

Monday 13 October 2014

Mr Mick Gentleman MLA  
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**Submission to the 2015-16 ACT Budget Consultation Process**

Dear Mr Gentleman,

Please find attached YWCA Canberra's Submission to the 2015-16 ACT Budget Consultation Process.

This document is informed by our response to the 2014-15 ACT Government Budget Consultation Process, our participation in the Select Committee on Estimates Hearing, and the Chief Minister's round table discussion with community sector leaders.

If you require further information please contact Joanna Allebone, YWCA Canberra Director of Corporate Relations and Communications  
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Yours Sincerely,



Frances Crimmins  
Executive Director  
YWCA Canberra

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

YWCA Canberra is a feminist, not-for-profit community 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.

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.

In 2013 YWCA Canberra provided a submission to the 2014 ACT Budget that contained a number of recommendations that highlighted key priority areas for funding. As these recommendations were not addressed in the process, these areas have been reiterated in this submission, in addition to a series of new priority areas.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The ACT's image as an affluent society often means the individuals and families in our community that live in poverty are overlooked (ACT Government 2012). 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 (Tanton et al 2013, p.ii).

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 2015-16 ACT Budget.

Importantly, as the outcomes of the recent Federal Department of Social Services funding round have yet to be announced, the ACT Government should seriously consider the impact of a potential significant shortfall in federal funding for vulnerable people in the ACT.

Further, the recent defunding of Youth Connections will leave a gaping hole in available services for vulnerable young people in Canberra and surrounding regions.

YWCA Canberra recommends:

- I. That the ACT Government prioritise homelessness services and housing affordability, particularly by:
  - a. funding homelessness prevention and early intervention measures including maintaining public and private tenancies and other supported services, especially for women and children leaving domestic/family violence, to break the cycle of homelessness.
  - b. working with community and commercial housing providers to increase the number of available, affordable and appropriate housing options for older women, women and children fleeing domestic/family violence and students.

2. That the ACT Government funds early intervention therapeutic counselling services for children and young people and their families.
3. That the ACT Government funds the delivery of respectful relationships education to students in ACT primary and secondary school, as a key strategy to eliminate violence against women and children in our community.

### **Housing Affordability and Homelessness**

**Recommendation 1:** That the ACT Government prioritise homelessness services and housing affordability.

Recent announcements in the Federal Budget will have a significant impact on income support for young people in our community and will lead to increased numbers of homeless young people.

The ACT Government should direct investment towards preventing homelessness, breaking the cycle of homelessness and addressing housing affordability in the ACT. Homelessness remains a significant issue in the ACT. In 2011, 1,785 people were homeless in the ACT (Tanton et al 2013, p.15). This number may not include hidden homelessness which particularly affects women and children, such as those staying with friends, relatives or engaging in unwanted sexual relationships (Homelessness Australia 2013; Martin 2010).

In 2011/2012, specialist homelessness services assisted approximately 229,200 people, who were homeless or at risk of homelessness: 59% female, 19% aged under 12 and 13% aged between 12 and 18 years. Interpersonal relationships, especially domestic/family violence, were the most common reason for seeking assistance. Approximately 374 requests per day were not met, with mainly women and children turned away (AIHW 2013, pp.282, 300).

Research has identified two types of critical assistance 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, life skills, housing assistance et cetera) for as long as they need it” (Tually et al 2008, p.vi, see also Dockery et al 2010; Spinney 2012). Preventing homelessness is more than beds, it includes support services (ACTCOSS 2013, p.13) and both must be funded.

Domestic/family violence and homelessness have adverse effects on children including “depression and anxiety, personal, social and language developmental difficulties, emotional developmental delays among pre-schoolers, health and hunger problems, and poor academic performance” (Dockery et al 2010, p.41, see also Spinney 2012). Breaking the Cycle, described below in Recommendation 2, is an innovative program designed to support children, young people and their families who have experienced homelessness and aims to mitigate the adverse effects of homelessness on them. These programs are integral to breaking the cycle of homelessness and domestic/family violence and must be funded.

Access to affordable housing is critical in preventing homelessness in Australia and housing affordability remains a significant issue in the ACT. A “lack of affordable housing is both a cause of homelessness and a reason for people being unable to break the cycle of homelessness” (ACTCOSS 2013, p.5). ACT faces the highest cost of living in Australia (Phillips 2013, p.21), mainly due to the highest rents in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that the

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<sup>1</sup> \$463/week for a house and \$403/week for an apartment in September 2013 (APM 2013).

private rental market in the ACT is “extremely unaffordable for persons on a low income”, with no “appropriate and affordable housing options” for pensioners, single parents, the unemployed and students. This places pressure on public housing (Anglicare 2013, p.26) which currently has long waiting times<sup>2</sup> and lists.<sup>3</sup>

YWCA Canberra supports Common Ground which will house around 40 people, however, there are 1,875 homeless in the ACT. Common Ground will also not house children. YWCA Canberra is increasingly concerned about the reduction of exit points for families accessing our transitional accommodation services.<sup>4</sup> Motivated by our desire to be part of the solution, we started our own affordable housing program which includes seven housing tenancies for older women.<sup>5</sup> In respect of housing affordability, women are more affected than men due to their lower incomes, periods out of the workplace for caring and longer lifespans (Tually et al 2007).

Research shows that single, older women face housing insecurity and are at greater risk of homelessness. There are limited housing and support options for this group and affordable housing options are integral in preventing this growing group from becoming homeless (Batterham et al 2013; Kliger 2010; McFerran 2010; Tually et al 2008; Sharam 2011).

Women and children fleeing domestic/family violence become homeless due to a lack of appropriate and affordable housing. Women with large families or male children have difficulty accessing accommodation (Tually et al 2008). Affordable housing plays a central role in allowing women and their families to re-establish their lives, while an absence means remaining in unsafe situations and multiple instances of homelessness (Champion et al 2009).

Students also face housing insecurity and are at risk of homelessness. 10% of Canberra’s population are students and half live independently. Research found that 87% of respondents experienced at least mild housing stress and 22% had, at one time, nowhere permanent to live (Lloyd-Jones 2013). For a single student, the maximum Youth Allowance including Rent Assistance is \$482 per fortnight. The high cost of living in the ACT results in students living in poverty (AYAC 2012).

#### **Therapeutic Services for Children & Young People and Support for Parents**

**Recommendation 2:** That the ACT Government funds early intervention therapeutic, counselling services for children and young people and universal and targeted support for parents.

YWCA Canberra has identified this as one of the critical areas of need as well as an opportunity. Counselling support to children and young people is only available as a free and immediate service through the school counselling service, although there are limitations:

- Counselling support is only available during school hours and school terms;
- Counselling services tend to focus on the individual students rather than involving the whole family
- A significant amount of School Counsellor time is devoted to assessment of students with disabilities. All though this is vital for students with disabilities it often leaves little

<sup>2</sup> 154 days for Priority Housing, 598 days for High Needs Housing and 618 days for Standard Housing (ACT Shelter 2013).

<sup>3</sup> At 30 June 2013, 2,231 households were waiting for public housing, up from 1,811 on 30 June 2012 (Anderson 2013).

<sup>4</sup> This is confirmed by research (Faulkner et al 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Two one bedroom units in Bruce and Lady Heydon House in Spence.

time to work with other students, particularly those who require early intervention support.

- Some children and young people will not access the counselling service for reasons of confidentiality or because they have disengaged with school;
- The service has limited capacity to provide longer term counselling support.

While we strongly support the need for the school counselling service we are also of the view that the needs of many children and young people are complex and need to be addressed within the context of the family. YWCA Canberra believes there is a significant need for counselling services that provide a holistic approach and that are available outside the school system including:

- Flexible hours of service – after school and during school holiday periods;
- Ensure that the existing service investment of \$5.5 million for the school counselling service is expended to implement a more holistic, flexible and diverse counselling service system;
- More resources are needed in order to provide for community based mental and therapeutic services for children, young people and their families.
- Introduce a referral pathway from school counselling services to community organisations to provide a more cohesive service;
- Provide wrap around support to parents of children with mental health issues.

In 2010/2011, the ACT had the highest contact rate of community mental health services in Australia. Nationwide, over 314,000 contacts were made to the community mental health services involving children under the age of 15 years. Most contacts were made by five to nine year olds (27%) and ten to 14 year olds (69%) (AIHW 2011).

YWCA Canberra has extensive experience in providing services and support to children, young people and their families including specific services for young mothers:

- Circles of Support provides essential early intervention for children, young people and their families to access therapeutic counselling support as well as support for parenting. The program provides outreach counselling for children and young people aged eight to 15 and their families in Lanyon, Phillip, Watson and Kippax. The program has been operational since late 2012 and is already fully subscribed. Circles of Support can only work with 16 children at a time leading to the current waiting list of over 20 children.
- Breaking the Cycle provides services to children, young people and their families who are either experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. This early intervention program works with families and their children by assessing their needs and providing one on one parenting support and parenting groups.

Both programs draw on the “Circle of Security” model developed in the USA that provides support to families by strengthening the relationship between parents and children. Evidence shows that early intervention through therapeutic counselling has long term positive effects on children and are beneficial to the individual and family. The positive effects have an impact on the child’s health, academic achievements and employment (Moore & McDonald 2013).

### **Eliminating violence against women and children**

**Recommendation 3:** That the ACT Government funds the delivery of respectful relationships education to students in ACT primary and secondary schools, as a key strategy to eliminate violence against women and children in our community.

The Second Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children (the National Plan) is focused on building and implementing national initiatives to achieve a society that is ultimately free of violence.

YWCA Canberra firmly believes that an integral part of reducing violence against women and children is primary prevention, and that by targeting primary school-aged children, we can enact a cultural change that will lead to an overall reduction of violence against women and children in the long-term, as well as building important short term outcomes for children in terms of forming respectful, violence-free relationships.

YWCA Canberra's primary prevention program aimed at ending violence against women and children is *Respect, Communicate, Choose*, a comprehensive primary school-based program that aims to give young people the necessary tools to develop, promote and perpetuate safe and respectful relationships.

We submit that funding to support the Second Action Plan incorporate a primary prevention program targeting primary school-aged children, and that *Respect, Communicate, Choose* be considered as a viable and effective model to be implemented in primary schools in the ACT.

*Respect, Communicate, Choose* complements *Relationship Things*, a program for young people aged 14- 18 years. As a school and community resource, *Relationship Things* aims to prevent sexual assault and gender-based violence by equipping young people with the tools and knowledge to develop and maintain safe and respectful relationships.

Relationship Things is underpinned by two key theories: a gender analysis which acknowledges that violence against women is caused by gender inequalities, and primary prevention, which aims to prevent violence before it occurs. YWCA Canberra recognises the need to extend the reach of the face-to-face program, and develop an online version, to engage young people who otherwise wouldn't have access through school or their local youth centre.

*Relationship Things Online* extends the reach of the hard copy Relationship Things resources by developing an interactive digital portal and mobile application. Relationship Things Online aims to increase the number of young people receiving this vital information, particularly those who are at-risk or who have disengaged from formal education. It will also act as a go-to reference for the graduates of the face-to-face program.

The Australian Media and Communications Authority's report entitled, "Like, post, share: Young Australians' experience of social media (Qualitative research report), August 2011" a study of Australian children aged eight to 17, found that as children become older, going online becomes a central activity for social interaction, education, knowledge gathering and exposure to new experiences. Online time is now an integral part of young people's lives.

A research snapshot released by the Australian Media and Communications Authority in July 2014 on the digital life of Australian teenagers further demonstrated that:

- 89 per cent have a mobile phone;
- 69 per cent of mobile phone users have a smartphone;
- 56 per cent use their mobile phone to go online;
- 72 per cent go online more than once a day.

The research snapshot also showed that the number of teenagers using the internet via mobile phones has more than tripled in the four years since December 2009 to reach 639,000 users during December 2013.

With this increased use of technology comes an increased pressure on young people interacting socially online. Empirical studies show that approximately one in 10 teenagers have sent a sexually explicit text message, often containing graphic images. Worryingly, one in 5 teenagers have seen a sexually explicit text message, indicating that the messages are rarely only viewed by the intended recipient.

Digital communication through texting, instant messaging and social media is generally conducted outside of parental regulation, so it is incredibly important that young people are equipped with the skills and knowledge to negotiate respect towards both their own and other people's relationships in order to ensure a safe, appropriate online environment where young people are supported and encouraged to engage with each other in a respectful way.

Delivered via a website and a mobile application, Relationship Things Online addresses this issue by providing an evidence-based, digital resource accessible to all young people outside of a formal education setting. homophobia, and normalising violence within same-sex relationships.

*Relationship Things* aims to influence the next generation by equipping young people with the skills and knowledge to identify and enact respectful relationships. In addition, the program aims to instill in participants a sense of gender equitable attitudes and values – ultimately creating a cultural change that will lead to an end to violence against women and children in the long term.

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