

04 April 2023

ACT Government –2024/25 pre- budget submission

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2024-2025 ACT Budget.

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region (RACR) Priority Areas and Recommendations

RACR recommends:

1. Strengthening ACT families through:

- a. *Increased investment for holistic models of care that support early intervention for children and their families.*
- b. *Greater support of paid social work placements including:*
 - *increased number of student placement grants for social work students; and*
 - *ACT Government advocacy for paid student placements;*
- c. *Increased investment for child, youth and family support services; and*
- d. *Support for multidisciplinary service delivery throughout the ACT.*

2. Focus to reduce family and domestic violence in the ACT through:

- a. *Dedicated funding for primary family violence prevention and intervention services tailored to men and boys.*
- b. *Provision of dedicated funding for Men's Behaviour Change Programs, with women and children's advocacy/support operating alongside.*
- c. *The ACT Government's assurance of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) sector's sustainability through collaborative learning and specialist DFSV supervision.*

3. Reduction of elder abuse through:

- a. *The ACT Government matching Federal Government funding contribution to increase support for older people experiencing elder abuse.*

Further information about specific priority areas and recommendations are outlined below.

The work of Relationships Australia Canberra & Region

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region (RACR) is a federated member of one of Australia's largest not-for-profit community-based organisations. We are an independent, not-for-profit secular organisation dedicated to supporting individuals and families to live meaningful lives, and to enjoy positive and respectful relationships. RACR delivers services in the ACT, and the New South Wales (NSW) Riverina, South Coast and surrounding regions.

RACR has extensive experience delivering a range of specialist family violence support services, family dispute resolution services, psycho-social group programs, mental health services, and specialist counselling services, funded by a range of Commonwealth agencies, as well as both NSW and ACT Government. We support the whole family, working with children, young people, older people and their families, including those who use violence. We are experienced in integrated, multidisciplinary service delivery, including as lead agency for headspace centres in Wagga Wagga and Batemans Bay.

The ACT government funds RACR to deliver a range of services supporting the ACT Community, including therapeutic and other group programs for children, young people and their families (ACT Community Services Directorate), ACT Coronial Counselling Service (ACT Health), and the ACT Gambling Support Service (ACT Gambling and Racing Commission). We deliver services in the ACT from our Deakin office and at regular outreach locations, including ACT Child and Family Centres, Yeddung Murra, ACT Youth Centres and Gunners Place in Gungahlin.

Through these services RACR works with some of Canberra's most vulnerable community members. Many of our clients experience a range of complex vulnerabilities including family breakdown, mental illness, homelessness, family violence and/or disruption to their education and work.

Priority areas for the ACT Government's consideration are included below.

Priority area 1: Strengthening ACT families

Relationships are a crucial foundation for the ACT community to withstand challenging times, manage uncertainty, build resilience and to thrive into the future. That is why supporting healthy and safe relationships is an essential priority.

A 2023 report¹ conducted by the Centre for International Economics (CIE) on behalf of Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA), shows the crucial role services like RACR play in providing

¹ https://frsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CIE-Final-Report_FRSA_Family-and-Relationship-Services-Evaluation-11092023.pdf

psychological and emotional support to individuals and families. It also highlights their significant return on investment, both socially and financially, returning \$8 for every dollar invested.

The increased cost of living and housing have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors, including for families affected by family and domestic violence. Mental health challenges, vulnerability to addiction, social isolation, and relationship breakdown are symptoms of these pressures, all of which are becoming increasingly prevalent amongst our clients (often in combination of two or more) and reflect a growing risk for the ACT community.

Services such as RACR act as a soft entry point for a wide range of supports. Our comprehensive risk screening and assessment allow our staff to identify complexity and need, working with people to reduce stigma associated with help seeking, and refer to the most appropriate services.

Many people seek RACR's services when experiencing relationship pressures and breakdown, for themselves, their children, as parents and the wider family unit. We work with and wrap around the whole family, with a particular focus on children and young people. This whole of family approach is crucial as children and young people can have limited ability to change the circumstances that are contributing to their service presentation, including mental health concerns and family violence.

With ACT Consultant Psychiatrist and expert in psychotraumatology, Dr Alexander Lim, RACR is exploring a model of care to assist angry, vulnerable children. This whole of family approach integrates specialist mental health support for children and support for parents and carers. This innovative, holistic model of care will help to prevent children entering out of home care and the youth justice system, however, will require investment.

Recommendation: RACR asks for increased investment in holistic models of care that support early intervention for children and their families.

To support the workforce entering our sector, especially counsellors, social workers, psychologists, mental health nurses and mental health occupational therapists, RACR seeks adequate funding. RACR staff are experienced in the work they do, have appropriate counselling/mental health qualifications and are registered with a professional body. However, it is difficult for students and new graduates to gain the necessary work experience that is required to be employed as a counsellor.

In particular, social work students are required to complete 1000 hours of unpaid placement, far greater than other allied health professions. This creates financial hardship and barriers to employment. RACR acknowledge ACT Government offers a \$1500 per semester nursing and allied health scholarship to address financial hardship and there are longer-term plans to increase the

counselling workforce, however this is currently insufficient to support social work placements. We believe that paid internships will make social work education more inclusive and accessible, reducing the barriers to obtaining social work employment. We advocate for the ACT Government to increase the grant amount for social work students to support paid placements.

Recommendation: RACR ask for support of paid social work placements through:

- **Increased number of student placement grants for social work students.**
- **The ACT Government advocating for paid student placements.**

RACR note that other than indexation there has been no real increase in many ACT Community Services programs. The CYFSP funding has not received an increase in funding for the last 12 years. During this time the ACT population has grown by 23%, with flow on to CYFSP service demand. Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 12, then 14 years, puts further pressure on demand for CYFSP services.

As outlined in the ACTCOSS 2022 report, *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*², community sector organisations in the ACT are facing pressures of rising demand and rising operating costs. RACR encourage the ACT Government to review and provide commensurate funding that appropriately resources community-based service delivery to support children, young people and their families.

Recommendation: RACR asks for increased investment for child, youth and family support services.

RACR supports prioritising accessibility and adaptability of service delivery, to reinforce the importance of meeting families where they need the service. Outreach is an important component of RACR's service delivery, to extend the accessibility of our service and our ability to engage with vulnerable communities.

RACR is a member of the Gunners Place service consortium, the interim youth and community centre in Gungahlin providing support for young people until the permanent community centre is operational. This would not have been possible without the support of the ACT Government. Gunners Place is an extremely important step in improving the way RACR supports children, young people and families through improved service access, integrated and collaborative approaches to service and strengthening referral pathways. It has increased visibility of our organisation in northern Canberra, for both the ACT community and other organisations.

² <https://actcoss.org.au/publication/report-counting-the-costs-sustainable-funding-for-the-act-community-services-sector-2/>

Access to ACT outreach locations can be limited without investment and is often not affordable for NGO's who focus on resourcing their service delivery staff within their funding streams. This can create geographic service silos. RACR encourages the ACT Government to expand its multidisciplinary approach to service delivery, supporting organisations to share locations and/or establishment of service hubs in accessible locations, to improve service response for children, young people and their families.

Recommendation: RACR asks for support for multidisciplinary service delivery throughout the ACT.

Priority area 2: Focus to reduce family and domestic violence in the ACT

To complement the Federal Government's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, RACR recommends dedicated funding to roll-out primary family violence prevention and intervention services tailored to men and boys. RACR advocates for a community wide approach to primary prevention, working with boys and men to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to domestic, family or sexual violence (DFSV).

Through our specialised family violence services, RACR has heard from girls and young women about negative and violent early sexual experiences. Nearly 50% of young men have viewed pornography by the time they are 13 years old³. In the absence of other information, pornography can shape young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours. Mainstream pornography includes high levels of violence, hostility and sexist content aggression targeted at women that can distort their perception of relationship and sexual norms. School staff are asking RACR for specialist support as they feel ill equipped to talk with young people and respond to DFSV beyond mandated reporting. RACR advocates for professional development for school staff to understand violence against women, gender equality, respectful relationships and the part they play in changing culture.

RACR advocates for increased attention on working with men to change societal norms and build connection. The findings from Relationships Australia's Relationships Indicators Study⁴ support that men are lonelier, less socially and emotionally connected and least likely to fulfil the role of significant other outside the partnership dynamic.

Recommendation: RACR recommends dedicated funding for primary and secondary family violence prevention and intervention services tailored to men and boys.

³ <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/20022415/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.relationships.org.au/relationship-indicators/>

RACR has previously delivered Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCP) in the ACT, ceasing in 2022. We have been unable to resource these services through mainstream funding, due to the specialist training and resourcing required. This is despite positive feedback from clients who have attested to the difference these services have made in their lives. There are limited MBCP services available for ACT men, those offered by DVCS and Everyman have waiting lists and require 20-week participant commitment.

RACR's Board is committed to continuing to upskill our staff to have a pool of qualified MBCP facilitators that includes a facilitator gender balance. We are working with our Relationships Australia sister organisations throughout Australia to explore innovative MBCP models.

Wrap around advocacy work with partners and families ensure additional safety measures are put in place for women and children and enable integration with all service offerings at RACR. Women and children can be referred into specialist services including specialised family violence counselling, family and relationship services, therapeutic services, family dispute resolution, relationship and parenting education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, as well as a network of other non-government and government services available across the ACT.

Recommendation: Dedicated funding for Men's Behaviour Change Programs is available, with women and children's advocacy/support operating alongside.

RACR strongly supports everyone in the ACT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) sector to have regular, ongoing access to specialist family violence supervision. We advocate for the establishment of a sector community of practice, to reduce system fragmentation, build an integrated DFSV sector and strengthen support for people experiencing family violence. Supervision is central to developing and sustaining family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing workforces, maintaining contemporary practice approaches.

While the ACT DFSV sector has a highly skilled, dedicated, and resilient workforce that embraces the importance of supervision and reflective practice (active process of witnessing an experience, examining it, and learning from it), it faces pressures such as increasing demands for service and managing client risk within tight funding budgets. When organisations are faced with these pressures it can be difficult to resource supervision internally and create space for reflective practice to share practice learnings. This increases the risk of sector silos that can become treatment traps for the very people we are working to support. RACR is investing in building a dedicated Clinical Practice Supervision team that offers specialist supervision to help address these issues, both within our organisation and for other providers.

RACR supports the work being undertaken by the ACT Government's DFSV Office to improve the ACT's response to domestic, family and sexual violence, including the current consultation to identify sector training needs, and the draft Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy⁵. As part of these reviews RACR advocates for increased funding to ensure sector sustainability through shared practice and understanding, and dedicated funding for specialist DFSV supervision.

Recommendation: The ACT Government to ensure DFSV sector sustainability through collaborative learning and specialist DFSV supervision.

Priority area 3: Reduction of elder abuse

While 15% of people aged 65 and older are experiencing physical, psychological, financial or sexual abuse in Australian communities it is often not visible in the ACT community. RACR is proud of its involvement in the Commonwealth-funded Elder Abuse Services, providing case management, counselling and mediation services in the ACT. Our experience confirms the importance of a holistic model that is tailored to our clients' unique circumstances, including complex co-morbidities experienced by the older person, their carer/s and other family members. Such co-morbidities include past trauma, mental ill-health, a history of family and domestic violence, homelessness and substance misuse.

Addressing the abuse and neglect of an older person in a family with conflictual dynamics requires an integrated response to engage all family members to reduce the risk and impact of elder abuse. As outlined in the Hidden Gems⁶ report compiled by our sister organisation, Relationships NSW, older people experiencing abuse need collaborative service models that engage their family members outside the legal system. Many older people want to maintain their family relationships and need non-adversarial, non-criminal routes for support.

The increased cost of living and housing in the ACT have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors for families and increasing levels of elder abuse. RACR is seeing adult sons, who after the breakdown of their relationship are returning to their parents in the family home and perpetuating elder abuse. In some case older people are moving in with extended family to receive care and support and are experiencing elder abuse.

RACR's elder abuse team is experiencing more demand for support than they have capacity to meet. They are resourced to provide 1.2 FTE to support the ACT and surrounding region by Federal Government and believe there is sufficient demand to double this effort.

⁵ <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/act-dfs-v-strategy>

⁶ https://issuu.com/ransw/docs/hidden_gems_report_-_compressed_1_?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ

Recommendation: We ask the ACT Government to match the Federal Government funding contribution to increase support for older people experiencing elder abuse.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this pre-Budget submission. Should you require clarification of any aspect of this submission or need information on the services that Relationships Australia Canberra & Region provides, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Yours Sincerely



Dr. Stephanie Hodson
Chief Executive Officer