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Mr Andrew Barr
Chief Minister
ACT Government
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budgetconsultation@act.gov.au

Dear Chief Minister

2020 – 21 ACT Budget Consultation Process

Thank you for the opportunity to input into the development of the 2020/21 ACT Budget.

This letter outlines the expressed need for additional professional counselling services for LGBTIQ communities including partners and families. 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 AIDS Action Council's service for counselling known as Westlund Counselling offers competent and professional counselling to people who are living with and impacted by HIV and 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. The service continues to be at capacity and there is an unqualified need for additional funding.

Over the past two and a half years we have been managing a significant increase in demand for counselling for the LGBTIQ community broadly and specifically the trans, gender diverse and non-binary communities. This includes people transitioning as well as partners and significant family members.

At this time we are advocating for the establishment of one FTE position for a mental health social worker or equivalent to add significant value to the service we currently deliver. The establishment of this position within Westlund Counselling would add significant value by being able to provide services under Medicare.

The document attached evidences the increase in demand and value of providing a mental health social worker and the unqualified need for additional funding and capacity in this area.

Proposed annual budget

	Annual budget
Mental Health Social Worker (1 FTE) or equivalent	\$ 108,000
Clinical supervision	\$10,500
Training and development	\$7,200
Admin/oversight/management	\$12,000
TOTAL annual cost	\$137,700

Please accept this submission to the ACT Government Budget Consultation Process 2020-2021.

Kind regards



Philippa Moss
Executive Director
29 October 2019



Business case – LGBTIQ Support Services (counselling and psychosocial support)

Executive Summary

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.

Westlund Counselling is the only community and peer based service provider in Canberra specifically set up for LGBTIQ people in a way that is safe and culturally appropriate. There are significant demand for service and gaps in providing services. The key gap is the addition of a mental health social worker (or equivalent) on staff. This is one of the most significant barrier to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for LGBTIQ communities. It also has cost implications and adds pressure on the healthcare system.

Evidence

The disparity between the mental health of LGBTIQ people and the wider community is a direct result of LGBTIQ people's exposure to multiple, interconnected, and recurring forms of discrimination, marginalisation, stigma, social exclusion, abuse, and violence. The compounding impact of these experiences is known as minority stress. Minority stress increases the risk of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, and suicide.

The health of LGBTIQ people is further impacted by their exposure to stigma, discrimination, and unconscious bias when accessing healthcare and support services. Additionally, many services do not have the knowledge to respond to their specific health-care needs. Where LGBTIQ-competent services do exist, they can be cost prohibitive to those that need them the most. As a result, many LGBTIQ people delay or do not access the services and support they need, which leads to late diagnoses and increased incidences of preventable diseases.

LGBTIQ-targeted services provided by LGBTIQ peer-led organisations, 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. When services provide clients with the opportunity to disclose their sexuality or gender identity in a safe and welcoming environment, they enhance the quality of care by building trust and enabling individualised and holistic approaches. LGBTIQ organisations are uniquely positioned to provide psychosocial services within a framework that addresses the impact of minority stress, which is key to improving mental health outcomes for LGBTIQ people.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSW) are recognised providers with Medicare Australia and other programs, delivering clinical social work services in mental health settings and utilising a range of evidence-based strategies.

AMHSWs work with people across the lifespan (including children, adults and older persons) and provide a unique contribution to the mental health space in their holistic approach to working with a person. The advanced training that is expected of AMHSW prepares and provides them with the skills for working with people with very complex presentations and co-morbidities. AMHSWs are highly trained and educated professionals, meeting some of the highest standards of professional regulation in Australia.

Why now?

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, gender diverse and non-binary community. The service model and function has the support of A Gender Agenda, who do not deliver professional counselling and refer specifically to the Council to support their communities.

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-judgmental 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, ATSiC, 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, U=U and safer 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. This will increase with the religious freedoms debate in the public arena.
- 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).

Who will benefit?

LGBTIQ communities, their families and allies are the target cohort for this increased service capacity. 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.

Mental health is a basic human right and the whole community benefits when we promote resilience, wellbeing and good mental health. If our whole community is well and resilient, we as individuals are more likely to meet our own life challenges successfully. Good social and emotional wellbeing means being able to enjoy life, to cope with stress and sadness, to fulfil goals and potential and to feel connected to others. Promoting mental health and wellbeing helps reduce risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug misuse and social and economic problems such as dropping out of school, crime, absenteeism from work, unemployment and the rates and severity of physical and mental illness. This benefits everyone.

Linkages with ACT Government initiatives

- Capital of Equality: An ACT Government strategy to deliver equitable outcomes for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex & Queer (LGBTIQ+) people
- Capital of Equality First Action Plan 2019 & 2020
- Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing Work Plan 2019 – 2021