



**COTA ACT Submission
on the**

2019-20 BUDGET

October 2018

COTA ACT thanks the ACT Government for the opportunity to make a submission on the 2019-20 ACT Budget.

INTRODUCTION

COTA ACT is the peak organisation in the Australian Capital Territory concerned with all issues related to ageing. It is an independent, non-party political and non-religious organisation working to protect and promote the well-being, rights and interests of all older people in the ACT irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic, religious or cultural background.

COTA ACT is a member of an Australian wide organisation – COTA Australia – and contributes to the development of national policies and agendas.

The COTA ACT Policy Committee has identified a number of policy priorities to improve the health and wellbeing of older Canberrans. This submission makes a number of recommendations against these priorities.

Recognising that resources are limited, ***COTA ACT recommends that ACT Government give highest priority in the 2019-20 Budget to initiatives that support:***

- ***older people attempting to get best use out of our health care system to avoid hospitalisation or rehospitalisation***
- ***older ACT people in the last stage of life, who require access to palliative care to have a good death***
- ***older ACT people at risk of homelessness (as broadly defined to include unacceptable accommodation situations as well as rough sleepers).***

HEALTH

Improve acute care pathways for older ACT patients at risk

It is essential that older public hospital patients with complex conditions likely to affect their recovery are identified on presentation at hospital, so that planning of treatment can begin on admission. There should also be a parallel process starting from admission to develop a plan for hospital discharge, simultaneous with the clinical path to medical stability.

In the ACT's main public hospital, Canberra Hospital, the process of identifying and planning acute care treatment has greatly improved for geriatric patients with the introduction of the ASET program. This picks up patients over 80 with specific geriatric conditions, who receive treatment in the Acute Care for the Elderly Unit.

COTA ACT strongly supports funding to broaden the scope of geriatric assessment to include all patients over 70 with complex conditions.

End prioritising the admission of privately insured patients to ACT public hospitals

There are indications that the ACT has joined some other jurisdictions in seeking to augment its revenue by prioritising the admission of privately insured patients for elective surgery in its public hospitals. Published data¹ shows the ACT had particularly long median wait times for total knee and hip replacements, consistent with a national trend evident in public

¹ Elective Surgery Waiting Times 2014-15 - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Tables 4.4, 4.9

hospitals where public patients face a much longer wait time than private patients for elective orthopaedic surgery.

Prioritising the admission of privately insured patients unfairly disadvantages older public patients and ***COTA ACT strongly opposes any reliance on this practice to promote the fiscal sustainability of the ACT health system.***

Properly manage the health care of ACT aged care residents

COTA ACT strongly supports efforts to improve health care for residents of the ACT's aged care facilities. These older Canberrans have for too long had to do without adequate primary medical services, over-reliance on hospitalisation, and poor continuity of care on discharge.

We commend the recently-piloted Geriatric Rapid Acute Care Evaluation (GRACE) care model which promotes collaboration and coordination between a resident's General Practitioner (GP), Aged Care Facility staff, and Calvary Public Hospital. Wherever possible, a resident experiencing a health episode is medically assessed and treated in the residential setting. If a patient's condition is serious enough to warrant a hospital admission, this is coordinated between the GRACE team and the Calvary Public Hospital Emergency Department.

COTA ACT urges the ACT Government to provide contributory funding to make this model of care available to all of the ACT's aged care residents. We believe this would result in substantial cost savings for the Territory's public hospital system, as well as a very positive impact for residents, their family and care providers.

Improve transitions of care for older ACT people

Many older consumers, especially those with chronic or complex conditions, face difficulties in getting the continuity of care they need when they are discharged from hospital.

The transition of care between hospital and home is a key point in health care delivery and patient recovery. Adverse events and disruptions to continuous and comprehensive care often occur at this stage of care. Poor transitions of care impact on patient safety, the quality and experience of care and the efficiency of the ACT's health system. From the system sustainability perspective, there is increased risk of costly re-hospitalisation.

COTA ACT strongly supports the targeted supportive approach taken in the Transitions of Care Service Delivery Model currently being piloted at Canberra Hospital. The pilot employs nurses who work closely with Discharge Liaison Nurses from the hospital and with primary health care providers in the community.

Key components of the model include:

- target patient enrolment – aimed at patients with complex and chronic conditions, with recent hospital admissions and at risk of readmission
- transition coordination support from the hospital to home setting individuals to sustain continuity of care through (re)connecting with general practice and outpatient, community health and care services

- patient education and self-management support
- facilitating access to health and community-based services the patient requires.

COTA ACT strongly supports the ACT Government contributing funding to ensure the continuation and broadening of this program to include all older ACT public hospital patients who meet the target criteria. This targeted assistance should reduce costly readmissions and so increase health system sustainability.

Introduce community-based health system navigators

Appropriately skilled and trained patient navigators can assist a patient to identify, anticipate and alleviate barriers to accessing prompt and coordinated health care. These barriers exist for many older people, and can include:

- lack of up to date knowledge about the health system, the different entities and care providers, and how elements of the system interact with each other and with patients
- communication and cultural issues, for example confronting non-English speakers, those unfamiliar with acronyms and technical terms, and those with cultural inhibitions about questioning people in authority
- negotiating the bureaucracy and managing financial issues
- emotional barriers, such as fear of diagnosis.

This navigation assistance can significantly improve the promptness of health care delivery for many older ACT people. It will also improve the coordination and continuity of care for many older patients discharged from hospital and those with chronic conditions who require an escalation of primary care to avoid hospitalisation. By helping to ensure that the health needs of older patients are met in the community, rather than in hospital, navigators will improve the sustainability of the ACT's health care system.

COTA ACT notes that Healthcare Consumers ACT have been funded to develop a model for the use of patient care navigators in community settings. We will be taking the opportunity to assist HCCA in the development of this model and ***we strongly support funding and implementation of a community-based health system navigators program.***

Improve resourcing and internal coordination of ACT public dental programs

The current level of funding only allows for the basic type of dentistry reflecting practice 50 years ago, such as extractions, fillings and dental plates. There appears to be no provision for modern treatment such as root canal therapy and implant surgery. Given the importance of dental health for overall health and quality of life for older people, this deficiency is too important to be sidestepped by blaming a lack of Federal funding.

Administratively, there seems to be a lack of coordination between professional staff identifying the dental work that patients require and those scheduling treatment appointments for the patient. There also appears to be issues with coordination of appointments and access to patient information when dental patients are referred to a different health centre to access specialised dental treatment.

COTA ACT supports supplemental funding for ACT dental programs to raise treatment standards and improve program administration.

Improve funding for pain management resourcing and training

Persistent and chronic pain is much more prevalent in older age groups, affecting one in three people over 65 (as documented by Pain Australia). The debilitating effects of untreated pain include depression, relationship breakdown and social isolation.

Pain management services in the ACT are seriously inadequate. When compared with waiting times for access to private pain management specialists, there are long delays for people wanting to access the public Pain Clinic. The long waiting list is not surprising, given that we understand the Pain Clinic has only one full time specialist.

Staff in the public Pain Clinic also require training in client contact with older patients, as they frequently make the incorrect assumption that they are dealing with drug addicts and treat older patients with unsympathetic discourtesy.

COTA ACT recommends:

- ***resources are allocated to the public Pain Clinic to employ additional specialists and provide staff training on working with older patients***
- ***better promotion of GPs in Canberra who specialise in pain management.***

PALLIATIVE CARE

Improve access to palliative care in residential aged care

Palliative care is a critical component in ensuring a “good death”. While recognising that existing palliative care services in the ACT are of a high standards, COTA ACT is aware through our members and through our links with the ACT Healthcare Consumers Association (HCCA) that access to palliative care in the home and in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACFs) is inadequate. The lack of palliative care in RACFS result in the inappropriate transfer of older Canberrans to die in ACT hospital emergency or acute care wards. ***COTA ACT calls on the ACT Government to advocate to the Commonwealth Government to improve access to palliative care in residential aged care facilities.***

Fund a palliative care ward in the Canberra Hospital

Meanwhile, current inpatient facilities are insufficient to provide palliative care for older people who don't have the family support to die at home, particularly those with dementia. Clare Holland House cannot accommodate people with dementia, and many older dementia sufferers spend their last weeks, by default, in hospital. ***COTA ACT recommends that the ACT Government funds an eight bed palliative care ward in the Canberra Hospital, as proposed by HCCA.***

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

COTA ACT welcomes the newly announced ACT Housing Strategy and looks forward to the timely implementation of its objectives.

Create greater diversity of housing choices for older residents

Older Canberrans seek to 'age in place' but currently are unable to find appropriate accommodation that meets their changing needs as they age within their neighbourhood. COTA ACT supports measures to diversify housing choice and to design and deliver purpose built housing that adapts to the needs of older people. To ensure that housing options meet the needs of older people, ***COTA ACT urges the ACT Government to actively engage older Canberrans in the planning, design and development of housing options, with particular attention paid to ensuring housing can adapt to the changing needs of older people across the different age cohorts.***

COTA ACT also supports the measures that encourage well designed, environmentally sustainable and accessible housing, including:

- the investigation into options to introduce a voluntary universal design rating system for dwellings in the ACT; and
- maintaining a strong advocacy role on the National Building Ministers Forum to develop minimum accessibility standards for new dwellings.

However, COTA ACT considers the above measures do not go far enough to ensure accessible housing and ***recommends that the ACT Government adopt universal design principles for new dwelling construction.***

Increase availability of social housing

COTA ACT is particularly concerned about the increasing number of older Canberrans, particularly women, who do not have secure and stable accommodation. These people rent their homes and are disproportionately more likely to be experiencing housing stress and lower well-being more generally. There appears to be very few programs available to assist older homeless women.

Public and community housing is in critically short supply with waiting lists that are years long. COTA ACT welcomes the 15% target for social and affordable housing and other measures to reduce homelessness and strengthen social housing assistance.

Improve tenancy support for older Canberrans

Increasingly COTA ACT is approached by older Canberrans seeking assistance in applying for social and community housing or sourcing private rental accommodation or share accommodation. Families who wish to move ageing parents to the ACT may also seek assistance when they find that they have insufficient funds to buy a property or to rent on the private rental market but are not eligible for social housing, the waiting lists are too long and the parents are not ready to enter residential aged care. COTA ACT often refers these families to the Supportive Tenancy Service, funded by the ACT Government and operating through One Link, for assistance.

Currently the Supportive Tenancy Service, has one Support Worker who assists older residents. While older people find this service useful, it would greatly benefit from additional workers to meet demand for services. ***COTA ACT recommends increased funding***

for additional Tenancy Support Workers at the Supportive Tenancy Service to provide specialised support and advocacy for older Canberrans.

ENERGY

Support to meet rising costs of energy

The significant increases in cost of electricity and gas are placing increasing pressure on the budgets of older Canberrans who are on fixed low incomes. Electricity prices have increased by 10.6 percent in the past year, while gas and other household fuels rose by 17.8 percent.² The health and wellbeing of older residents are at risk as residents try to find ways to meet these costs. Often older residents try to save on energy costs by avoiding the use of heating or cooling even during extremes in temperature. Others forgo food, medicines or going to a doctor in order to pay the bills.

COTA ACT recommends:

- *continued investment to educate and support older residents to implement energy efficiency measures, including those in public housing*
- *continued funding for the Solar for Low Income Households Programs to extend this successful program*
- *investigate incentives for landlords to implement energy efficiency measures in their properties*
- *increasing the utilities concession to reflect the rising costs of energy.*

CONCESSIONS AND REBATES

No further reduction in concessions and rebates

Concessions and rebates play a critical role in helping older people on a fixed low income to balance their budget and meet the rising cost of essentials. Over the last few years, there has been a general erosion of the value of some concessions, while others have been removed as a budget saving measures, e.g. the ACT Seniors Spectacles Scheme. Significantly, the capping of the Pensioner Rates Rebate at \$700 has seen a reduction in the real value of the rebate against the significant increases to rates.

COTA ACT strongly recommends that:

- *there is no further reduction of concessions and rebates currently available to pensioners*
- *the cap of \$700 on the Pensioner Rates Rebate is removed or increased in line with the significant increases applied to ACT rates.*

ACTIVE AGEING/AGE FRIENDLY CITY

Implement active ageing principles in mainstream policies

COTA ACT understands that the ACT Government will not be extending the *ACT Active Ageing Framework 2015-2018*. We strongly encourage the Government to continue its commitment to enable all senior Canberrans to lead active, healthy and rewarding lives as valued members of the Canberra community. ***COTA ACT supports the principles outlined in the framework and recommends that the ACT Government does not lose its focus on***

² ACT Council of Social Service *ACT Cost of Living Report* May 2018

ensuring active ageing principles are incorporated into mainstream policies such as health, transport, employment, housing and social inclusion.

Improve access to strength training for older Canberrans

Research has shown that progressive strength training can alleviate the effects of chronic conditions such as Arthritis, Type 2 Diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease. Strength training has also show to:

- Improve balance and reduce risk of falling
- Enhance mental wellbeing
- Improve body composition
- Raise self-esteem and self-confidence
- Reduce lower back pain
- Enhance older people's ability to undertake activities of daily living and maintain an independent lifestyle.

These programs not only improve the health and wellbeing of older people, they can lead to reduction in demand for health, allied health and aged care services over time.

To encourage older people to undertake progressive strength training, a number of state COTAs offer strength training programs run by accredited fitness providers. The programs have been run under the name of Strength for Life (SA) and Living Longer Living Stronger (WA and VIC). COTA ACT is currently exploring funding opportunities to undertake a similar program in the ACT. ***COTA ACT recommends the ACT Government provide funding to implement a strength training program such as Strength for Life in the ACT.***

ELDER ABUSE

Develop an ACT Implementation Plan on Elder Abuse

COTA ACT welcomes the development of a national plan on elder abuse and the 2018 ACT Budget announcement to establish the Older Persons ACT Legal Service (OPALS) to provide targeted legal services to older Canberrans vulnerable to or experiencing elder abuse.

As the national plan will only focus on areas of national interest, ***COTA ACT strongly recommends that the ACT Government:***

- ***develop an ACT Implementation Plan that covers priority areas not included in the National Plan***
- ***establish an independent body to monitor and coordinate the implementation of all actions to address elder abuse.***

Create an ACT Register for Powers of Attorney

On 7 June 2018, COTA Australia, along with Australian Banking Association and National Seniors, called on the Attorneys-General to introduce standardised Power of Attorney laws, along with a single national online register and a dedicated body, which can investigate suspected financial abuse of older Australians. ***COTA ACT strongly supports this call for action and asks the ACT Government to work with other jurisdictions to achieve this.***

In the event of any significant delay in establishing a national register, **COTA ACT recommends that the ACT Government establish an ACT register for Powers of Attorney, as a priority.**

TRANSPORT

Improve access to public transport

Older Canberrans, particularly those with mobility issues, continue to express concerns about the changes to the bus network and the introduction of light rail, including:

- greater difficulty in accessing their regular shopping centre and services because of changes or removal of their regular bus route
- inability to walk the distance required to access a bus stop
- safety concerns when accessing light rail stops, particularly when crossing Northbourne Avenue
- failure to include the Canberra Hospital on the proposed route for Stage 2 Light Rail.

COTA ACT recommends:

- ***the Stage 2 of the Light Rail route include a stop at the Canberra Hospital. This would not only benefit older patients, family members but also staff employed at the hospital***
- ***ongoing adequate funding for the flexible bus service to meet increased demand arising from the changes to bus routes.***

HOME CARE SUPPORT

Interim care services for those facing long waits for high level home care packages

According to Department of Health figures, there are currently 1595 ACT residents on the waiting list for home care packages, and 935 of these people require Level 4 packages representing the highest level of care. Of those waiting for Level 4 packages, 223 have not been assigned a lower level package.

Departmental figures show that older Australians requiring the highest level of long-term support to live at home were waiting between nine and 12 months for an appropriate package, compared with a wait of between six to nine months in late 2017.

Increased Federal funding has led to the rollout of an additional 14,000 high-level packages nationally. However even if the ACT receives its pro rata share of these packages, this will still leave over 700 older ACT residents on the queue for a Level 4 package.

COTA ACT strongly supports increased funding for ACT organisations that provide interim care for older people awaiting high level home care packages.

VOLUNTEERING

Recognise the economic value of volunteering

Older Australians make significant contributions by volunteering. In 2010, 43% of volunteers in Australia were aged between 55 and 64 years, while 31% were aged 65 years and over.³

³ Volunteering Australia Information Sheet – Key facts and statistics about volunteering in Australia 16 April 2015

ACT has the highest rate of volunteering in Australia. Volunteering and Contact ACT has estimated that in the ACT nearly four in ten people volunteer, contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy annually⁴.

Volunteering delivers tangible economic, social and cultural outcomes for a community. In recognition of the importance of volunteering to the ACT community, ***COTA ACT recommends that the ACT Government acknowledge the contribution of voluntary work to the ACT economy and include an estimate of the economic value of this contribution in the ACT Budget Papers.***

In conclusion, COTA ACT would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these important issues.

Jenny Mobbs, Executive Director, COTA ACT

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⁴ Volunteering and Contact 2018-19 Budget Consultation October 2017 accessed at https://vc-act.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/VCA_2018_19_Budget_Submission.pdf