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Mr Andrew Barr  
Chief Minister  
ACT Government  
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Canberra ACT 2601

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Dear Chief Minister

### **2019 – 20 ACT Budget Consultation Process**

Thank you for the opportunity to input into the development of the 2019/20 ACT Budget.

This letter outlines the expressed need for additional professional counselling services for LGBTIQ communities. There is conclusive evidence that LGBTI people experience higher levels of depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide compared to the general population because of stigma, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion.

The AIDS Action Council is proud to offer LGBTI competent and professional counselling to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans/gender diverse communities, including people who are intersex or identify as genderqueer, non binary or gender-questioning. However our service is at capacity and there is an unqualified need for additional funding in this space.

The AIDS Action Council is the ACT's leading community based HIV and LGBTI organisation. At the Council we are aware of the need for counselling that is appropriate, safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ people and we utilise Westlund Counselling as the vehicle to provide this service. For more information please see [www.aidsaction.org.au/westlund](http://www.aidsaction.org.au/westlund). In addition the Council supports and utilises a wide range of community practitioners who are appropriately skilled and experienced (LGBTIQ competent). Information on practitioners and this model of service can be found at <https://bit.ly/2MNe3WR>. Many of our staff and community practitioners are peers and all counsellors are qualified, competent, trained and experienced working in therapeutic settings with LGBTI communities. We work to match the individual seeking support to right counsellor or peer and support people to access GP mental health care plans. We supports people who could not otherwise afford to access

counselling to get the care they need and we subsidize mental health care plans when required.

This mixed model of using both in-house staff and outsourced practitioners, supported by the Council through resourcing, training and education aims to provide community members with flexible access, options and choices. This is a very successful model of service.

Over the past 12 to 18 months we have been managing a significant increase in demand for counselling for the LGBTIQ community broadly and specifically the Trans community. This includes people transitioning as well as partners and significant family members. At this time we are seeking the support from the ACT Government through the budget process to manage this increase by providing funding to the Council. This proposal has the support of the Canberra Sexual Health Centre Dr Sarah Martin and all partners of the LGBTIQ Community Consortium including A Gender Agenda, who do not deliver counselling and refer specifically to the Council to support their communities.

Counselling is in high demand and the Council is strongly advocating for specific counselling support and direct funding through the AIDS Action Council. The document attached evidences the increase in demand and need for additional funding and capacity in this area.

**Proposed annual budget**

	Annual budget
Counselling Staff (1 FTE)	\$85,500
Supervision/evaluation	\$10,400
Referrals and advocates – community counsellors	\$25,000
Admin/oversight/management	\$12,000
TOTAL	\$132,900

Please accept this submission to the ACT Government Budget Consultation Process 2019-2020.

Kind regards



Philippa Moss  
Executive Director  
25 October 2018



## **Counselling Services – Demand for Services – updated August 2018**

This document outlines the expressed need for additional counselling services for LGBTIQ communities in the ACT. There is conclusive evidence that LGBTIQ people experience higher levels of depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide compared to the general population because of stigma, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion.

The Council is the ACT's leading community based HIV and LGBTIQ organisation. One of the Council's primary population groups is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) communities, and as such it provides current information, counselling, peer support and education on all aspects of health and welfare related issues affecting LGBTIQ people.

### **The Council's Community-focused Counselling Model is at Capacity**

The AIDS Action Council is proud to offer LGBTIQ competent counselling to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans/gender diverse communities, including people who are intersex or identify as genderqueer, non-binary or gender-questioning. **However, our service is at capacity and there is an unqualified need for additional funding.**

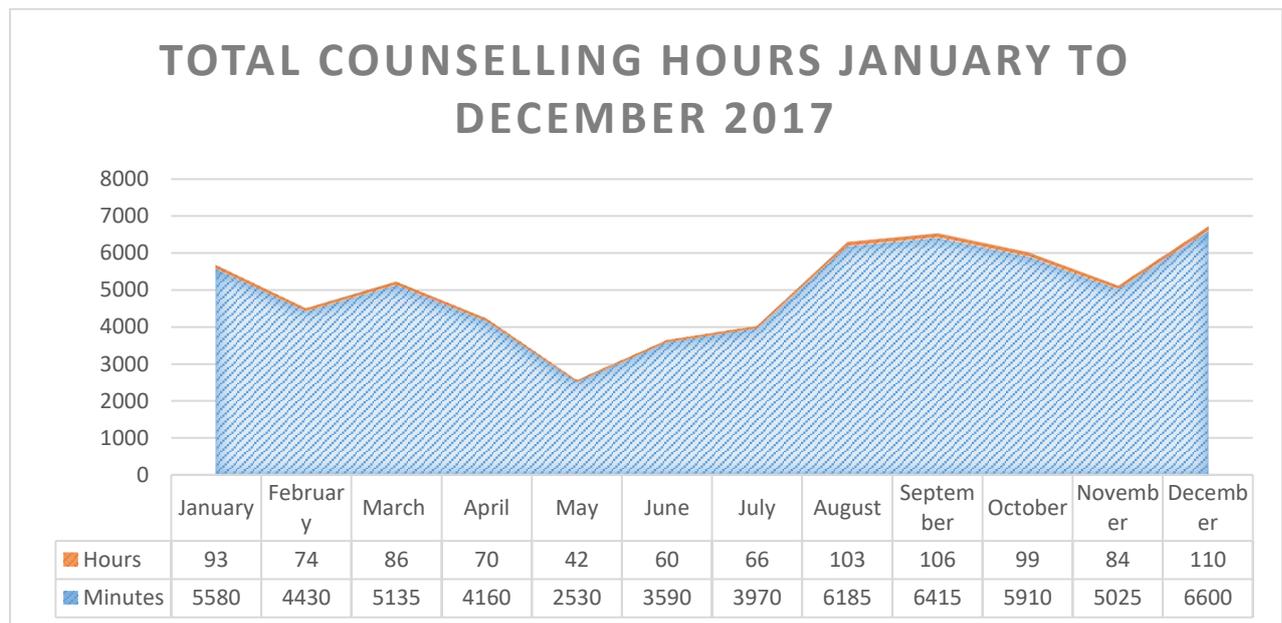
At the Council we are aware of the need for counselling that is appropriate, safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ people and we utilise Westlund Counselling as the vehicle to provide this service. For more information please see [www.aidsaction.org.au/westlund](http://www.aidsaction.org.au/westlund). In addition the Council supports and utilises a wide range of community practitioners who are appropriately skilled and experienced (LGBTIQ competent). Information on practitioners and this model of service can be found at <https://bit.ly/2MNe3WR>. Many of our staff and community practitioners are peers and all counsellors are qualified, competent, trained and experienced working in therapeutic settings with LGBTIQ communities. We work to match the individual seeking support to right counsellor or peer and support people to access GP mental health care plans. We support people who could not otherwise afford to access counselling to get the care they need and we subsidise mental health care plans when required.

This mixed model of using both in-house staff and outsourced practitioners, supported by the Council through resourcing, training and education aims to provide community members with flexible access, options and choices. Our counselling service evaluation shows that this is a very successful model of service.

## Increasing Demand for Community-Focused Counselling Services

Over the past 12 to 18 months we have been managing a significant increase in demand for counselling for the LGBTIQ community broadly and specifically the Trans community. This includes people transitioning as well as partners and significant family members. The service model and function has the support of A Gender Agenda, who do not deliver counselling and refer specifically to the Council to support their communities.

Below is a graph of counselling hours from January to December 2017 which demonstrates a big increase in demand which the Council was able to manage with additional funding from the ACT Government during the period of time around the marriage equality postal vote. These funds are no longer available; however, the need continues to increase.



## Increasing Counselling Need Locally

The Council sees the demand for counselling services for the LGBTIQ community increasing beyond our current capacity due to an increasing need for:

- **Safe, non-judgemental and professional community-focused counselling options** responsive to the unique lived experience of LGBTIQ community members that manages the ongoing and sustained impact of stigma, discrimination and minority stress.
- **Access to counselling services that provide community connection** to combat social and emotional isolation and a lack of clear and reliable pathways to other trusted LGBTIQ competent health care services.
- **Counselling service options that address the intersectionality** between the 'healthy' management of LGBTIQ emotional and wellbeing issues combined with complex mental health issues that manifest from being 'different' and the associated homogenised exclusion of other minority groups – People with ability, ATSI, CALD communities, Sex Workers and IVDU - from mental health conversations. Most of our clients use the Council's counselling service as a stepping stone for care and support prior to engaging with other non-community professionals such as a Psychologist.

- **A positive counter-balance** to tackle the negative and destructive conversations about our communities in the general media and on social media and digital platforms.
- **An outlet to vent, address and strategy responses to minority stress**, specifically the ongoing challenge of being visible, respected and included in health service delivery.

The Council is committed to continual improvement and we have implemented a mixed model monitoring and evaluation framework throughout all programs and services. The qualitative and quantitative review of the AIDS Action Council Counselling and Westlund Counselling Services indicates that the increases in **client need for the Council's counselling service** includes:

- A 50% increase in counselling clients who identify as men who have sex with men and use the counselling service to discuss sexual health issues such as healthy sexual negotiation strategies, PrEP disclosure and U=U safe sex strategies within a serodiscordant relationship and safe online behaviours and risk management.
- A 300% increase in clients who identify (or are exploring identity options) as trans, gender diverse, non-binary or people living with an intersex variation:
  - Of these clients, a majority are using the Council's counselling services both for support with their lived experience and wellbeing along with practical advice regarding respected trans and gender diversity pathways through the health system.
  - A number of these clients come to the Council's counselling service to build the skills and strategies to support their role of 'proving' their 'transness' or gender dysphoria diagnostic criteria to other health professionals such as a Psychologist and Endocrinologist.
  - Most of these gender diverse or non-binary clients are also accessing the counselling service to be supported in social changes such as birth markers on legal documents and learning strategies to negotiate gender transition (or not) at home, in social settings, at school, at university and at work.
    - of these clients, a large majority present to counselling with the intersectionality of depression and anxiety symptomology that is rarely connected to their gender diversity and more likely connected to stigma, discrimination and the minority stress of being 'different' and unheard.
- Approximately 40% of clients described a contextual increase in demand for counselling services as a coping mechanism during the Marriage Equality Survey (2017) to counter homophobic discourse and the impact of minority stress.
- A 50% increase counselling need from clients who tentatively identify (and are exploring through counselling) an MSM identity (men who have sex with men and the intersection with a CALD identity) in contrast to existing counselling clients who traditionally identify as gay males.
- A 30% increase in counselling clients identify with a pattern of 'risky substance use behaviours' associated with 'numbing' the impact of lifetime stigma and discrimination. Statistically this contrasts significantly with a much lower risk of 'risky substance use behaviour' in the heterosexual population (National Drug Strategy Household Survey, 2016).

## Counselling Client Quotes

**Boston\* identifies as a non-binary asexual person using they/them/their pronouns.**

Boston says,

*"I chose the counselling services of the Council as my first step in understanding why I am so deeply unhappy when I think about my body and how I feel about how I fit into the traditional restrictive binary gender representations in world. I felt a connection with my counsellor because they are a community peer and I found their lived experience invaluable; I finally felt valued. I felt their resilience and this in turn gave me strength and the desire to build my own resilience. I now understand that I am 'different' and I now really like that about myself; I no longer label myself as an 'aberration' or 'abnormal' and even if you want to call me that, I'm cool with it."*

**Jason\* is a person with ability and he identifies as a sexually active cis-gendered gay man on PrEP using he/him pronouns.**

Jason says,

*"The Council understands my rights to an active and fulfilling sex life with other men and I do not need to educate or explain or ratify my natural sexual attractions and behaviours. They get me and we have very frank (and genuinely constructive and helpful) conversations about sexual negotiation and relative risk that other providers either wouldn't understand or would be judgemental of. I was sick of being defined as a 'deviant' and misunderstood; other health professionals have always sought to 'fix' or 'normalise' my sex life."*

**Mark\* is from a CALD background and identifies as a cis-gendered man who has sex with other men using he/him pronouns.**

Mark says,

*"I have been feeling really uneasy about having sex with other men which is strange because I enjoy it and it makes me feel alive but my cultural history is steeped in shame around MSM behaviour; It is considered completely unacceptable and because of this everything I do is secretive and overwhelming at the same time. Seeing a counsellor at the Council means I avoid the constant worry of social risk around being in public and 'presenting' or acting as a 'normal' straight person. They realise that it's about the underlying issues of self-worth, self-respect and self-acceptance."*

**Liam or Lara\* identifies as queer and gender fluid and often feels more male than female or vice versa and changes their name and pronouns based on how they identify.**

Liam or Lara\* says,

*"I come to counselling at the Council because they don't make assumptions about what I am or what I should be; they let me own the counselling space to work on being the healthiest version of me I can be. They know my feelings and wellbeing are deeply part of me and understanding myself. They understand that my feelings and my life goals are not based on, nor do they rely on, a binary gender presentation or the fluidity that makes me feel comfortable."*