



## ACT Budget Submission 2018-2019

Families ACT is a peak body representing organisations working with children, young people and families in the Territory and surrounding area. Families ACT advocates to the ACT Government on issues affecting these organisations' service users. It also provides information and sector development for members.

Our submission reflects input from our Advisory Council (which comprises representatives from member organisations), our skills-based Board, and feedback from our annual member survey. As in previous years, this submission is underpinned by Families ACT's ongoing commitment to equity for all families, and the importance of prevention and early intervention. We support the united call from Canberra's community organisations to ensure that the ACT Government addresses the growing gap between those who enjoy Canberra's prosperity and liveability, and those who don't.

### Our Priorities

Families ACT's key priorities in this submission are:

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### 1. Housing

Families ACT continues to support and actively endorse the strategies proposed by ACTCOSS for addressing housing problems in the Territory, as enunciated in its 2016 Budget submission. This includes diverting \$100 million from current Government bonds to create an investment fund for building new, accessible, affordable community rental housing. Additionally, any directorates that have not yet allocated a minimum of one percent of total funds to contribute to housing crisis and transition support for vulnerable members of the community should be promptly directed to do so.

The ACT Government needs to place higher responsibility on developers to give back to the Canberra community. This includes providing suitable community housing, and ensuring that urban infill and densification acknowledges the existing neighbourhood and social fabric, and is of high quality design and construction. Further, developers should be required to increase the diversity of housing forms, including accessibility, work on Universal Design and size (e.g. micro-units). All social housing needs to be well-located and to provide access to opportunities and resources that enable social and economic mobility. This means providing community housing organisations and developers with access to urban infill sites, rather than situating community housing on the fringes of the city.

### *Increasing affordable housing for families*

#### **The ACT Government needs to make an immediate and substantial investment in affordable housing in the territory.**

When the cost of housing is disproportionate to incomes, families are forced to cut costs in other areas. That can mean forgoing new clothing, shoes, school supplies or family activities, or children miss out on school activities aimed at their social growth, such as camps and excursions. At worst, families may not be able to afford food and basic necessities.

A Government that is serious about addressing homelessness in the ACT understands that a \$1 million Innovation Fund is incapable of genuinely addressing homelessness in the territory. Families ACT supports the ongoing call by ACTCOSS for \$100 million to urgently tackle the ACT's homelessness crisis.

Although the ACT Government has responsibility to lead in this area, the private sector has a critical role to play: businesses which benefit from housing development must return some of the profit back to the community. The Government should require developers to donate a significant percentage of accommodation in any large development to affordable housing stock. This could be facilitated by reductions in planning application fees.

### *Ensuring women can afford to escape violence*

#### **The ACT needs affordable housing that can be accessed quickly: women cannot escape violence if they cannot afford to leave.**

Canberra's expensive housing and rental markets and its high cost of living are major barriers to women who need to escape domestic and family violence, and women with children are especially vulnerable. The *Staying Home After Domestic Violence* report (DVCS 2014) confirmed that the overwhelming majority of women DVCS had contact with in the ACT remained in the home with the men who harmed them. Those who did leave were at high risk of homelessness in Canberra's expensive housing market: the report found that more than half of the homeowners and families living in private rentals lost their homes within 12 months of separation.

Single incomes, long delays in joint property settlements, ineligibility for government housing when there is joint home ownership, legal costs and non-payment of child support are all factors that undermine women's capacity to escape violence. A high proportion of women either return to the violent relationship or end up in secondary homelessness.

## 2. Domestic and Family Violence

### *Supporting specialist women's services*

#### **The ACT Government needs to increase funding to specialist women's services to support women who are experiencing domestic and family violence.**

The Safer Families initiative has been an important step in addressing domestic and family violence (DFV) in the Territory. A year in, there is an urgent need to channel funding from the Safer Families levy to specialist crisis services such as DVCS and the Rape Crisis Centre.

Families ACT recognises the establishment of the Family Safety Hub is merely the first stage of the Safer Families initiative announced in the 2016-17 Budget, and we have received feedback from women's services consulted during its establishment confirming that their knowledge and expertise has been respected and valued, and sound foundations have been laid for change.

However, the situation remains urgent: all women's services in the ACT have reported increasing demand over the last few years, including domestic violence services like the Refuges, the Women's Health Service, and the Women's Legal Centre. Funding cuts have seen a move away from specialist women's services, but women and children escaping DFV require high levels of support, physical security and access to a range of immediate basic needs. It is also likely that many have never have accessed any kind of community service in the past. Generalist services cannot provide the high levels of support needed, so specialist women's services must be immediately and adequately funded.

As Families ACT has noted in previous submissions, rapidly increasing demand on women's crisis services does not represent a spike in demand, but an ongoing growth in reporting as a result of more effective community education and raised awareness. The successful roll out of the Family Safety Hub and other initiatives make it more important than ever to ensure that these services are funded to meet that demand. Further provision will also need to be made for future increases in service need when the outcomes from the Royal Commission and other Commonwealth reviews begin to impact in the ACT.

### *Gaps in supporting children*

#### **The ACT Government needs to improve support to children and young people who experience violence in the home.**

Violence in the home affects all members of a family, and Families ACT is particularly concerned that the needs of children are often overlooked in addressing domestic and family violence.

It is well known that children witnessing and experiencing violence in the home are at high risk of increased anxiety, behavioural issues, learning difficulties and attachment problems that can have lifelong negative impacts. They need access to ongoing counselling and support services appropriate to their age and specific trauma experience. These services need to be provided early, and they need to be ongoing to meet the needs of the individual child.

These needs extend to providing a safe and secure home for children who have experienced domestic and family violence. The current model for providing homelessness services does not consider children as service clients in their own right. In regarding children as 'add-ons' to their mothers, the individual counselling and support needs of children are not captured, and there is no data to inform the need for funding child-specific services.

## *Preventing violence*

### **The ACT needs greater investment in early intervention, pre-crisis and non-justice responses to domestic and family violence.**

The best way to deal with domestic and family violence is to stop it before it starts. Rather than focusing on results or symptoms, the ACT Government needs to invest in primary prevention methods, such as education in schools and communities, and workplace programs and discussions, to change the culture around and attitudes towards violence by men, including sexual assault.

Attitudes at a local level influence whether victims feel comfortable in disclosing violence and seeking help – and these attitudes also affect the decisions of other people in the community in acting in response to the violence.

*Families ACT thanks the Women's centre for Health Matters, the Women's Services Network, the Domestic Violence Prevention Council and Domestic Violence Crisis Service for providing access to the material upon which this section has been based.*

### 3. Support for children aged 8-12 – the Middle Years

#### **The ACT Government needs to commit funds to programs that support children in their critical middle years – the age from 8 to 12.**

Awareness of the importance of the middle years of childhood is growing, but this is not reflected in the way services are provided to children, and there remains a critical funding gap for this age group. Families ACT works closely with some of Australia's leading experts on the needs of children in their middle years, and supports their calls for policies and programs tailored to their specific needs.

The founder of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project, Professor Gerry Redmond of Flinders University, describes the middle years as a period of 'benign neglect' that is poorly understood and critically underfunded. Where the early childhood and teenage years are prioritised for funding and programs, the middle years – despite being a period of enormous growth and transition, including to secondary school – are overlooked. This neglect is evident in some of the mental health concerns that emerge as children move into their teen years.

Professor George Patton of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute says that the most intense period of brain development *in a human being's life* occurs between the ages of eight and 12, and that mental health issues generally linked to adolescence have their roots in the middle years. While intervention in the early years is recognised as the ideal, he describes the middle years as the 'next best opportunity', for early intervention programs that will have a lasting impact on the wellbeing and mental health of a growing young person.

An awareness of the needs of middle years children needs to drive the shaping of early intervention policy and programs. This does not mean changing the age limit for existing services: that simply increases pressure on services to existing clients, without addressing the specific needs of middle years children. Rather, it means addressing the huge gap in services for this age group, and acknowledging that intervening early in the life of a person is as important as intervening early in the life of a problem.

It is important that programs are targeted at a sub-clinical level. Both Professors Redmond and Patton stress the importance of avoiding labelling and keeping children of this age away from systemic services as wherever possible, recognising that symptoms like anxiety can be readily addressed in their early stages by non-specialist services.

This call for targeted policy and programs for 8 to 12 year olds is supported by leading academics and by our members, who acknowledge that only a coordinated and targeted effort across the public and community sectors can address the lack of support to Canberra children aged between 8 and 12.

#### 4. Fit for Purpose Procurement Framework

**The ACT Government needs a fit for purpose service procurement framework that includes processes that engage directly with the community to ensure services meet expectations, improve quality, continuity, diversity and sustainability of both the service offer and the workforce.**

The ACT Government needs to develop a fit for purpose procurement framework focussed on outcomes for service users rather than the financial bottom line. For example, the type of procurement processes employed in infrastructure projects have no place in contracting human services. The idea that the same procurement tools can be used in buying services for vulnerable people and building roads and bridges can only lead to poor quality services for ACT citizens.

The cornerstone of the procurement framework should be that Government is accountable to the community for the services they receive. This means that throughout the procurement process the quality of what will be provided is the key determinant in decision making.

In light of this “self-determination and community control [should be key factors] when evaluating organisations involved in the commissioning processes for the delivery of social and community services” (ACTCOSS ACT Budget Submission 2017-18).

#### Conclusion

Canberra is a prosperous city: families experiencing very real disadvantage in the nation’s capital should be supported to share in the great quality of life that Canberra can offer. A city as wealthy as Canberra should be able to ensure all its citizens can afford a place to live, and access pathways to escape violence. Equity should be a cornerstone of all ACT Government policy, and the Budget should reflect this. A genuine commitment to promote equity for all citizens will provide the catalyst for budget and policy decisions that improve life for the Territory’s most vulnerable, resulting in a more cohesive community for all.