

SUBMISSION

2023-24 ACT BUDGET CONSULTATION

BY

ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA/GOULBURN

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INTRODUCTION

The St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission into the on-going ACT Government 2023-24 Budget consultation. As an organisation that seeks to address social injustice within our communities, we have tailored our programme delivery around empathy, anchored on the genuine believe that we can make a difference in the community by show of care and love, in a way that gives strength to people during their tough moments.

The Society is a member based lay Catholic organisation that has been assisting people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in the region since 1924. We seek to shape a more just and compassionate society by working to address the causes of poverty and injustice, with a focus on prevention and early intervention.

As a registered charitable not for profit organisation, we are operational in the Australian Capital Territory and in surrounding southern and western regional areas of New South Wales. The Society's conference model of support has members of the Society undertake visits to the homes of people experiencing disadvantage, including those at risk of homelessness. Members refer those at risk to our homelessness services, where staff then offer case management, support services, and referral to other agencies to help prevent people becoming homeless.

There are presently 520 Members, 1482 volunteers and 242 employees working to deliver person-centered support and assistance to those most in need in our community. We thrive in the partnership we have built with the community and consider this Budget Consultation process an affirmation of the ACT Government's approach of harnessing the strength and wisdom of community, to inform government decisions and action.

BUDGET SUBMISSION & RECOMMENDATION

The Society makes its submission on the thematic areas of Housing/Homelessness, Cost of Living/Climate Energy, and Indigenous Justice.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

According to the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services, data on Housing and Homelessness¹ in the ACT indicates a decrease in Social Housing dwellings from 11181 units in 2018 to 10744 units in 2022 (June 2022). There has also been significant increase in turnaround days² in the ACT, from 49.9 days to 89.3 days. As stated in the report, there are 3059 households on the waiting list, of which 2076 of these households are on the greatest

¹ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023. Accessed on April 18, 2023.

² Number of days taken to allocate a newly vacated dwelling (that is fit for occupation) to a new household.

needs list. Overcrowding in public houses got worse as there is an increase from 4.5% (2018) to 5.1% (2022).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics³ in its recent Census report, estimate that 1773 people (59% Male; 41 % Female) were homeless in the ACT on census night in 2021. This is an increase from the 2016 estimate of 1596 people (60% Male; 40 % Female). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)⁴, 1 in 119 people in the ACT received homelessness assistance, with the top three reasons for seeking this service being financial difficulties, housing affordability stress and housing crisis. The AIHW reports that homelessness services supported 3,800 clients across the ACT in the 2021/22 year. Further it estimates that, almost 9 in 10(85%) clients at risk of homelessness were assisted to maintain housing.

Our own data sourced from our homelessness programmes between 2018 to 2022 indicates a rise in the number of younger women within the age cohorts of 24- 40 years rough sleeping or resorting to couch surfing with friends and family. These women are dealing with the threat of homelessness as a compound effect of the current cost-of-living crisis.

RECOMMENDATION

The recommendations below for uptake in the ACT Government 2023-24 Budget is intentioned to address some of the gaps that the data points out: the need for transitional housing, need to increase funding for homelessness support programs and the need to give attention to individual circumstances in dealing with the housing and homelessness issues.

- **Recommendation 1: Increase in the Percentage share of Housing in the Budget:** The Society advocates for an across the board increase in the overall budget allocation for the housing sector from the 4% in the 2022-23 ACT Budget⁵ (\$265million) to 8% in the 2023-24 ACT Budget. This should enable the Government to increase the number of properties available for affordable housing in the ACT.
- **Recommendation 2: Continue to Fund Food and Engagement Services:** The Blue Door Program⁶ had approximately 1,500 drop-ins per month and provided over 34,000 free meals throughout the year 2022. Increasing the funds and extending the funding beyond its current duration will ensure that the growing cohort in our community who rely on the program will continue to be provided for.
- **Recommendation 3: Renovate the Ainslie Village⁷:** The dining hall and commercial kitchen Ainslie Village require renovation. These substantial areas are currently closed due to damage and disrepair. Both the dining hall area and the commercial kitchen

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), [Estimating Homelessness: Census](#), ABS Website, accessed 21 April 2023.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22](#), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 April 2023.

⁵ Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, [Australian Capital Territory Budget 22-23: Delivering for Canberrans: Now and into the Future](#), ACT Government. Accessed April 21, 2023

⁶ The St. Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn, [The Blue Door Program](#). Accessed on April 24, 2023

⁷Argyle Housing, [Ainslie Village](#), Accessed on April 24, 2023

could be utilized to substantially increase the food and engagement services work of both the Society and Argyle Housing on the site.

- **Recommendation 4: Provide more transitional housing facilities:** Programs such as the Samaritan House, a 13-bed facility which supported 79 men throughout 2022, face a practical challenge of lack of exit points. For an emergency accommodation unit for men, this means that residents have no options other than to remain in Samaritan House. This in turn reduces the available beds for emergency accommodation. Government should consider providing up to 6 transitional properties to the program to enable a more secure medium-term pathway out of homelessness for men.
- **Recommendation 5: To increase the capacity of crisis accommodation option:** The Society believes that there might be an opportunity to develop the Samaritan House building, to increase the number of accommodation options available on the site. The Society would be happy to participate in a consultation to develop a plan for such a re-development.
- **Recommendation 6: Provide Onsite-Case Management:** We encourage the ACT Government to consider the provision of on-site case management, tenancy, and support services in both Jerilderie Court and Kanangra Court.

COST OF LIVING, ENERGY AND CLIMATE SMART MEASURES

Cost of living concerns have gained both media and political attention in recent weeks⁸. In Canberra rent remains high in comparison to other states and territories. Gas tariffs have seen a recent increase of as much as 7% in the ACT⁹. The Reserve Bank of Australia, as part of measures in addressing rising inflation, has further increased interest rates by 3.6%¹⁰ in April 2023. These factors have a direct impact on the cost of living, particularly for low-income earners.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7.8% in 2022. Significantly, electricity represented (+8.6%) of the CPI increase¹¹.

The ACT Government has demonstrated commitment to supporting Canberrans to better understand their energy use, reduce this use and support households to access cleaner energy. The ACT Government's "Everyday Climate Choices"¹² initiative provides residents of the ACT with information that clearly explains climate change and ways to reduce energy use on its website.

⁸ H Frost, "[The cost of living is dominating ACT politics. Can the government ease the pain?](#)", *The ABC News*, 12 Feb 2023, accessed on 21 April 2023.

⁹ D Jervis-Bardy, "[Origin customers in Canberra to face price rise in February](#)", *The Canberra Times*, 19 January 2023, accessed on 21 April 2023.

¹⁰ M Janda, "[Reserve Bank of Australia raises interest rates to 11-year high, opens the door to a pause](#)", *The ABC News*, 7 March 2023, accessed on 21 April 2023.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (Dec-quarter-2022), [Consumer Price Index, Australia](#), ABS Website, accessed 24 April 2023.

¹² ACT Government, "Everyday Climate Choices" <https://www.climatechoices.act.gov.au/>, accessed on 18 April 2023.

Between April 1, 2022, and April 1, 2023, St Vincent de Paul Household Energy Efficiency Officers:

- assisted 1750 households in the ACT,
- made 645 referrals to a service provider for home energy and water assessment, education and retrofit.
- served 292 Housing ACT and 124 Community Housing tenants.
- installed draught sealing for 573 clients.
- installed 1693 curtains for 261 clients,
- installed 487 heated throw rugs.

Our Energy Efficiency Officers have visited ACT households where occupants no longer use their heating and they have turned off their hot water; are accessing food banks and going to bed early in winter; wake up in temperatures that are below zero; and have no other option than to suffer through increasing heatwave temperatures in summer. In these households the fear of not being able to pay energy bills is more than a physical discomfort, it's energy poverty.

RECOMMENDATION

To address this poverty St Vincent de Paul advocates to support those most in need in particular Housing ACT households, households that are supported by government concession cards and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households. Complementarily, the specific recommendations below will make a great impact on the lives of families dealing with this energy poverty amidst the high cost of living.

- **Recommendation 7: Reinroduce the Fridge Upgrade Program:** Upgrading 130 fridges per year would cost an estimated \$170,000/pa. As a benchmark, this is the number of fridge upgrades per year in previous years, done through Harvey Norman. The difference in electricity usage and cost between an old inefficient and an efficient fridge is upwards of \$3000 over the lifetime of the fridge, calculated at 15 years. This is a significant cost saving benefit, freeing up money for other living costs for vulnerable households.
- **Recommendation 8: Increased Budget for Maintenance and Management of ACT Housing Stock:** Better management of ACT Housing stock when preparing homes for new occupants will help reduce the turnaround time and hence make housing units available more quickly. For example, by not removing working, usable curtain tracks when preparing for new tenants and referring new occupants to the Home Energy Efficiency Program on sign up.
- **Recommendation 9: Reinroduce the Doona Replacement Program:** Upgrading doonas for 250 households per year would cost \$104,225 p/a. With the rising cost of living in Canberra, our participants are unlikely to prioritise buying a good quality doona over a poor quality low-cost one. Replacing their old doona with thick wool doonas encourages participants to turn off portable heating overnight which can save

as much as \$300 per month (based on inefficient heaters costing \$1 per hour and running for 10 hours a night).

- **Recommendation 10: Increased Funding for Energy Efficiency Programs:** It is important to continue and increase funding for programs such as the Home Energy Efficiency Program which support vulnerable households to reduce their energy use.
- **Recommendation 11: Increased Awareness and Publicity:** There is the need to increase awareness about ACT Government’s programs and initiatives such as the Everyday Climate Choices website, Sustainable Home Advice Program and Energy Efficiency Improvement Scheme

INDIGENOUS JUSTICE

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the child-detention centres and institutions comes through again in the Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services. The report highlights that, for 2021-22, the average daily rate of detention across Australia was 2.8 per 10 000 young people and the average daily rate of community-based supervision was 10.7 per 10 000 young people. Both rates have fallen nationally since 2014-15, although rates of young people in detention increased in Queensland, the ACT and the NT.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT are 12 times more likely to be under a community corrections order than non-Indigenous people: a crude rate of 2,789 Indigenous people per 100,000 adults, compared to only 233 non-Indigenous. This is the third highest rate in the country. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only a quarter of the prison population at the Alexander Maconochie Centre, Indigenous people are 20 times more likely to be in prison in the ACT: 1,770.3 Indigenous detainees per 100,000 adults, compared to 86.5 non-Indigenous.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Recommendation 12: Continue to prioritise and implement the 28 Recommendations from the “Our Booris, Our Way Report”.** We note that the “Our Booris, Our Way Six Monthly Report January – June 2022¹³” submitted to the Legislative Assembly details great progress made in the implementation of the recommendations. The Society supports the principle that the best outcomes for any child, but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for whom culture is so important, are gained if the child can be safely supported within his or her birth family.
- **Recommendation 13: Prioritise Actions that Seek to Reform Justice and Prison Systems:** The Society supports the adoption of the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission in its 2017 report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait

¹³ ACT Government, [Our Booris, Our Way Six Monthly Report January – June 2022](#) ACT Government Community Service Website , access on 18 April 2023

Islander incarceration rates¹⁴ and would encourage the ACT Government to prioritise implementation of the key targets contained within the recently signed National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap¹⁵

ABOUT THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA / GOULBURN

The Society implements many programs that deliver services to a cross section of the vulnerable population within the ACT, some of which are outlined below.

Street to Home Program supports people who are ‘sleeping rough’ and/or experiencing long term chronic homelessness through case management and assertive outreach. The program provided case management to 75 rough sleepers and outreach to 184 more in the last year.

Families and Youth Program provides outreach support services to families and young people in the ACT currently at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness to enable them to access and maintain safe, secure, independent, and affordable housing. The program supported 112 families throughout the year.

Samaritan House is a 13-bed facility in Canberra that provides crisis accommodation and support for men experiencing homelessness, working to break the cycle of chronic and acute homelessness. The service supported 79 men throughout the year.

Blue Door Program is a drop-in centre located in the middle of Ainslie Village in Canberra. It provides support to those living in the village and beyond in the form of meals, emergency relief material aid, information, referral, and support. The service had about 1,500 drop-ins per month and provided some 34,000 free meals throughout the year.

Night Patrol operates across Canberra and Queanbeyan on every night of the year from its 2 vans and with the support of 300 volunteers. It provides food, material items such as jackets, sleeping bags and hygiene items, and most importantly, an opportunity to engage socially with companions who are experiencing homelessness and/or social isolation. It served 7,992 companions throughout the year and provided 5,212 material items.

Community Inclusion Program, which operates out of the Oaks Estate and is designed to offer support for people living with psycho-social disabilities who are ineligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding. It is funded by an Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Grant from the Australian Federal Government. It exists to build innovative ways to increase the independence, social and community participation of people with a psychosocial disability who are ineligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. It provides advocacy, support, information, referral case management and the development of activities in response to identified needs. The program supported 276 companions throughout the year.

Justice Housing Program provides accommodation options for individuals who otherwise would remain in detention due to a lack of suitable community-based accommodation. The

¹⁴ Australian Law Reform Commission, [Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#), Final Report No 133 (2017) accessed on April 14, 2023

¹⁵Council of Australian Governments [Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029](#) accessed on April 14, 2023

program also provides accommodation support services to women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the criminal justice system, with a focus on trauma informed, gender-informed and culturally safe practices. Funded by the ACT Government, the program is a core element of its Building Communities Not Prisons initiative, which seeks to address the lack of available and affordable housing for people released from custody.

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