

Submission to ACT Government Budget Consultation 2023/24

Overview

Meridian is an LGBTIQ+ peer-led, community-controlled organisation that provides health and social support services to our communities. We have been supporting and advocating for our communities for 40 years. We celebrate diversity, strengthen community, and empower individuals to live their best lives.

Our communities we serve are those with and impacted by HIV, the LGBTIQ+ community, sex workers, and people who use drugs. We work with people across their life span and with intersection of disability, mental health and all aspects of humanity. We are united by our shared fight against stigma and discrimination and the ongoing impact of minority stress on the health and wellbeing of our communities.

We are subject matter experts and we have substantiated evidence about what works and why, with and for, our communities. Our impact and outcome evaluation indicates that our programs work and further we have a significant evidence base to support continuous improvement.

We are proud to be working alongside the ACT Government to create a safe and inclusive city for all Canberrans. We call for the ACT Government to allocate adequate funding to Meridian in the 2023/24 budget to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.

Capital of Equality Strategy Second Action Plan commitment	What we need to deliver on these commitments
<p>CoE Action 1 Improve information for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans in ACT Government communications.</p> <p>CoE Action 9 Improve access to health services for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.</p>	<p>We need a community development function to ensure information is current, accurate, and educational and to improve access to health services for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans. This will require a 1.0 FTE position, including oncosts and activity costs.</p>
<p>CoE Action 2 Resource annual events to celebrate the strength and diversity of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.</p>	<p>Meridian can deliver Fair Day annually. This will require an annual investment of \$100,000 to cover the current gap in funding.</p>
<p>CoE Action 5 Support Canberra’s LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisations: Meridian.</p>	<p>Meridian requires an annual operational budget to support infrastructure and oversight, governance, quality software, and other ICTs costs. In addition, our essential outcome measurement systems are currently unfunded.</p>
<p>CoE Action 8 Improve access to mental health support for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.</p>	<p>Meridian can hire a 1.6 FTE mental health professional, increasing our capacity to provide safe, inclusive, and identity-affirming mental health services and supports.</p>

Introduction

About Meridian

Meridian is an LGBTIQ+ community-controlled, peer-led organisation that provides health and social support services to our community. We have been supporting and advocating for our communities for 40 years.

We offer community and healthcare services and programs to people of diverse identities and experiences, including people of diverse sexualities, gender identities, and sex characteristics; people from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those who have sought asylum; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; sex workers; and people who use drugs. We support mainstream service providers and organisations to deliver LGBTIQ+ inclusive and competent services. We drive advocacy and awareness campaigns and contribute to research. And we deliver tailor-made training and education programs, calling on our lived experience and expertise to improve the broader community's understanding of HIV, sex and gender diversity, stigma and discrimination, inclusivity, and sex work.

Our funding requests are informed by:

- monitoring and evaluation data from our programs and services
- our insight into the needs of our communities as a peer-led organisation embedded in LGBTIQ+ communities
- the expertise and lived experience of our staff
- the lived experience of the Canberra Inclusive Partnership's LGBTIQ+ Service User Reference Group
- research on the role of LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisations in improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ communities
- the Capital of Equality Second Action Plan
- the ACT Government's LGBTIQ+ Health Scoping Study
- the following publications:
 - *Private Lives 3*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at Latrobe University
 - *Writing Themselves In 4*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at Latrobe University
 - *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*, ACTCOSS
 - *Paying What It Takes*, Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact.

A note on terminology: Meridian uses the initialism LGBTIQ+ to refer to people of diverse genders, sexualities, and sex characteristics, including but not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, pansexual, and people who have an intersex variation. We recognise that the initialism does not capture the full diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences that exist within our community. However, we also recognise the value of the term when exploring collective experiences of stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation, and when advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusivity. In this document, we also use LGBTIQ+ to align with current ACT Government terminology.

Requested funding

We urge the ACT Government to ensure that funding models provide long-term security and flexibility so we can dynamically respond to the changing needs of our communities. Our funding requirements are outlined below, with additional detail for each individual request provided in the following pages.

STAFFING AND ACTIVITY COSTS	
Mental health and wellbeing – highest priority	
Counselling staff: 1.6 FTE Level 5 SCHARDS Award (including oncosts)	\$175,407
Service delivery costs (including maintenance of accreditation, supervision, and professional development)	\$50,000
	\$225,407
Community development	
Community development coordinator: 1.0 FTE Level 6 SCHADS Award (including oncosts)	\$127,764
Community development activity costs	\$55,000
	\$177,764
Volunteering program	
Volunteer coordinator: 1.0 FTE Level 6 SCHADS Award (including oncosts)	\$123,500
Volunteering activity costs	\$45,000
	\$168,500
Education and training	
Trainers: 0.5 FTE Level 7 and 0.2 Level 5 SCHADS Award (including oncosts)	\$113,500
Training delivery costs	\$20,000
	\$133,500
SUBTOTAL – Staffing and activity costs	\$705,171
ESSENTIAL ORGANISATIONAL COSTS	
Outcomes measurement (currently unfunded). Approximately 10% of the staff and activity costs.	\$70,000
Admin, infrastructure, and oversight – including governance and quality assurance. Approximately 20% of the staff and activity costs.	\$140,000
Licensing, software, ICTs, and other essential hardware and software. Approximately 10% of the staff and activity costs.	\$50,000
SUBTOTAL – Essential organisational costs	\$260,000
ADDITIONAL FUNDING	
Fair Day production costs	\$100,000
TOTAL	\$965,171

OPERATIONAL BUDGET TO ENSURE MERIDIAN'S ONGOING SUSTAINABILITY

Meridian's ability to evolve with our communities' hinges on our organisation's flexibility. Without consistent, sustainable funding at the organisational level, we will lose this capacity.

We encourage the ACT Government to adopt the revised methodology for the community sector indexation rate outlined in ACTCOSS' *Counting the Costs*ⁱ report. The report aligns with the findings of numerous studies, including the recent *Paying What It Takes*ⁱⁱ report from Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact. These findings confirm that Australia's community sector has been persistently underfunded for indirect costs such as staffing, administration, and infrastructure. Adequate funding is crucial to sustain thriving non-for-profit organisations that improve the wellbeing of their communities.

We urge the ACT Government to use the new budget process to not only address the unmet needs of LGBTIQ+ people, but to bolster and enhance the services and support available to our communities. We encourage the Government to ensure that consumers and communities are at the centre of service design, planning, implementation, and governance.

To continue meeting the needs of LGBTIQ+ people in the ACT, we need funding to cover the implementation of the services, programs, and activities detailed above. Beyond seeking funding to cover these operational costs, however, we also request that funding be secured through longer contract periods of five years. This will provide the funding security required to sustainably meet our communities' complex and evolving needs.

Meridian's services play a vital role in supporting the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ communities in the ACT. We hope to have your support to ensure that our organisation has adequate and sustainable funding so we can continue this important role into the future.

Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Providing Meridian with an ongoing, sustainable budget to cover operational costs will fulfill all of the domains and indicators in the wellbeing framework.

Domain: Health – being healthy and supported with the right care

Indicator: Access to health services

Meridian supports the health and wellbeing of the LGBTIQ+ community to ensure they are supported with the right care. Without operational funding, we cannot provide our unique and critical services. Put simply, without core operational funding, we cannot open our doors.

MERIDIAN SERVICES

Counselling, psychosocial, and mental health support

For Meridian to provide adequate counselling, psychosocial, and mental health support, including service delivery costs, and to employ 1.6 FTE staff, we require **\$225,407** in funding.

Meridian is Canberra's only LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisation delivering mental health services, and those services are at capacity. This is a major priority for the community, for Meridian and for Government.

The mental health of LGBTIQ+ people is among the poorest in Australia. We know that the Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs has a deep understanding of the stigma, discrimination, and abuse that LGBTIQ+ people face every day, and the impact this has on their health and wellbeing. Our recent study into the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people when accessing services found that 58% of the 443 respondents had faced stigma, discrimination, or abuse when accessing a mainstream service in the previous 12 months (report forthcoming). Roughly a third of respondents said they had delayed or chosen not to access support in the last 12 months because they feared experiencing stigma, discrimination, or abuse.

Ensuring LGBTIQ+ people have access to safe, inclusive, and knowledgeable services is essential for addressing the very concerning rates of mental health disorders and suicide within our communities. Our study shows the important role of LGBTIQ+ peer-led services in increasing access to essential healthcare and support. Eighty-four percent of respondents said that they were more likely to access healthcare and support services if an LGBTIQ+ community controlled service were available.

We have been providing essential mental health support to our communities for over 30 years. This includes counselling, case management, psychosocial group work, and peer support. Our counselling service was established to support people living with and impacted by HIV, and we continue to provide critically important support to this cohort. However, in recent years we have expanded our services to respond to the unmet need in the LGBTIQ+ community for safe, inclusive, knowledgeable, and trauma-informed mental health support. The funds available through our current contract are insufficient to meet the needs of our communities. In recognition of this, the ACT Government has provided Meridian with additional funding through one-off and ad-hoc grants, particularly during times of additional stress within our communities, including during the marriage equality vote and the COVID-19 pandemic. We are grateful for these grants; however, the demand for our services continues to exceed what we are funded to deliver. Additionally, our mental health services sit within a broader infrastructure of quality and safety assurance. Not only are our mental health services fully accredited to the National Standards for Mental Health Services, but we provide our staff with regular training, professional development, and supervision and support to maintain their health and wellbeing. Maintaining our high standards of quality and safety cannot be achieved without adequate and sustainable funding. Ad-hoc and short-term funding hinders long-term planning and investment in our services.

Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Domain: Health – being healthy and supported with the right care

Indicator: Mental health

Mental health services provided by peer-led organisations such as Meridian are essential for improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, with research showing that LGBTIQ+ specific services are most effective in improving the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ clients.ⁱⁱⁱ Preliminary data from Meridian’s Inclusive Pathways counselling service shows that 92% of clients have experienced health and wellbeing improvements as a result of using the service, with 85% noting an improvement to their mental health. 100% of clients say the program has helped them improve their emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Indicator: Access to health services

LGBTIQ+ peer-led services, such as those provided by Meridian, play a crucial role in reducing healthcare inequities. Research consistently shows that peer-led organisations that are embedded in LGBTIQ+ communities are essential to reducing service barriers.^{iv} Findings from Meridian’s research into the value of peer-led services echoes this research, with 63% of respondents having actively avoided or delayed accessing support because they feared stigma, discrimination, or abuse. Further, 84% of survey respondents said they would be more likely to access support if a peer-led service were available.

Domain: Identity and belonging – being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society

Indicator: Sense of belonging and inclusion

Peer-led services have been shown to increase connection to community and a sense of belonging. According to Meridian’s peer-led services research, 75% of respondents said that it is important or very important that healthcare and support services increase their connection to community, and 78% said that peer-led services always or sometimes provide this connection. Evaluation data of Meridian’s Inclusive Pathways service shows that 98% of clients agree or strongly agree that they feel accepted and safe to be themselves when using the service. When asked what outcomes they have experienced relating to increased access to relevant information, services, and support, 69% said they feel more connected to community.

Community development

For Meridian to provide these services, we need **\$177,764** to employ a **community development coordinator** and to cover **activity costs**.

LGBTIQ+ people are significantly more likely to experience social isolation, discrimination, bullying, violence, and rejection by family and friends than the wider community. As a result, LGBTIQ+ people may avoid participating in public activities, which can lead to or exacerbate feelings of isolation.

Our community development work seeks to build active and sustainable communities to enhance inclusion, reduce stigma and discrimination, and achieve social, economic, and other objectives that are led by our communities. Our community development activities provide a vital source of social connection for many vulnerable people in our community. This is an important protective factor for health and wellbeing.

The *Counting the Costs* report recommends that ‘the ACT should continue to prioritise early intervention and preventative models, recognising that responding to risks early reduces subsequent resource requirements and pressures.’ By increasing social connection, a sense of belonging, and inclusion – all of which are key indicators in the ACT Government’s Wellbeing Framework – Meridian’s community development activities, as well as our volunteering program discussed below, help to reduce the risks associated with social isolation and connect people to the services and care they need.

Our community development work also includes supporting consultations with LGBTIQ+ communities and providing advice to the ACT Government. As a peer-led organisation, we provide a critical link between government and LGBTIQ+ communities to ensure that government policies, legislation, strategies, and services are informed by, recognise, and respond to the experiences and needs of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans and marginalised people in the community. We have made an enormous contribution in this space in recent years, with over 18 submissions in 22/23, and attendance at multiple roundtables and reference groups, consultations, reviews, and engagements.

As highlighted in *Counting the Costs*, ‘consulting with and providing input to government, participating in policy reform processes, and involving service users with lived experience in service development’ are ‘essential activities which are expected by government, and which support government capacity.’ The report recommends that these efforts ‘should be explicitly recognised in contracts and funded.’^v

Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Domain: Governance and institution

Supporting LGBTIQ+ people to have a say, connect with, and be part of key government processes.

Domain: Social connection

Community development supports social connection and encourages people to be involved in community, sport, culture, and the arts.

Domain: Social Connection – being connected with family, friends, and community

Indicator: Sense of social connection

The work of community development and community capacity building has been shown to increase community acceptance and belonging.

Domain: Identity and belonging – being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society

Indicator: Belonging and inclusion

Community development and capacity building allows people to be connected to and valued by those in their community.

Fair Day

For Meridian to facilitate Fair Day annually, we need **\$100,000** for production costs and additional funding for a **community development coordinator** (as outlined above).

Fair Day promotes the creation of safe and supportive communities where LGBTIQ+ people feel included and affirmed in their gender and sexual identities. Fair Day also gives our community members the opportunity to access high-quality and relevant services and information. It is a much-loved community celebration and the cornerstone event of the Pride Festival in the ACT.

We have been grateful to receive one-off grants from the ACT government through the ACT Event Fund and the Community Support Fund to support the delivery of Fair Day. Recently, Minister Barr announced an additional grant of \$25,000, making a total of \$50,000 in funding for the event. Unfortunately, this is not enough to cover the costs of delivering Fair Day. Without \$100,000 and additional funding for the role of a community development coordinator, the event will not go forward.

We wrote to the Chief Minister at the end of last year requesting his support to secure adequate, long-term, and sustainable funding so that we can continue to deliver Fair Day each year. We requested annual funding of \$100,000 for five years, with agreed indexing. If we are unable to secure this funding, we will be unable to deliver the event. As Canberra's only large-scale community celebration of Pride in the ACT, it is essential that we continue to deliver it. Fair Day is so much more than an event; it is an opportunity for our community to demonstrate that we value diversity and inclusion and embrace LGBTIQ+ people. It is a vital expression of Canberra's identity as Australia's most inclusive city.

Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Domain: Social Connection – being connected with family, friends, and community

Indicator: Sense of social connection

Events such as Fair Day have been shown to increase community acceptance and belonging.^{vi} Findings from the evaluations of Fair Days in 2017, 2018, and 2019 show that 92% of attendees found CBR Fair day to be effective or very effective in strengthening community connection and cohesion.

Indicator: Participation in community events and activities

Fair Day attracted 1800 attendees in 2019 alone, showing that it facilitates the participation of LGBTIQ+ people and their allies in community events, with many (64%) participants also attending in previous years. Evaluation data found that 94% of respondents felt that Fair Day was effective or very effective in providing LGBTIQ+ people and their allies with a fun-filled day of quality entertainment, cultural activities, and community engagement.

Domain: Identity and belonging – being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society

Indicator: Belonging and inclusion

As noted above, LGBTIQ+ people frequently report feeling as though they do not belong, but that they feel more accepted at LGBTIQ+ events. Overall, 95% of Fair Day attendees reported that the event was effective or very effective at providing LGBTIQ+ people with a safe and inclusive space to celebrate Pride. Research shows that this is connected to increased sense of community acceptance and belonging.^{vii}

Domain: Health – being healthy and supported with the right care

Indicator: Mental health

LGBTIQ+ Pride events such as Fair Day promote feelings of pride in one's identity and in the community. This can reduce the shame and stigma often internalised by LGBTIQ+ people about their identities,^{viii} and contribute to better self-esteem and improved mental health and wellbeing.^{ix} Additionally, community and social connection increases social support for LGBTIQ+ people, and it assists in the development of coping mechanisms against social stigma.^x These are major protective factors for improved health and wellbeing.^{xi}

Indicator: Access to health services

Fair day connects LGBTIQ+ people to information, organisations, and services that are relevant and inclusive. 95% of Fair Day attendees said that the event was effective or very effective at connecting LGBTIQ+ people to information, services, and support. Ensuring LGBTIQ+ people have information about available safe, inclusive, and knowledgeable LGBTIQ+ services is key to reducing barriers to services and increasing help-seeking behaviour.^{xii}

Volunteering

We provide meaningful opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people to contribute to their community and build new skills and networks.

For Meridian to provide volunteering opportunities, we need **\$168,500** to employ a **volunteer coordinator** and to cover **activity costs**.

Meridian was founded on the hard work and dedication of volunteers. With our volunteer program running for over 35 years, our volunteers play a critical role in our organisation. According to our evaluation data, we support hundreds of volunteers who work hundreds of hours, with 2000 volunteer hours clocked in 2022 alone.

Our volunteering program provides LGBTIQ+ people with opportunities to connect with others and develop new skills. Many of our volunteers experience social isolation, and our program also supports numerous people with disabilities. Our volunteers play a crucial role in supporting Meridian's operations and activities, including providing office support, badge making, condom packing, and supporting the delivery of events.

Our volunteer program also connects volunteers to ACT Government-led community activities, such as Floriade and the Landcare LGBTIQ+ Community Planting Day – a tree planting activity that brought together diverse members of the LGBTIQ+ community while also benefiting our precious environment.

Contribution to ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Domain: Social Connection – being connected with family, friends, and community

Indicator: Sense of social connection

Our volunteering program increases participants' feelings of social connection through multiple opportunities to meet and interact with other community members.

Domain: Identity and belonging – being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society

Indicator: Belonging and inclusion

Our volunteering program increases participants' feelings of belonging and inclusion by supporting them to engage in meaningful activities with other community members.

Education and training

We strengthen the capacity of mainstream service providers to deliver safe and inclusive services.

For Meridian to adequately provide education and training, we need **\$133,500** to employ **trainers and educators (0.7 FTE)** and to cover **activity costs**.

As discussed above, our recent study into the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people when accessing services found that 60% of respondents had faced stigma, discrimination, or abuse when accessing a mainstream service in the previous 12 months. Overall, 63% of respondents said they had delayed or chosen not to access support in the last 12 months because they feared experiencing stigma, discrimination, or abuse. This can lead to late diagnoses and increased incidences of preventable disease.

Meridian plays a crucial role in providing training and education to organisations and service providers across the ACT, including sessions on LGBTIQ+ awareness and inclusivity, allyship, alcohol and other drugs, and LGBTIQ+ mental health. Through our education and training programs, we are helping to build the capacity of mainstream service providers so that LGBTIQ+ people feel safe to use their services and can access the healthcare they need when they need it.

As recognised by the Capital of Equality Strategy Second Action Plan, the availability of services that meet the health needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals, tailored health information, and staff trained in understanding LGBTIQ+ experiences across government and community partners are key to improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.

Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Domain: Education and lifelong learning

Without increased education and training, mainstream service providers will struggle to deliver safe, appropriate, and inclusive services and supports to our LGBTIQ+ community members.

We take pride in sharing knowledge and creating a welcoming and inclusive community where there is respect for all people regardless of their HIV status, sexuality, or gender identity. Meridian's reputation and the demand for comprehensive and engaging education is growing, and we seek to serve the broad community.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021) *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

ⁱⁱ Social Ventures Australia and the Centre for Social Impact (2022) *Paying what it takes: funding indirect cost to create long-term impact*. Social Ventures Australia.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M. and Lyons, A. (2020) *Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia*. ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 122. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. p. 37.

^{iv} Alpert, A. B., Cichoski Kelly, E. M., and Fox, A. D. (2017) What lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex patients say doctors should know and do: A qualitative study. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(10), 1368–1389; Thompson, H. M., Karnik, N. S., and Garofalo, R. (2016) Centering transgender voices in research as a fundamental strategy toward expansion of access to care and social support. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(3), 241–242.

^v Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021)

^{vi} Ong, F., and Goh, S. (2018) Pink is the new gray: Events as agents of social change. *Event Management* 22(6), 965-979.

^{vii} Ong, F., and Goh, S., (2018)

^{viii} McFarland Bruce, K. (2016) *Pride parades: How a parade changed the world*. NYU Press.

^{ix} Russell, S. T. and Fish, J. N. (2016) Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Youth. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 12(1), 465–487.

^x Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) p. 78.

^{xi} Newman, M. L. and Roberts, N. A. (Eds). (2013) *Health and social relationships: The good, the bad, and the complicated*. American Psychological Association; Smith, E., Jones, T., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Mitchell, A., and Hillier, L. (2014) *From blues to rainbows: Mental health and wellbeing of gender diverse and transgender young people in Australia*. The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society, pp. 85-86.

^{xii} Alpert, A. B., Cichoski Kelly, E. M., and Fox, A. D. (2017) What lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex patients say doctors should know and do: A qualitative study. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(10), 1368–1389; Smith et al. (2014) p. 82-83; Russell, S. T. and Fish, J. N. (2016) Mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 12(1), 465–487.