



YWCA CANBERRA

**2017-18 ACT Government  
Budget Consultation Submission**

## **About YWCA Canberra**

YWCA Canberra is a feminist, secular, not-for-profit organisation that has provided community services and represented women's issues in Canberra since 1929.

Through our national Member Association, YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 125 countries across the globe.

Our rich history of supporting women and girls in Canberra through the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the rapid social and cultural changes Canberra has experienced in recent years, continues to inform and influence our work.

Today we provide quality, innovative services for women, girls and families in the ACT and surrounding regions. We work in the areas of children's services, community development, housing, youth services, personal and professional training, women's leadership and advocacy.

As a membership-based, non-religious organisation, we encourage the participation of people of all cultures, beliefs and ages in our movement. Strengthened by diversity, we welcome members who are committed to recognising and celebrating the value of every human being.

## **Introduction**

YWCA Canberra welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for the 2017-18 ACT Government Budget Consultation Process. YWCA Canberra's submission outlines areas where immediate action can be taken to achieve a greater social impact within current budget allocations, as well as areas where a modest additional investment can result in significant benefits to the community.

This submission also outlines the practical steps that the ACT Government can make to increase the economic participation of all Canberrans, and ensure our most vulnerable community members are not left behind.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly presents an opportunity to progress an agenda of equality, economic opportunity, and progress. In the Chief Minister's speech opening the new Assembly, he stated that by 're-electing my government, Canberrans have voted for a positive vision of a confident and self-reliant city, where everyone is welcome and where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential'<sup>i</sup>. This submission provides recommendations to support this vision.

To be a city where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential, all Canberrans need the best start in life through quality early learning education, through the provision of support for young people who are falling through the gaps, through safe and affordable housing, and through systemic change that results in true gender equality.

Recommendations made in this Budget Submission are provided under the four key areas of gender equality, early education and care, safe and affordable housing, and supporting young

people in need. The fourth priority area of supporting young people in need has been developed in partnership with Marymead Child & Family Centre. These recommendations are based on sound analysis, and may be incorporated into the existing fiscal infrastructure.

## **Recommendations**

YWCA Canberra recommends the ACT Government prioritise four key areas in which to invest in the 2017-18 ACT Budget as outlined below.

### **1. Gender equality – Leading the way**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its commitment to gender equality by:

- Allocating \$100,000 to conduct a robust evaluation of the ACT Government's investment in social and emotional learning programs to determine the effectiveness of existing programs and inform future program funding.
- Committing \$615,000 per year to continue targeted respectful relationship learning programs to ensure all young people in the ACT have the tools and skills to form respectful relationships.
- Appropriately resource the Office for Women to enable it to play a coordinating role in supporting all Directorates in working towards gender equality, and in ensuring that all legislation and policy contributes to gender equality. As a minimum, a full-time policy officer within the Office for Women should be appointed to oversee the implementation of gender impact analysis across government.
- Increasing funding for women's leadership programs and education programs focused on respectful relationships, economic participation, and addressing harmful gender stereotypes.

### **2. The best start in life - Early education and care**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its commitment to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by:

- Extending the provision of publically funded preschool to NFP ECEC providers to ensure greater access to preschool across the ACT.
- Entering a long-term agreement for peppercorn lease arrangements for NFP ECEC providers, and increasing maintenance funding available to these facilities.

### **3. Essential to wellbeing - Safe and affordable housing for women**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government acts to ensure that women are provided with access to housing and homelessness services by:

- Investing in innovative housing models for women including options to provide appropriate and affordable single unit dwellings for older women.
- Resourcing 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.
- Ensuring the 2017 homelessness summit includes a specific focus on older women and homelessness.

#### **4. Investing in our future - Supporting young people**

YWCA Canberra and Marymead Child & Family Centre recommend that the ACT Government demonstrates its ongoing commitment to supporting young people by:

- Dedicating an equal amount of funding allocated to the 20 school psychologists outlined in the Parliamentary Agreement, to community-based counselling services for at-risk young people and their families.<sup>xi</sup> This will ensure that children and young people not attending school, or who are at-risk of disengaging from education do not fall further behind. Alternately, if additional funding is not available, then half of these funds should be allocated to a community-based therapeutic counselling service for children, young people and their families.

### **Priority area 1: Gender equality – Leading the way**

Gender equality benefits society as a whole. If women are able to participate equally in employment, and have safe, secure, and healthy lives, this has a positive impact on all of society in economic, social and welfare terms.

The social and economic case for gender equality is clear. Women make up one half of the population and deserve equal access to health, education, economic participation, and decision-making power. Ensuring that we adequately use half of our ‘talent pool’ improves economic growth, competitiveness and future-readiness.<sup>ii</sup> Not taking action is costly, with research suggesting that failing to address gender inequality costs Australia \$195 billion or 13 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>iii</sup>

There are several examples of gender inequality in Australia and the ACT:

- ACT women that work full time hours earned, on average, more than \$300 less than men each week (\$1,209 versus \$1536).<sup>iv</sup>
- The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) 2016 scorecard reported the gender pay gap in Australia to be 23.1 per cent, with men earning, on average, \$26,853 per year more than women.

- Women account for 65 per cent of the ACT Public Service, but only 42 per cent of senior executive positions.<sup>v</sup>
- On average, women retire with half as much superannuation as men; one in three have no super at all.<sup>vi,vii</sup>
- On average, women in Australia spend more time each day working (paid and unpaid), and more than double the amount of time that men spend each day on unpaid work.<sup>viii</sup>
- Women are less likely to have paid leave entitlements in Australia and single mothers are the least likely to have access to paid leave entitlements, with nearly a third lacking access.<sup>ix</sup>
- One in three Australian women have experienced physical violence, one in four women have experienced violence by an intimate partner and one in five experience sexual violence.<sup>x</sup>

### **Our role in progressing gender equality**

YWCA Canberra is part of a global movement working in 101 countries. Together we are working towards to goal of '100 million young women and girls transforming power structures to create justice, gender equality and a world without violence and war; leading a sustainable YWCA movement, inclusive of all women' by 2035'.

We provide professional development opportunities to women and girls across the ACT through a diverse range of leadership programs. In 2015-16, 14 students graduated with a She Leads Diploma of Management, currently 45 students are enrolled across three classes and are expected to graduate in 2016-17. A further 250 people attended our She Leads Conference and 100 college age young women attended our She Leads College Conference.

We also deliver school-based leadership programs for girls in years seven and eight through our Y-Aspire program. In 2015-16 Y-Aspire was delivered to 110 girls in the Belconnen and Tuggeranong regions.

YWCA Canberra also provides Great Ydeas grants of \$2,000 to women and girls to pursue professional development opportunities, develop pilot projects, kick-start business ideas, or address a need in the community. Seven Great Ydeas grants were awarded in 2016.

We also offer a Board Traineeship Program providing a unique opportunity for young women to gain experience in governance and holding directorships. In addition to the Traineeship Program, our Board has a quota requiring 30 per cent of our Board positions to be held by women age 30 or under.

### **Policy proposal**

YWCA Canberra notes that in the Parliamentary Agreement for the 9<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, that the ACT Government will "Continue social and emotional learning programs in schools to enhance the skills of children and young people to engage in respectful relationships, including to prevent violence and sexual assault."<sup>xi</sup> However, there is no mention of a commitment of

funding, how it will have an impact on enabling young people to form respectful relationships, and no timeframe allocated for this important work.

The 2015-16 Budget included \$615,000 in funding for social and emotional learning programs in ACT public schools. This included teacher and staff training resources on domestic violence issues, an online resource centre to connect families to support services, and support for children and young people who may be experiencing domestic violence.<sup>xii</sup>

In order to learn from the outcomes of this investment, YWCA Canberra encourages the ACT Government to undertake a robust evaluation of existing social and emotional wellbeing programs, as well as commit further funding to this area to ensure all young people in the ACT have the tools and skills to form respectful relationships.

YWCA Canberra also recommends that the ACT Government appropriately resource the Office for Women to enable it to play a coordinating role in supporting all Directorates in working towards gender equality, and in ensuring that all legislation and policy contributes to gender equality.

Finally, we encourage the ACT Government to increase funding for women's leadership programs and education programs focused on respectful relationships and addressing harmful gender stereotypes.

## **Recommendations**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its commitment to gender equality by:

- Allocating \$100,000 to conduct a robust evaluation of the ACT Government's investment in social and emotional learning programs to determine the effectiveness of existing programs and inform future program funding.
- Committing \$615,000 per year to continue targeted respectful relationship learning programs to ensure all young people in the ACT have the tools and skills to form respectful relationships.
- Appropriately resource the Office for Women to enable it to play a coordinating role in supporting all Directorates in working towards gender equality, and in ensuring that all legislation and policy contributes to gender equality. As a minimum, a full-time policy officer within the Office for Women should be appointed to oversee the implementation of gender impact analysis across government.
- Increasing funding for women's leadership programs and education programs focused on respectful relationships, economic participation and addressing harmful gender stereotypes. The current funding amount for ACT women's grants of \$180,000 is not proportionate to the population.

## **Priority area 2: The best start in life – Early education and care**

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) makes a real and lasting difference to the lives of children across their lifespan. Research has consistently demonstrated that quality ECEC can have an impact on a child's social, emotional and learning outcomes, educational attainment, economic and social participation, and family wellbeing.<sup>xiii</sup>

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has outlined developmental reasons why early childhood is a critical period for the realisation of children's rights. During this period young people experience the most rapid period of growth and change during the human lifespan; young children actively make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they inhabit, and the earliest years provide the foundation for their physical and mental health.<sup>xiv</sup>

Despite the considerable body of evidence that demonstrates the significant and lifelong value of quality ECEC, the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) found that more than one in five (22 per cent) ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school in one or more domains of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge.<sup>xv</sup> This has remained consistent between 2009 and 2015. The AEDS also shows that children who are most socioeconomically disadvantaged are two and a half times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those who are least socio-economically disadvantaged.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Our role in early childhood education and care**

YWCA Canberra has been providing ECEC in the ACT for more than 30 years. We have three ECEC centres; Campbell Cottage, Winyu in Gungahlin, and Conder Early Childhood Services. Through these Centres in 2016, we reached 523 children from 405 families.

We are also one of the largest employer-based providers of Family Day Care in Australia. In 2015-16 165 children from 137 families accessed our Family Day Care.

YWCA Canberra also delivers nationally recognised qualifications for ECEC educators through our Registered Training Organisation (RTO- National Number: 1373). In our RTO in 2015-16 alone, 178 people commenced ECEC training (Certificate III and Diploma) and 100 people received First Aid training.

### **Policy Proposal**

All Australian governments have committed to implementing the National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care. Under the NQF, each early childhood education service is assessed and rated against a set of National Quality Standards, which cover aspects of quality service such as educational program and practice, staff/child ratios, features of the physical setting, and relationships with children.<sup>xvii</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.

All Australian governments have committed to the National Partnership Agreement to Universal access to early childhood education for 2016-17. The Partnership provides funding for the delivery of 15 hours per week of preschool education by a qualified early childhood teacher in the year before primary school.

The Australian Government has in place a work, training and study test for access to the Child Care Rebate and Benefit. The Government has proposed a new 'Child Care Subsidy' which will replace the Child Care Benefit and Rebate. This subsidy will have even greater emphasis on the amount of work, study or training undertaken, and will be limited based on hours of engagement in these activities.<sup>xviii</sup> This policy is dependent on the passage of legislation and has received significant criticism from social policy stakeholders who claim that it will make it even more difficult for people experiencing disadvantage to access ECEC.

In the ACT, public funded preschool programs are provided by Government preschools. The ACT Government funds 12 hours of preschool per week, with the additional three hours funding by the Australian Government. The ACT Government also provides peppercorn lease arrangements and maintenance support to some Not-for-Profit (NFP) operated ECEC centres. These arrangements make it possible to provide ECEC services in areas that would be deemed 'non-viable' on a for-profit basis.

## **Recommendations**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its commitment to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by:

- Extending the provision of publically funded preschool to NFP ECEC providers to ensure greater access to preschool across the ACT.
- Entering a long-term agreement for peppercorn lease arrangements for NFP ECEC providers, and increasing maintenance funding available to these facilities.

## **Priority area 3: Essential to wellbeing - Safe and affordable housing for women**

Appropriate, affordable and stable housing is essential to the wellbeing of both individuals and the community. However, for low and moderate income earners in the ACT, there are high levels of unmet demand for housing that is affordable and appropriate.

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. 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>xix</sup>



- Low-income households in the ACT spend, on average more than double the proportion of their weekly household income on housing costs than households in the highest income quintile;<sup>xx</sup>
- 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;<sup>xxi</sup>
- An estimated 20,000 Canberra households are experiencing housing stress, with housing costs exceeding 30 percent of household income.<sup>xxii</sup>

For women there are added housing pressures. Domestic violence is the number one cause of homelessness among women and children in Australia.<sup>xxiii,xxiv</sup> 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.

Single women comprise a growing segment of those experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness. Women 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>xxv</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>xxvi</sup>

Single older women comprise a rapidly growing cohort facing housing insecurity and the risk of homelessness. A constellation of 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>xxvii,xxviii,xxix,xxx,xxxi</sup>

A landmark research project undertaken by ACT Shelter explored older women's housing vulnerability in the ACT.<sup>xxxii</sup> They found that in 2011 there were 11,431 women in the ACT over the age of 45 on low to median outcomes who did not own their own home. In contrast, there were 7356 men living in the ACT in the same category. Older women facing homelessness tend to avoid seeking help and feel ashamed of their situation. As such, it is believed that statistics on this issue are conservative and do not reflect the extent of the problem.

## **Our role in housing**

YWCA Canberra provides housing support to Canberrans through a number of programs. YWCA Canberra's Housing Support Unit assisted 175 people in 2015-16, including 55 people seeking assistance due to domestic violence. We also operate three affordable housing

properties: Lady Heydon House, two Eclipse Apartments, and Betty Searle House, amounting to a total of 15 tenancies for women in Canberra.

As part of a consortium with Woden Community Service and Belconnen Community Service, we also provide the Supportive Tenancy Service (STS). STS supports individuals and families to sustain their tenancies. In 2015-16 STS supported 333 people.

## **Policy Proposal**

While 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 Australian Government funding cuts to the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and the National Affordable Housing Agreement, 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 funding, the ACT Government developed a revised costings model to determine the allocation of funding cuts across the ACT's housing and homelessness sector. This has resulted in a reduction in overall funding across the ACT sector. In addition, the revised funding model neglects the complex nature of domestic violence and does not factor in the more intensive support that women fleeing domestic violence require. 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.

Looking forward, the Parliamentary Agreement for the 9th Legislative Assembly of the ACT includes a number of commitments to housing and homelessness including:

- Develop a new Affordable Housing Strategy;
- To 'Grow and diversify the not for profit community housing sector, through a combination of capital investment, land transfer and other means';
- 'Strengthen specialist homelessness and housing support services to make sure vulnerable groups', with a particular mention of older women and women escaping domestic violence; and
- Hold a homelessness summit in 2017.

These commitments provide an opportunity to address the significant barriers to accessing housing and homelessness services for women in the ACT.

## **Recommendations**

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government acts to ensure that women are provided with access to housing and homelessness services by:

- Investing in innovative housing models for women including options to provide appropriate and affordable single unit dwellings for older women.

- Resourcing 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.
- Ensuring the 2017 homelessness summit includes a specific focus on older women and homelessness.

## **Priority area 4: Investing in our future - Supporting young people**

Youth educational disengagement, underemployment, and unemployment come at a cost to the ACT community, both socially and economically. 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>xxxiii</sup>

A second national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of Australian children and adolescents was conducted by the Telethon Kids Institute at The University of Western Australia in partnership with Roy Morgan Research in 2013-14<sup>xxxiv</sup>. This was a household survey of parents and carers of 4-17 year-olds in the general population and 11-17 year-olds themselves. The main aims were to determine:

- How many children and adolescents had particular mental health problems and disorders, and the nature and impact of these.
- How many children and adolescents had used services for mental health problems.
- The role of the education sector in providing these services.

In total 76,606 households were approached and visited up to 6 times each between June 2013 and April 2014. Key findings of the survey were as follows:

- One in six (17 per cent) of children and adolescents age 4-17 years had used services for emotional or behavioural problems in the previous 12 months.
- One in seven (14.8 per cent) used health services.
- One in nine (11.5 per cent) used school services.
- Just over half (53.5 per cent) of 4-17 year-olds used both health and school services.

In terms of findings relating to services for young people with disorders:

- Just over half (56 per cent) of 4-17 year-olds with mental disorders had used services for emotional and behavioural problems in the previous 12 months.

- Service use was higher among children and adolescents with more severe disorders. Two fifths (41.2 per cent) of those with mild disorders, 72.5 per cent of those with moderate disorders and 87.6 per cent of those with severe disorders had used services.

The report and service networks in areas indicate that while there are more services available, there is still a relatively low percentage of children and young people in Australia accessing early intervention services when there are illnesses or disorders emerging. The bulk of those children diagnosed are waiting to access services until their disorders are more severe.

The report also indicates the common siloing effect where services appear to be accessed in isolation, rather than in a comprehensive wrap around approach. There is also no clear indication from the report as to whether there is any kind of concurrent work occurring between these services for children and young people.

In ACT schools, 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. The ACT is one of the most poorly performing jurisdictions when it comes to equity in educational outcomes for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>xxxv</sup>

While schools struggle to support students who are disadvantaged and/or at-risk of disengagement, the lack of adequately resourced youth and community support services are having profound consequences for those who drop 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.

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.

### **Our role in supporting young people**

YWCA Canberra and Marymead Child & Family Centre are the only two community service organisations in the ACT providing outreach early intervention mental health support services to children and young people in the region.

YWCA Canberra delivers Circles of Support, a counselling service for children and young people age eight to 15 years, and their families. Our counsellors use a relationship-based therapeutic model, and are extremely flexible in the way that they deliver the service. We provide centre-based counselling as well as outreach, according to the needs of the clients.

In 2015-16 Circles of Support provided over 600 hours of counselling to 65 people from 39 families. In addition, our team provided training in the Circles of Security parenting model to 26 early childhood educators.

The Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Centre (MLYCC) plays an important role in the local community by providing myriad opportunities to engage in social, cultural, recreational and educational activities. Our MLYCC team is committed to promoting community self-determination, ownership and empowerment through different community development opportunities. Our Youth Engagement team also work with vulnerable, at-risk young people in the Tuggeranong region.

YWCA Canberra also operates the YWCA Canberra Clubhouse, with over 170 young people now signed up as members. The Clubhouse is a high tech digital studio where Tuggeranong youth collaborate with industry mentors to design, create and pursue their passions. The ultimate goal of the program is to increase the number of at-risk young people employed in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics areas.

Marymead delivers the New Horizons service, an early intervention mental health outreach program for children and young people showing early signs of, or who are at risk of developing mental illness, and their families. This is provided through outreach (offices are also located on the north and south sides of Canberra), counselling, case management, practical support, therapeutic groups, information and referral.

The Common Approach underpins New Horizons' work with children, young people and families. Developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), the Common Approach is holistic, strengths-based, child-centred, relationship-based, and backed by evidence and evaluation.

In addition to individualised counselling and case management work, Marymead has partnered with schools and organisations such as the Cal Bruton Foundation, to deliver a targeted, term-long early intervention program in schools. The program connects with young people through sport, such as basketball, to develop their self-esteem and resilience. The first of these was delivered in 2016 at a school in Gungahlin and included young people from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and new humanitarian entrants.

A 2016 program evaluation gathered a range of qualitative and quantitative data. Key themes from the qualitative data included:

- Clients felt known, understood, accepted, cared for and supported
- Practical, 'hands on', tailored support that's flexible to meet needs
- Value of outreach, service accessibility and ease of engagement
- Progress and improvements in parent and CYP mental health, wellbeing and family relationships
- Value of family focused and family involved intervention

- Increases in parental self-efficacy and understanding
- Persistence of workers and intensity of support valued and important to outcomes
- Clients grateful and relieved for the support they received (volunteered in 50% of responses)

### **Policy proposal**

The Parliamentary Agreement for the 9th Legislative Assembly outlines that the ACT Government will employ an additional 20 school psychologists over the term to strengthen mental health and wellbeing support in our schools, strengthen community based counselling services for children and young people, and implement a streamlined referral process that can be utilised by all schools.<sup>xi</sup>

YWCA Canberra and Marymead applaud the ACT Government on this great initiative, which acknowledges the need to improve mental health outcomes for young people in the Territory. YWCA Canberra and Marymead proposes that this funding should be matched to reach young people in the community who are at-risk of disengaging from their education, or who have already disengaged. It is vital that at-risk young people are included in this initiative, and there are existing, tried and tested programs that specialise in reaching them.

If additional funding is not available, YWCA Canberra and Marymead propose that half of the allocated funding should be attributed to a community-based therapeutic counselling service. YWCA Canberra, Marymead and other organisations working in the therapeutic counselling space know of the unmet need and constant demand on these services all too well.

According to Marymead's New Horizons service data, there are 112 young people currently engaged in the program, and another 70 on the waiting list. The majority of these young people are between 5-12 years of age (54 per cent), followed by 13-18 years of age (32 per cent), and 0-4 year olds (14 per cent). It is estimated that more than half of these participants have a history of alleged family violence, and approximately 30 per cent are currently at risk of experiencing family violence.

Further, it is anticipated that more than half of the young people currently engaged in the program have a parent or carer with a mental illness. In addition to the social and mental health needs of these families, there are also barriers to these young people seeking employment.

In terms of accessibility to services, approximately half of these young people require in-home appointments with counsellors, a further 20 per cent are engaged in community settings, 20 per cent in the school environment, and 10 per cent at youth and community centres.

YWCA Canberra's Circles of Support (COS) program provides counselling and therapeutic services to 8-15 year olds and their families. This service has been stretched to capacity for the past three years, with a current waiting list time of eight months.

A recent snapshot of clients accessing this service showed that all but one person out of 25 experienced at least one form of family violence. Specifically, the data revealed that 24 per cent of clients have experienced sexual abuse, 64 per cent have experienced physical abuse, 23 per

cent have experienced emotional abuse, 36 per cent have experienced financial abuse, 20 percent have engaged in substance abuse, and 24 per cent have experienced neglect.

This snapshot also demonstrated that 50 per cent of COS clients experience psychosocial disability, with only half having a formal diagnosis. 20 per cent of clients have a history of involvement with the Child Protection system, with 88 per cent experiencing attachment trauma in their childhood, which has affected their capacities, relationships and functioning in their daily lives.

Common issues experienced by young people in the COS program are disengagement from school, violence in the family home, self-harm and suicidality, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues and disability.

### **Recommendations**

YWCA Canberra and Marymead Child & Family Centre recommend that the ACT Government demonstrates its ongoing commitment to supporting young people by:

- Dedicating an equal amount of funding allocated to the 20 school psychologists outlined in the Parliamentary Agreement, to community-based counselling services for at-risk young people and their families.<sup>xi</sup> This will ensure that children and young people not attending school, or who are at-risk of disengaging from education do not fall further behind. Alternately, if additional funding is not available, it is recommended that half of these funds are allocated to community-based therapeutic counselling services for children, young people and their families.

## References

- <sup>i</sup> My first speech to the 9<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, [http://www.andrewbarr.com.au/my\\_first\\_speech\\_to\\_the\\_9th\\_assembly](http://www.andrewbarr.com.au/my_first_speech_to_the_9th_assembly)
- <sup>ii</sup> *The case for gender parity*, World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/the-case-for-gender-parity/>
- <sup>iii</sup> *Gender pay gap costs country \$195b, says economist*, Adele Ferguson, Sydney Morning Herald, 9 March 2013 <http://www.smh.com.au/national/gender-gap-costs-country-195b-says-economist-20130308-2fr2n.html>
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