



YWCA CANBERRA

## **Submission to ACT Budget 2025-2026 Community Consultation**

[Leah.dwyer@ywca-canberra.org.au](mailto:Leah.dwyer@ywca-canberra.org.au)

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

YWCA Canberra proudly recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to own and control their cultures and pays our respect to these rights. YWCA Canberra acknowledges the need to respect and encourage the diversity of Indigenous cultures and to respect Indigenous worldviews, lifestyles, and customary laws. We extend our respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and will continue to always be Aboriginal land.

## **About YWCA Canberra**

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

Our mission is 'We strengthen communities by supporting girls and women through our services and advocacy' and our vision is 'Girls and women thriving'.

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

We are externally accredited against the Quality Improvement Council (QIC) Health and Community Service Standards (7th Edition). Accreditation against the QIC standards support us to improve client and community engagement, diversity and cultural appropriateness, management systems, governance and service delivery, while committing to a cycle of continuous quality improvement. In addition to the QIC standards, we are accredited against the following external client related service standards for our key areas of work:

- [Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission](#)
- [National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Aged Care](#)
- [National Regulatory System for Community Housing](#)
- [Registered Training Organisations Standards](#)

Through our national Affiliate Association with YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 120 countries across the globe.

## **Introduction**

YWCA Canberra have been long-standing contributors to the ACT Government's community consultation process on the Territory Budget. We use this valuable process to draw attention to the lives of women, girls, and families in the ACT and put forward policy suggestions to improve our community for everyone.

We welcomed the announcement in 2024 to redirect the revenue from the Safer Families Levy toward frontline services. This decision reflects our longstanding advocacy regarding transparency of the levy, public expectation and future sustainability for front line services.

More people than ever rely on our community services. Our food pantry service in Lanyon has seen a doubling of demand and a shift in user demographics over the past two years, and more dependent children are presenting to our domestic violence support service. The shift in demand for our critical social services is yet to be offset by a sustainable funding envelope despite the compounding effects of population growth and cost of living pressures.

We further hold concerns regarding the sustainability of our services in light of ongoing Budget deficits in the ACT and delays to the commissioning process. We use this submission to caution against underinvestment or cuts to the sector as means to manage the ACT Government's Budget position.

### **We use this Budget submission to highlight the following:**

1. The critical role of peppercorn leases in delivering viable community services;
2. The need for specialist child support workers in domestic violence services;
3. Immediate allocation of the Safer Families Levy to programs that are routinely exhausted, underfunded or have not received indexation;
4. The role of a distinct Homelessness portfolio; and
5. The value of early education services.

## **Overarching considerations**

We frame this submission within the context of increased, and foreseeable demand on our services alongside continuing budget deficits. The ACT's estimated resident population grew 2 per cent through the year to the December quarter 2023, due largely to strong net overseas migration. Furthermore, at the last Census, it was revealed that the ABS had underestimated the ACT population by 5.1 per cent, the largest underestimation of any jurisdiction. Despite the precarity that many services operate under, population increase which has compounded pre-existing issues, has not been incorporated in funding models. Some community services are operating under the same funding envelope from ten years ago, despite population changes and significant policy reforms.

We are concerned that in light of overriding budget deficits, as well as repeated messaging from ACT Government representatives about resource limitations, that programs in dire need of investment or subsidies will be left facing the same precarity following the 2025-2026 Budget. The temptation for government to address Budget shortfalls by treating community services as a 'magic pudding', that can be subjected to underinvestment while meeting increasing demand, is common.

For YWCA Canberra, this scenario has the potential to play out through our peppercorn lease arrangements that support our food relief program and the affordability of our early learning services, critical services that Canberrans increasingly rely on. The availability of peppercorn rates at our early learning services in Condor and Reid allow us to provide critically underfunded programs such as the three-year old preschool initiative and emergency places on behalf of Child, Youth and Family Services. Without the continuation of peppercorn rates, we will be unable to deliver these services to vulnerable children in Canberra who typically have the most to developmentally gain from formal early learning services.

## **Peppercorn lease arrangements**

YWCA Canberra supports the retention of peppercorn lease arrangements for place-based community service hubs and early learning services that provide services to vulnerable Canberrans, on behalf of the ACT Government. Our Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Centre

in Tuggeranong, available on a peppercorn lease, provides placed based services, from YWCA and other community services, pantry support, community health, financial counselling services, programs for at risk young people, social programs for seniors as well as 'mums and bubs' groups, to name a few. In addition, a communal space available for hire at low cost or free for local recreational groups. Furthermore, our early learning centre in Reid, also on a peppercorn lease, means we are able to provide places which are on average \$30 less per day than other services in the area to families on modest income and others who are receiving the additional child support subsidy. This lease arrangement allows us to deliver the Government's three-year old preschool initiative and emergency placements while keeping mainstream places affordable.

The community benefit of a peppercorn lease cannot be overstated. With reduced rental costs, services can allocate more resources to programs and subsidised access that directly benefit those most in need. Recently however, we have become increasingly concerned for the future of these leases. Most significantly, these concerns arise from the government's reluctance to support a transitional Peppercorn lease for the Civic Early Learning Centre after the previous tenant departed the site and our own peppercorn lease at Reid CIT is being earmarked for eventual termination. Maintaining and valuing

**Recommendation 1): Commit to retaining existing peppercorn lease arrangements for facilities providing a community services on behalf of government.**

**Recommendation 2): Commit to expanding peppercorn lease arrangements for facilities providing a community services on behalf of government in new developments and suburbs.**

### **Specialist child support workers in domestic violence services**

As increasing numbers of women turn to domestic violence response services for help there is an inevitable increase in the presentation of accompanying children. Our Domestic Violence Support Service provided support for 203 children in 2023. This increased to 254 children in 2024, with toddler-aged children being the age bracket with the greatest growth in presentations.

However, as our Domestic Violence Support Service does not have a specialist child support workers in place, these children are not able to receive support directly from our service. While we provide direct support to the protective parent, we would be better able to directly respond to the unique needs of children living with domestic or family violence if we had specialist child support workers. These specialist roles would involve assessing the impact of domestic violence on the wellbeing and development of the child as well as responding to their unique safety needs. Funded through the resources of the Safer Families Levy, these roles would allow services such as ours to contribute to the ACT Government's commitment to the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2023* which centres the voices and experiences of children subjected to violence, as victim-survivors in their own right. Further to this, it would also address the findings of the *Now you have heard us, What will you do?* developed by the Family Safety Hub and the Children's Commissioner which heard young people's experiences with violence. The report found children had difficult experiences with counsellors and workers who didn't understand their unique needs or were not skilled in helping them manage trauma.<sup>1</sup> These additional workers would also deliver age-appropriate support services and group programs for young people and their recovery and safety needs.

**Recommendation 3): Deliver funding, \$300,000 per year to support the recruitment and retention of two specialist child/young people support officers within YWCA Canberra's Domestic Violence Support Service.**

### **Use of the Safer Families Levy**

YWCA Canberra welcomed the announcement to direct all revenue accrued through the Safer Families Levy toward services and programs that work directly with women and children living with violence. The misuse of the Levy has been a longstanding concern of YWCA Canberra, as well as the broader sector and these changes to how the Levy is allocated will better align with community expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/2264476/Now-you-have-heard-us-What-will-you-do-Report-FA-Web-FA.pdf](https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2264476/Now-you-have-heard-us-What-will-you-do-Report-FA-Web-FA.pdf) (p 17).

In 2024, the ACT Audit Office found that *“planning and development of domestic and family violence initiatives has been undermined by the lack of a Territory-specific strategy for responding to domestic and family violence and an up-to-date understanding of what the needs of the ACT are in responding to domestic and family violence”*.<sup>2</sup> The absence of a domestic violence strategy has undermined the allocation of this significant resource to the sector. While we support the development of a comprehensive and visionary strategy to address domestic and family violence in the ACT to guide projects and targets, there are a number of initiatives that can be immediately better resourced through the Safer Families Levy:

- The **safer families assistance payment**, a \$2,000 payment from the ACT Government to assist people rebuild their lives after violence, is routinely exhausted. While it does get replenished throughout the year, those claimants who have the misfortune of applying during the window where the funding has temporarily run out are left without support. The allocation of funding set aside for the payment must be increased so that no client who asks for help is left without support purely due to the timing of their arrival.
- Support an **increase in specialist staff throughout the women’s sector** including child welfare specialists, sexual violence counsellors and court advocates.
- **Establish a flexible innovation fund** that can meet the bespoke needs of women in need of housing and homelessness support due to violence, but who are outside of existing programs.
- **Apply indexation to the Women’s Safety Grants**, the funding envelope of which has not changed in more than 10 years.

**Recommendation 4): Immediately resource existing programs and services, that work directly with victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, and sexual violence which are routinely exhausted, underfunded or which are not appropriately indexed.**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.audit.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/2612949/Report-No.-10-of-2024-Safer-Families-Levy.pdf](https://www.audit.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2612949/Report-No.-10-of-2024-Safer-Families-Levy.pdf)

## Homelessness resourcing and recognition

YWCA Canberra was disappointed by the decision of the new ACT Government to remove the distinct Homelessness portfolio and move its functions to the portfolio *“Homes and New Suburbs”*. The erasure of this portfolio alienates those who are homeless and who do not see themselves under branding such as *“Homes”*. It defies logic, that at a time when the Australian Government is working with states and territories to deliver upon the National Housing and Homelessness Plan as well as negotiate the new National Agreement for Social Housing and Homelessness, that the ACT Government would strip the homelessness services portfolio and deprioritise the status of these services.

Homelessness and housing crisis in Canberra is increasing and safe exits into housing are difficult to secure. Long-term data from the Specialist Homelessness Services reveals a discernible upward trend in presentations at Canberra services. Nationally, there has been an increase in rough-sleeping and the cohort of homeless persons who are in employment is growing.<sup>3</sup> Domestic violence remains a common co-presenting factor for service users, of whom women aged 18-45 are the largest cohort. We welcomed the \$20 million boost to homelessness services, delivered through the 2023-24 ACT Budget which included flexible and ad hoc support for people who were sleeping rough or not serviced through pre-existing programs. Not all of this funding however is slated to continue beyond the forward estimates. Given the challenges facing the homelessness sector we urge that time limited programs that responded to complex client needs, be reinstated.

**Recommendation 5): Continue the one-off funding for emergency material, financial aid and food relief services that was provided in the 2024-2025 Budget.**

**Recommendation 6): Continue longer term investment in homelessness services that provide flexible support and brokerage for clients who may not be captured under existing programs.**

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<sup>3</sup> [https://cityfutures.adg.unsw.edu.au/documents/764/AHM\\_final.pdf](https://cityfutures.adg.unsw.edu.au/documents/764/AHM_final.pdf)



## Valuing Early Education Services

High quality early learning contributes significantly to childhood development and has lifelong benefits. This is particularly true for children who are in out of home care or child protection. Many of these children have been able to access emergency placements through Child, Youth and Family Services when their primary carer is not available. However, the funding envelope for this program has not kept pace either with demand or with the price settings that recognise the true value of this labour. In addition, the funding for the Three-year-old initiative is well below the daily rate of a placement for education and care.

Until January 2025, our early learning services provided 43, three-year-old inclusion placements for children each two days per week. Many of these children are vulnerable and present with complex trauma and developmental delays. Without the routine and opportunities of early learning, many will struggle to catch up to their peers. Following lobbying from the sector, the ACT Government increased the funding by removing the GST inclusive component of funding agreements. However, this has still not made up the funding shortfall for this program. Data from the Report on Government Services (ROGS) indicate that the recurrent cost of operating an early learning service far outstrip costs nationally, but this is not reflected in ACT Government funding for three-year-old initiative and emergency places. Subsequently, centres have been forced to reduce the number of places or withdraw from the three-year-old initiative and emergency care places.

The referral process for CYF emergency childcare program is not transparent and accessing a place for a vulnerable children/ family is being limited with a substantive number of referrals being refused. It is not apparent how CYF services can state that there is a reduced need for emergency childcare places, when data indicating more victim survivors of domestic and family violence are seeking support, and the number of children in out of home care has not reduced.

**Recommendation 7): Adequately resource the emergency placement for children who are in early learning services without reducing capacity of services to provide mainstream places. Provide transparency on the referral process and criteria to access to the emergency childcare places.**

**Recommendation 8): Extend the emergency placement program so that eligible children attending primary school can also access the benefits of outside school care.**

**Recommendation 9): Adequately resource the three-year-old preschool initiative to at least the average daily ROGs price per day (GST exclusive) so the NGO sector does not have to fund the gap and ensure service viability in delivering the program.**