stereotypes and attitudes supporting violence'. The report also found that only 54 percent of high school students surveyed had received information about domestic violence in school, and that 19 percent of men surveyed believed that men should be in control of their relationships.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to this, the recently released report from Our Watch into youth perceptions of respectful relationships found that one in three young people don't think that exerting control over someone else is a form of violence; one in four young people don't think it's serious if a guy, who's normally gentle, sometimes slaps his girlfriend when he's drunk and they're arguing; and one in four young people think it's pretty normal for guys to pressure girls into sex.<sup>6</sup>

These trends are deeply concerning, and strongly demonstrate a need for primary prevention programs teaching respectful relationships that are targeted to young people.

YWCA Canberra welcomed the announcement in the 2015-16 ACT Budget of \$615,000 for respectful relationships education in public schools in the Territory. However, as we await further clarification around the deployment of this funding, we urge the Government to ensure that meaningful accountability and evaluation measures are in place, to ensure that schools access best-practice, evidence-based primary prevention programs.

In the recently released report from the Senate Enquiry into Domestic Violence, the Committee noted the recommendation from the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance that, 'primary prevention messaging must focus on gender inequality and its intersection with other social inequalities'.

Gender inequality has been identified as the root cause of violence against women, and best-practice

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/update/australian-young-people-deem-domestic-violence-as-commonplace-in-australia-today>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ourwatch.org.au/News-media/Latest-news/New-research-shows-need-to-challenge-violence-supp>

primary prevention programs address this by educating young people about equality, diversity and respect prior to inequitable attitudes becoming entrenched.

Research also indicates that best-practice primary prevention programs work with children and young people to allow programs to be repeated regularly and address multiple forms of violence (Flood et al, 2008).

These factors are crucial for effective primary prevention initiatives.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government ensure that any primary prevention initiatives implemented in the ACT (following 2015-16 Budget announcement of \$615,000 in funding), are best-practice and include gender equality and diversity principles, and hold schools accountable to this requirement through reporting and evaluation mechanisms, with the outcomes made publicly available.**

**Recommendation 3. Extend current youth engagement activities in the ACT to support programs that reengage young people in education or employment pathways.**

Youth educational disengagement, underemployment and unemployment cost the ACT community, both socially and economically. The discontinuation of federally-funded programs such as Youth Connections, combined with high youth unemployment, changes to welfare accessibility, and inequitable access to education and training, is pushing more young people in the ACT into poverty. In this context, it is critical that the ACT Government increase investment in services that provide targeted, intensive, case-managed support to young people who have disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging, from school and employment.

In recent years, the youth unemployment rate in the ACT has been steadily growing, with 11.4 percent of 15-24 year olds unemployed at August 2015. This is more than double the overall unemployment rate for ACT (4.8 percent). One in four people who experience homelessness in the ACT, and one in three at risk of becoming homeless, are aged 12 to 24.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, one in ten 15-24 year olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET) (AIHW analysis of ABS 2015).

At the same time that increasing numbers of young people are experiencing homelessness or unemployment, the closure of the nationally funded Youth Connections service at the end of 2014 has left a major gap in assisting young people to reengage with education, training or employment. The Youth Connections program consistently delivered positive outcomes for young people in the ACT. It provided tailored case management for young people, taking into account their individual vulnerabilities and barriers to accessing education or employment opportunities. The Program worked with around 350 young people in the ACT each year, and proved highly successful.<sup>8</sup> Six months after

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<sup>7</sup> Sawa, Mark, 'More than a third of Canberra's homeless aged 25 or under', Canberra Times, 20 April 2015, [www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/more-than-a-third-of-canberras-homeless-aged-25-or-under-20150418-1mnudb.html#ixzz3pLn8apOZ](http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/more-than-a-third-of-canberras-homeless-aged-25-or-under-20150418-1mnudb.html#ixzz3pLn8apOZ)

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), (2013). *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. Australian Capital Territory Annual Report.*

leaving the program, an average of 93 percent of young people were still engaged in some kind of training, education or employment; after two years, 89 percent remained engaged.<sup>9</sup>

Since Youth Connections ceased, there has been no comparable program implemented, placing young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, in an increasingly precarious position. Schools are not equipped to fill this gap, and there is a pressing need to invest in intensive programs modelled on the Youth Connections program. In the ACT, children and young people experiencing poverty and social and educational disadvantage are often hidden or unacknowledged.

In terms of educational outcomes, there is a persistent and widening gap for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to those from more affluent families. As a result of the diversity within Canberra's suburbs, most ACT schools have small numbers of highly disadvantaged students, rather than disadvantage being concentrated in a few schools. Results from the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that, on average, ACT students outperformed students from other states and territories across reading, mathematical and scientific literacy measures. However, the ACT's comparative 'average' rank in national and international testing obscures deep inequities in the ACT's education system. As Roberts and Leonard report:

A close examination of the PISA report shows that the ACT quickly falls to near the bottom of the nation when it comes to equity in education with only the Northern Territory showing a greater connection between SES background and PISA achievement... Especially striking is that the ACT has the biggest in-school variation linked to student SES of any Australian jurisdiction. There may not be much difference between schools, but within them students are performing very differently based on their SES background.<sup>10</sup>

While schools struggle to support students who are disadvantaged and/or at risk of disengagement, the lack of adequately resourced youth services and community supports is having profound consequences for those who have dropped out of education. Almost half of all early school leavers find themselves on the margins of the labour force, either in part-time or casual jobs or out of work altogether. Some will face ongoing unemployment and will be more likely to suffer poorer health, be socially isolated, or even find themselves in trouble with the criminal justice system. This will adversely impact on their capacity to fully participate in society.

Research shows that young people who leave school early often experience complex and interconnected barriers to remaining in school, both within and beyond the school gate. These include learning disorders and underdeveloped literacy and numeracy skills, bullying, low self-esteem and a combination of low-expectations and limited adult support. Difficulties beyond the school gate are often experienced as causal or compounding factors. Crucially, none are 'pull' factors; most students do not leave for greener pastures, but due to a lack of support.

It is imperative that the ACT Government take action to ensure young people receive the support and opportunities they desperately need.

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<sup>9</sup> (2014). *Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts: Interim Report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.  
[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny\\_of\\_Government/Budget\\_Measures/~media/Committees/budgetcuts\\_ctte/First\\_Interim\\_Report/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny_of_Government/Budget_Measures/~media/Committees/budgetcuts_ctte/First_Interim_Report/report.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Roberts, P, & Leonard, S, (2013). 'PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged'. Canberra Times. accessed 5 October 2015, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/pisaresultsshowact-schoolsfarepoorlyinteachingdisadvantaged201312092z1xa.html>



While the factors relating to the disengagement of young people are complex and interconnected, when provided with adequate learning, wellbeing and practical support young people can flourish. A lack of resources and flexible learning options within the ACT education system means that many schools do not have the capacity to support students experiencing disadvantage to stay in school. These difficulties are compounded by the withdrawal of the Youth Connections program and the persistent inequities that exist within many ACT schools.

While the establishment of a service to reengage young people who have disengaged from school has upfront costs, the social and economic cost of not providing such support is significant – not only for the individual, but also for the wider ACT community and economy. These costs manifest through increased likelihood to require welfare support and government-subsidised services, increased contact with the criminal justice system, poorer health outcomes and subsequent pressure on the public health system, low participation in the labour market and the associated loss of taxes and contribution to the economy. As Anglicare ACT's Youth and Educational Support Services Co-ordinator, Shyanne Watson, has noted:

Once they have totally disengaged, we know that the modelling shows that those young people generally become engaged in other activities. Those other activities can be risk-taking behaviours where they do not have the skills and they do not necessarily have the cognitive ability to recognise that this is not the right path to be walking down. Unfortunately, we believe that the engagement in care and protection type services in the ACT and community justice services will be much higher.<sup>11</sup>

It is vitally important to ensure that young people do not disengage from education, ill-equipped for employment and facing the likelihood of a life sentence of disadvantage. Importantly, the costs of youth disengagement are not only felt on an individual level – the strengths, talents and potential that these young people can contribute to our economy and broader community are also in danger of being wasted.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government urgently invest in a service to rapidly re-engage young people who disengage from school without securing their next steps. It should build on the evidence of what works:**

- **Rapid action**
- **Early intervention**
- **Meaningful and relevant vocational guidance**
- **A plan for action based on the young person's strengths and aspirations**
- **Collaboration between schools, health and community agencies, employers and the broader community**

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<sup>11</sup> (2014). *Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts: Interim Report*. Canberra : Commonwealth of Australia.

[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny\\_of\\_Government/Budget\\_Measures/~/\\_media/Committees/budgetcuts\\_ctte/First\\_Interim\\_Report/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny_of_Government/Budget_Measures/~/_media/Committees/budgetcuts_ctte/First_Interim_Report/report.pdf)

- **Access to high-support flexible learning options; one-on-one coaching; and reintegration support.**

**Recommendation 4. Increase funding for secondary intervention counselling services for young people and their families to ensure that such services are accessible both inside and outside of the child protection system and school environments; are adequately resourced to respond to the extent and complexity of needs; and able to support referrals and coordination with other services provided by the Health, Education and Community Services Directorates.**

Therapeutic counselling services play a vital role in supporting vulnerable young people and preventing problems occurring or escalating. Despite the ACT Government's recent investment in early intervention for children with mental disorders, the demand for therapeutic counselling services remains unmet, and the capacity of these services to work across agencies and sectors is constrained both by limited resourcing and siloed services systems and funding streams. It is imperative that funding is increased to ensure young people and their families can access timely and responsive services, and that such services are supported to work across Directorates and service sectors.

The need for accessible and responsive therapeutic counselling services for children and young people is clear and compelling. Service providers are experiencing an increase in the number of children presenting with a range of complex social, familial and developmental vulnerabilities and needs.<sup>12</sup> Mental health issues are also affecting a significant and growing number of young people in the ACT each year. The rate at which both adults and young people access community mental health services in the ACT is higher than any other jurisdiction. In 2013, the contact rate of community mental health services in the ACT was 690.4 contacts per 1,000 people, which is more than double the national rate of 374 for every 1,000 people. The rate at which children under the age of 15 access community mental health services in the ACT is also more than double the national rate and significantly higher than any other jurisdiction. In 2013-14, over 18,000 contacts in the ACT involved children under the age of 15, with the rate for young females more than 2.5 times the rate for young males.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the high rates of service use, many young people in the ACT are unable to access timely services to support their mental health and wellbeing. Nationally, it is estimated that, of those young people aged 4 to 17 years who experience a mental disorder, only one in four access a mental health service. Unmet demand for counselling services is of particular concern, with one out of every three young people with a mental disorder reporting that they are unable to access counselling when they needed it. Although the ACT has increased the number of counsellors employed in school settings,

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<sup>12</sup> KPMG, (2014). *Early childhood intervention – an overview of best practice*. Report for the ACT NDIS Taskforce, on behalf of the ACT Government. Canberra.

[http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/635695/Early-Intervention-Best-Practice.pdf](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/635695/Early-Intervention-Best-Practice.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), (2015). National Community Mental Health Care Database. Canberra: AIHW. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health-data-cubes/>



the ratio of counsellors to students remains well in excess of the 1:500 ratio recommended by the Australian Psychological Association.

Within the ACT, access to therapeutic counselling for children and young people is not funded to meet current levels of demand and the range of contexts in which it is required. Eligibility criteria for the *Health in Mind* Program<sup>14</sup> mean that most young people and families are not able to access free counselling in community health centres. Aside from this program, counselling support to children and young people is only available as a free and immediate service through school counselling services, and additional limitations apply to these school-based services:

- counselling support is only available during school hours and school terms;
- counselling services tend to focus on the individual student rather than involving the whole family;
- a significant amount of counsellors' time is devoted to administering assessments of students with disabilities and, although these assessments are important for students with disabilities, they often leave little time to work with other students, particularly those who require early interventions;
- some children and young people do not access the counselling service for reasons of confidentiality or because they have disengaged with school; and
- the service has limited capacity to provide longer term counselling support.

YWCA Canberra strongly supports fully resourced school counselling services, however we recognise that the needs of many children and young people are complex and need to be addressed within the context of the family. School-based initiatives may also exclude young people already disengaged from education or dealing with difficulties such as bullying at school. It is therefore critical that services provide a holistic approach, are offered both inside and outside the school system, and work in partnership with community services beyond the school setting.

In addition to limiting access, the persistent under-resourcing of counselling services limits their ability to collaborate with other agencies and develop linkages with services provided by the Education, Health and Community Services Directorates. Children and young people often experience multiple and interconnected issues and vulnerabilities, including family conflict, abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence, health problems and homelessness. Access to holistic counselling and early intervention can prevent the escalation of these vulnerabilities, and can also ensure young people are referred to appropriate services. All too often, however, the persistence of siloed service systems and agencies leads to fragmented service delivery and results in young people 'falling through the cracks'.

The ACT Government's *Human Services Blueprint* envisages a cohesive and coordinated model of service delivery. If this vision is to be realised for vulnerable children and young people, it is essential that counselling services are better resourced and supported to develop partnerships and referral pathways.

YWCA Canberra has extensive experience in providing therapeutic counselling services to children, young people and their families. Our *Circles of Support* program involves early intervention for children, young people and their families, providing access to therapeutic counselling support as well

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<sup>14</sup> *Health in Mind* is a Commonwealth funded program that provides free counselling for children under 12 years of age who are experiencing a mild to moderate mental health condition. To be eligible, a child must be facing demonstrated financial barriers to gaining other treatment options, and must have a referral and completed Mental Health Treatment Plan from their GP.

as support for parenting. Since this program commenced in 2012, it has struggled to meet demand and is currently oversubscribed, with 20 families on the waiting list and unable to access a counsellor for up to six months.

In addition to restricting the numbers of families who can access the service, funding constraints have limited our capacity to provide the level of support needed for families who are grappling with multiple complex needs. Many of the families referred to our service have a history of trauma and violence or abuse. A recent survey of the 24 families attending the service highlighted the prevalence of trauma and, in particular, physical violence (18 out of 24 families), emotional violence (22), sexual violence (9), and financial abuse (5). Only one family had not disclosed violence or abuse of any kind.

These experiences of trauma are rarely disclosed by the family at the time of referral. It takes time to establish a trusting therapeutic relationship, to build on the client's capacity to recognise and reflect on the responses triggered by their experience of trauma, and to support the client to develop the skills and confidence to respond differently when they are being triggered. This relationship-based and trauma-informed model of care is not quick work which can be accomplished in six sessions.

It is vital that therapeutic counselling services are adequately funded to meet the needs of young people and families who have experienced trauma. In the '*A Step up for our Kids' Out of Home Care Strategy 2015 – 2020* released earlier this year, the ACT Government focuses on the need for a 'trauma-informed' Out-of-Home Care response for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. We are finding the same need for a relationship-based, trauma-informed approach in our secondary counselling service working with children and young people who are not in the Out-of-Home Care system. The lack of sufficient funding, however, means that the needs of many of these vulnerable children and young people remain unmet.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government increase funding for secondary intervention counselling services for young people and their families to ensure that such services are:**

- **Accessible both inside and outside of the child protection system and school environments;**
- **Adequately resourced to respond to the extent and complexity of needs; and**
- **Able to support referrals and coordination with other services provided by the Health, Education and Community Services Directorates.**

**Recommendation 5. Reinstate to prior levels funding for gendered services to provide transitional housing support for families escaping domestic violence, acknowledging that gender-aware services are necessary to provide meaningful support to help break the cycle of violence.**

Family violence is the number one cause of homelessness among women and children in Australia. While housing vulnerability is a significant and growing issue across the ACT, the shortage of transitional housing options for families escaping violence is of profound concern. Lack of affordable accommodation is the leading reason women return to abusive relationships. Without a significant increase in the supply of transitional housing for those escaping family violence, many women will leave abusive partners only to find they have nowhere to go.

At the same time the demand for services has increased in the ACT, funding cuts have reduced the level of transitional housing services available to families fleeing domestic violence. As a result of federal cuts to funding through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) and the National Affordable Housing Agreement, annual funding to ACT homelessness services has been steadily eroded over the past three years, with \$3.7 million cut in 2013-14, and a further \$2.2 million in 2014-15. In response to the reduction in Federal funding, the ACT Government developed a revised costings model to determine the allocation of funding cuts across the ACT's housing and homelessness sector. While this has resulted in a reduction in overall funding across the sector, the funding model adopted in the ACT neglects the complex nature of domestic violence and does not factor in the more intensive support it requires. The freeze in indexation imposed in the ACT Government's 2015-16 budget has further compounded the funding shortfall, reducing the capacity of services at time of unprecedented demand.

As a result of these funding cuts, staffing for YWCA Canberra's housing and support service has been reduced from nine FTE staff (338 hours) to six and a third FTE staff (240 hours). This service provides crisis and supported transitional accommodation and outreach support, via case management and a variety of support and educational groups, to families that are homeless across the ACT. To support women escaping domestic violence, YWCA Canberra also works in partnership with the specialist domestic violence accommodation services Beryl Women Inc., Toora House, and Doris Women's Refuge. These services have also experienced substantial reductions in their funding.

YWCA Canberra urges the ACT Government to reverse these funding cuts and to develop a funding model that better reflects the nature and intensity of service provision for families escaping domestic violence. While chronic under-resourcing is an issue across the homelessness support sector, women and children fleeing domestic violence have specific needs and complex issues which are not addressed by mainstream providers. A recent evaluation of ACT specialist homelessness services identified women with children as one of the groups who are more likely to experience a mismatch between their needs and their eligibility for specific service providers.<sup>15</sup>

The specialist domestic violence housing sector provides a unique model of service delivery that cannot be replaced by generic housing and homelessness services. Services that utilise gender-informed practice provide tailored support that recognises the impact of trauma and violence, provides an environment that is safe and respectful, and includes case management that attends to the range of needs and issues that women and families face. Generalist homelessness services with little privacy are not safe spaces for women to disclose family violence, may not be appropriate for accommodating children, and are not specifically oriented toward providing the gender-aware and trauma-informed responses that specialist services provide.

For those escaping domestic violence, mainstream service providers do not always provide the level and type of engagement that is offered by specialist providers. Research has identified two types of assistance that is critical to support women affected by domestic/family violence: "safe, secure and affordable housing, and provision of a continuum of individualised and open-ended support including outreach services, that wraps around women and their children in a range of areas (therapy, health,

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<sup>15</sup> ARTD Consultants, (2015). *Evaluation of reforms to the ACT Specialist Homelessness Service system: Evaluation report*. Report for the ACT Community Services Directorate, ACT Government: Canberra. [http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/755266/Evaluation-of-reforms-to-the-ACT-Specialist-Homelessness-Service-system.pdf](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/755266/Evaluation-of-reforms-to-the-ACT-Specialist-Homelessness-Service-system.pdf)

life skills, housing assistance, etc) for as long as they need it".<sup>16</sup> Preventing homelessness is more than beds: it includes support services that are responsive to the needs of clients. In this context, responsive service delivery that is gender-informed is essential in supporting women and children who have experienced domestic violence.

At a time when governments across Australia have committed to preventing domestic violence, it is inexplicable that the ACT Government continues to underfund transitional housing for women and children escaping such violence. As demand continues to rise, the chronic lack of crisis accommodation and recent funding cuts to specialist domestic violence accommodation are unsustainable. To help break the cycle of violence for families in the ACT, it is imperative the ACT Government restore funding to specialist housing support for women and children escaping domestic violence, and ensure that future tendering processes do not disadvantage specialist services for women and children. A failure to do so will result in the further reduction of women's access to specialist support, increase risk to women and children affected, and exacerbate structural and systemic gender inequality.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government reinstate funding to transitional housing support for women and children escaping domestic violence, and ensure that future funding models incorporate the full costs of providing intensive, specialist support for women and children who have experienced violence and trauma.**

**Recommendation 6. Increase provision of safe, affordable, single-unit housing for single women of all ages in Canberra, recognising that not all women are in a position to share housing.**

Appropriate, affordable and stable housing is essential to the wellbeing of both individuals and the community. In the ACT, the scarcity of safe and affordable housing for single women is a significant and growing area of unmet need.

A shortage of affordable supply, and various factors fuelling demand for housing, has contributed to record high house prices and private rents. Canberra's higher than average level of income not only masks the extent of housing stress, but exacerbates it by pushing up the cost of housing and creating upward pressure on rental prices. Over the past 15 years, the increase in rental prices has rapidly outstripped the inflation rate for the ACT, with average rent prices increasing at a rate 66 percent higher than the CPI.<sup>17</sup> The lack of affordable housing in the ACT is reflected in a number of key measures:

- ACT households have the second highest expenditure on housing compared with other jurisdictions, with average housing costs \$65 per week above the national average;<sup>18</sup>
- The proportion of rental stock in the ACT that is affordable for someone on the minimum wage is lower than the national average;

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<sup>16</sup> Tually, S, Faulkner, D, Cutler, C, Slatter, M, (2008). *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness: A Synthesis Report*. Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Research, Flinders University, Adelaide. [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/synthesis\\_report08/Pages/successful\\_strats\\_m\\_ods.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/synthesis_report08/Pages/successful_strats_m_ods.aspx)

<sup>17</sup> ACTCOSS and ACT Shelter, (2015). *Analysis of Changes in the Cost of Housing in the ACT*. Canberra: ACTCOSS. [http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/Publications\\_2015/0615rep-analysis-of-changes-in-cost-of-housing-act.pdf](http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/Publications_2015/0615rep-analysis-of-changes-in-cost-of-housing-act.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> ABS, (2015). *4130.0 - Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2013-14*. Canberra.

- Over the past five years, Anglicare's annual rental affordability snapshot has consistently shown Canberra to be one of the least affordable rental markets for people on low incomes; in 2015, the only affordable option for a person on Newstart was renting someone's lounge room;
- An estimated 20,000 Canberra households are experiencing housing stress, with housing costs exceeding 30 percent of household income.<sup>19</sup>

The majority of those in housing stress are in private rental, with 60 percent of people on low incomes who are in private rental experience housing stress, and 25 percent spending over half of their income on rent.<sup>20</sup> Some housing that is 'affordable' for people on low incomes may not be safe or appropriate housing.

While housing affordability remains an intractable issues across the ACT, single women comprise a growing segment of those experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness. Women and are more likely than men to be renting, and they are more likely to lose home ownership as a result of divorce or relationship breakdown. In the most recent ABS census of population and housing, women accounted for over half the homeless population in the ACT.<sup>21</sup> Women are overrepresented in key poverty indicators, comprising 53 percent of adults in low-income households, and 59 percent of those accessing homeless services. Specialist homelessness services that provide support to single women account for less than 10 percent of all homelessness services in Australia.<sup>22</sup>

In particular, single older women comprise a rapidly growing cohort facing housing insecurity and the risk of homelessness. A constellation factors has contributed to emergence of older single women as a group at heightened risk of housing insecurity, including years of unpaid caring, wage inequities, less secure work tenure, insufficient superannuation, relationship breakdown and the rising costs of living.<sup>23</sup> Research shows that the number of single, older women soon reaching retirement age without either economic or housing security is set to increase.

It is imperative the availability of safe and affordable housing options is enhanced for single women in Canberra. At present, there are limited options for single women, and affordable options are often inappropriate.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government increase investment in safe and affordable housing options for single women, recognising that not all women are in a position to share housing.**

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<sup>19</sup> ACTCOSS & ACT Shelter, (2015). *Safe + Well – Redefining the affordable housing crisis*. Canberra: ACTCOSS. [http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/Publications\\_2015/2015-green-paper-safe-and-well-redefining-affordable-housing-crisis.pdf](http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/Publications_2015/2015-green-paper-safe-and-well-redefining-affordable-housing-crisis.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> YWCA Australia, (2014). *Submission to Senate Economics References Committee Inquiry into affordable housing*.

<sup>21</sup> ABS, (2012). *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*. Cat. No. 2049.0. Canberra: ABS.

<sup>22</sup> Homelessness Australia Fact Sheet 2013 <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/fact-sheets>

<sup>23</sup> Batterham et al. (2013); Klinger (2010); McFerran (2010); Tually et al (2008); Sharam (2011).

## **Recommendation 7. Reinstate emergency relief funding for all providers in the ACT.**

One of the most immediate and devastating effects of poverty and disadvantage is food insecurity. Households living on the margins experience significant levels of deprivation as they choose between having sufficient food to feed their families, securing stable and affordable accommodation, and paying utility and medical bills. In the ACT, the demand for food relief is rising and is not being met by supply. At the same time that the demand has increased, the funding for emergency relief services in the ACT has been substantially reduced. It is vital that the ACT Government restore funding to these services to ensure that all individuals, families and, in particular, children can meet their fundamental requirement for food.

Despite the common perception that Canberra is a prosperous city with a high standard of living, the reality for a significant number of individuals and families is one of financial hardship and difficulties meeting the basic costs of living, including food. The most recent ABS census found that, in 2011, there were more than 20,000 people in the ACT living in poverty, with over 14,000 people experiencing financial stress.<sup>24</sup> The ACT's relatively high costs of living disproportionately affect low-income households, and have increased financial pressures on a growing number of low and insecure income workers. At the same time, the pressures on low income families and individuals have been compounded by Commonwealth funding cuts to a number of essential social services and programs, coupled with reductions in family tax benefits and tighter restrictions to accessing Youth Allowance, Newstart and Disability Support payments.

Against this backdrop, a growing number of people in Canberra are seeking support from emergency relief services to meet their basic material needs, including access to food. Over the past year, YWCA Canberra's Lanyon Food Hub experienced a substantial increase in demand. From February 2015 to October 2015, the service provided food to nearly 950 individuals and families, compared to 578 clients that were supported in the entire 2013-14 financial year. Similar increases in demand have been experienced across the emergency relief sector in the ACT. Foodbank, which is the largest supplier of food to emergency relief services in the ACT, reported an eight percent increase in the number of individuals seeking food relief in 2013-14, with less than a third of all services able to meet demand. Of particular concern, children comprised over a third of those seeking food relief, and more than one in five of those who were turned away.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to high cost of living pressures, the ACT has a number of unique features that compound inequitable access to affordable fresh food. Rather than concentrating in certain areas or suburbs, disadvantage and deprivation is spread across the ACT and tends to be masked.<sup>26,27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> ABS, (2012). *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*. Cat. No. 2049.0. Canberra: ABS.

<sup>25</sup> Foodbank, (2014). *Foodbank Hunger Report 2014*. Sydney: Foodbank Australia Limited. <http://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2014.pdf>; Foodbank ACT and NSW, (2015). *Foodbank NSW and ACT food drive kit*. Sydney: Foodbank Australia Limited. <http://www.foodbank.org.au/nsw/files/2015/01/Real-Food-drive-MASTER-2.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Tanton, R., Vidyattama, Y., & Mohanty, I. (2015). Disadvantage in the Australian Capital Territory. *Policy Studies* 36(1):92-113.

<sup>27</sup> Goldie, X., Kakuk, I., & Wood, G. (2014). Two Tales of a City: detecting socio-economic disadvantage in an 'advantaged' Australian urban centre. *Australian Geographer* 45(4):521-540.



Food insecurity is further influenced by factors such as local availability and transport. Food outlets in the ACT tend to be clustered in town centres and central suburban hubs, such that those reliant on public transport are unable to readily access affordable fresh food options.<sup>28</sup> An analysis of food insecurity in the ACT found that those in Canberra's south face the greatest barriers to accessible local food options, with the lack of local food outlets compounded by the scarcity of emergency assistance services in this region.<sup>28</sup>

A significant number of clients accessing food relief services cite limited transport options or the time taken to travel to services as a barrier to seeking food relief when it was most needed. Furthermore, most food assistance programs in the ACT operate during ordinary working hours, thereby reducing access for the growing number of low-wage households and working poor experiencing food insecurity.<sup>28,29</sup>

For those experiencing food insecurity, emergency relief services are a critical safety net: without the support of free or low-cost food, their financial situation would be ever more precarious and unsustainable. From the evident impact on health, wellbeing and schooling, to the disconnection that comes from not being able to join in, the consequences of such food insecurity are profound.<sup>30</sup> In a social-return-on-investment analysis commissioned by Foodbank, it was found that the benefits of food relief extend beyond satisfying immediate hunger needs. In addition to environmental gains and reduced waste, the provision of food addresses the nutritional and physical health needs of disadvantaged people and contributes to improvements in their emotional wellbeing, sense of self-worth, social relationships, academic achievement and standard of living. When these benefits are quantified, the forecasted social, economic and environmental value created by each kilogram of food distributed is estimated to be \$23.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the growing demand for food relief in the ACT, the Commonwealth has dramatically reduced funding cuts to emergency relief services. In 2013-14, funding for YWCA Canberra's Food Hub was reduced by 17 percent, followed by a drastic 60 percent cut in funds in 2015-16. These cuts have made it increasingly difficult to support the growing number of people seeking assistance. While the Community Services Directorate has funded a handful of providers through the Emergency Material and Financial Aid Program, the sector remains severely under-resourced and there has been no injection of funds to address the gaps left by recent funding cuts. YWCA Canberra understands that in the past year the ACT Government completed a review of the Emergency Financial and Material Aid Program, which recommended an increase in funding to overcome the growing level of unmet need in the ACT.

It is critical that the ACT Government restore funding to emergency relief services in the ACT, and ensure front-line services are adequately resourced to provide food relief and material aid to some of the most disadvantaged in our community. The current funding shortfall is unsustainable, placing

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<sup>28</sup> Anglicare ACT and Australian Redcross, (2014). *Mapping food insecurity in the ACT*.

<http://www.anglicare.com.au/data/foodmappingbasic.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> King, S., Bellamy, J., & Kemp, B. (2013). *Hard choices: going without in a time of plenty: a study of food insecurity in NSW and the ACT*. ANGLICARE Diocese of Sydney.

<sup>30</sup> Anglicare Australia, (2012). *State of the Family report: When there's not enough to eat. Volume 1 – essays*. Canberra: Anglicare Australia. [http://www.anglicare.asn.au/userfiles/file/sof/SOTF12/SOTF12\\_VOL1\\_web.pdf](http://www.anglicare.asn.au/userfiles/file/sof/SOTF12/SOTF12_VOL1_web.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Foodbank, (2014). *Foodbank Hunger Report 2014*. Sydney: Foodbank Australia Limited. <http://www.foodbank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Foodbank-Hunger-Report-2014.pdf>

growing pressure on oversubscribed services, and leaving many individuals and families without the most basic necessities for their health, wellbeing and dignity.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government increase funding to emergency relief services through the Emergency Material and Financial Aid Program, ensuring that:**

- **funding is restored to emergency relief services;**
- **the amount and distribution of funds is sufficient to meet the growth in demand for food relief; and**
- **food relief and material aid are available and accessible across the Territory, recognising the scattered nature of households in need and inequities in access to transport infrastructure and food outlets.**

## **ACT Strategic Priority 4: Health and Education investment**

**Recommendation 8. Retain current peppercorn lease arrangements for not-for-profit early childhood education providers, and make a holistic cost-benefit analysis of the cost of concessions vs the impact on the community by not-for-profit providers.**

It is critical all ACT families are able to access quality early childhood education centres (ECECs). Not-for-profit (NFP) providers play a key role in ensuring quality early childhood education is affordable and accessible, particularly for families on low incomes.

Although NFP providers enable equitable access to early childhood education, the viability of such services depends on concessional arrangements and subsidies, such as peppercorn lease arrangements. Even with such arrangements in place, NFP services often cross-subsidise their programs, making it possible to provide ECEC services in areas that would be deemed 'non-viable' on a for-profit basis. This ensures services are available in areas of disadvantage, often in areas where carers have unstable employment arrangements and the need for occasional care is high. If these services were to become unviable, the burden of providing services would fall on the government, or result in families missing out on critical ECEC services.

In order to realise additional income from their assets, the ACT Government has increasingly sought to move community organisations and NFP services off peppercorn or concessional lease arrangements. YWCA Canberra believes the imposition of commercial rental rates on such services is a false economy, threatening the sustainability of community organisations and reducing the accessibility of essential services to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families in the ACT community. For many services, increased rental costs will divert funds away from front-line service delivery, leading to increased service-user costs, an erosion of quality, or the closure of services.

Ultimately, the withdrawal of concessions and the transfer of providers off peppercorn leases will undermine the affordability and accessibility of ECEC, with the burden falling most heavily on disadvantaged families. As an analysis by the Productivity Commission recently found, ECEC services in disadvantaged communities are generally less profitable, and such communities are often

reliant on the NFP sector.<sup>32</sup> The barriers to affordable services are particularly acute in the ACT, which has the highest average costs for early childhood education in Australia. Families in the ACT pay the most as a proportion of their income, with those with one or two children in long day care having the highest out-of-pocket costs as a proportion of weekly disposable income.<sup>33</sup>

In this context, it is imperative is the ACT Government retains concessional and peppercorn lease arrangements for the NFP early childhood education sector. Services also need to be able to make changes to their properties, or variations to their existing leases, without being moved onto commercial lease arrangements. In the early childhood sector, the inability to upgrade properties without losing leasing concessions has prevented NFP providers from meeting building standards and physical environment requirements under the National Quality Framework for early childhood education. Ultimately, the lack of flexibility and the imposition of commercial rents will erode the sustainability of NFP providers and undermine their capacity to ensure that every child, regardless of the socioeconomic circumstance of their family, has access to quality early childhood education.

**YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government:**

- **continue concessional and peppercorn leasing arrangements for NFP early childhood education providers;**
- **allow community organisations and NFP services to upgrade properties without being moved onto commercial lease arrangements; and**
- **undertake a holistic cost-benefit analysis of the cost of concessions versus the impact on the community by NFPs.**

**Recommendation 9. Continue implementation of the National Quality Framework to ensure high quality education for children in all early learning settings.**

YWCA Canberra believes every child has the right to high-quality early childhood experiences. A child's formative experiences are critical in shaping his or her physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. A large body of research evidence shows that high quality early learning programs enable children to establish the foundation skills that will assist them to successfully navigate education, work and life. This positive impact is strengthened with increased hours of participation over longer periods of time, with the benefits lasting beyond compulsory education.<sup>34</sup> If governments, communities and service providers get the early years right for all children, we can improve social, educational and employment outcomes and significantly reduce future pressure on the health, welfare and justice systems.

To achieve this, it is essential to deliver high quality programs early in life. Fundamental to the delivery of high-quality programs is the implementation of the qualification and ratio requirements

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<sup>32</sup> Productivity Commission, (2014). *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*. Inquiry Report No. 73, Canberra. <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childcare/report>

<sup>33</sup> COAG Reform Council, (2013). [Tracking equity: Comparing outcomes for women and girls across Australia](http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/reports/gender-equity/tracking-equity-comparing-outcomes-women-and-girls-across-australia). Sydney. <http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au/reports/gender-equity/tracking-equity-comparing-outcomes-women-and-girls-across-australia>

<sup>34</sup> Sylva, K, Melhuish, E, Sammons, P, Siraj, I, Taggart, B, (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16, Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project Research Report*. September 2014. Institute of Education, University of London. [www.ioe.ac.uk/research/66737.html](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/66737.html)

currently specified under the National Quality Framework (NQF).<sup>35</sup> The NQF has achieved – for the first time in Australia – a clear national focus on the importance of quality education and care for children. This gives practical effect to decades of research into the positive outcomes generated by high-quality early childhood settings.

The ACT government has an integral role to play in implementing the NQF and ensuring regulatory compliance with the standards it embodies. The NQF establishes a national quality rating and assessment process through which services are assessed against the National Quality Standard. For services located in the ACT, authorised officers from the ACT Government's Children's Policy and Regulation Unit are responsible for the approval, monitoring and quality assessment of services in accordance with the national legislative framework and the National Quality Standard.

To ensure every child in the ACT has access to quality early learning, it is important that the ACT Government fund the ongoing implementation of national guidelines, regulations and quality standards in the early childhood education sector.

**YWCA Canberra calls on the ACT Government to demonstrate leadership and a firm commitment to the long-term benefits for children that the NQF reform agenda will deliver. The Government can support early years learning by ensuring compliance with the NQF, funding the early learning sector to cover salary increases required to attract and retain a high-quality professionalised workforce, while preventing cost shifting to families in the form of higher fees or reduced service provision.**

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>