

MERIDIAN SEEKS BUDGET CONSIDERATION FOR AN IMMEDIATE EXPANSION OF OUR PRIMARY HEALTH CARE CLINIC TO INCREASE ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL GENDER-AFFIRMING HEALTHCARE AND SUPPORT

BUDGET REQUIRED

\$350,000 for a salaried doctor and nurse for 25 hours a week (5 sessions) and a full-time Clinical Care Coordinator.

BACKGROUND

Health disparity of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia

LGBTIQ+ people in Australia experience significantly poorer mental and physical health than the wider population. These health disparities are largely related to chronic stressors from stigmatisation and the pathologisation of sexuality, gender, and intersex variations, which can lead to discrimination, exclusion, harassment, and physical violence.

LGBTIQ+ people -

- Underutilise health services and delay seeking treatment due to previous or anticipated experiences of stigma and discrimination.
- Report experiences of being refused service because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or intersex status.
- Lack access to culturally competent, gender-affirming, trusted, and safe primary care workforces.
- Experience gaps in services, particularly in gender-affirming care for trans and gender diverse people.

The ACT's healthcare system is under stress, and Canberrans are paying the price

Wait times to see GPs in the ACT are already among the highest in the country, and the closure of the Hobart Place General Practice worsens the problem for all Canberrans trying to access primary healthcare. The closure may further drive up costs experienced by Canberrans, who are already paying more for healthcare than most other Australians. Canberrans are more likely to face out-of-pocket costs than Australians living in any other state or territory. The ACT has the lowest bulk billing rates for GPs in the nation, at 72.2% from July to December 2021. Only 65% of the ACT's diagnostic imaging is bulk billed, despite the national average sitting at 85%.

Meridian's work to improve healthcare for LGBTIQ+ people in the ACT

The ACT Government invested in a co-design and discovery process to understand the needs of our LGBTIQ+ communities in relation to primary healthcare. This was a result of the ACT Health Directorate's [LGBTIQ+ Health Scoping Study](#), which looked at the gaps and opportunities for health services for LGBTIQ+ people in the ACT and identified barriers to seeking health services.



Meridian has been supported by the ACT Government to work with local healthcare services to develop an integrated, innovative, culturally safe, gender-affirming model of care for LGBTIQ+ communities in Canberra. This work specifically targets the trans and gender diverse community as a priority population.

The objectives of this work are to -

- Provide safe and affirming primary healthcare for trans and gender diverse people.
- Address barriers and challenges that LGBTIQ+ communities experience when trying to access culturally safe and gender-affirming health care.
- Improve capabilities and address gaps in the system of care while not duplicating existing services.
- Increase choice and access to culturally safe and gender-affirming healthcare for LGBTIQ+ communities.

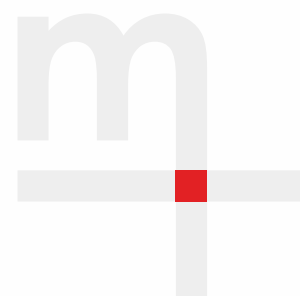
This work integrates and builds on Meridian's suite of Wellbeing Services, including care coordination, counselling, and psychological services and wellbeing groups partly funded by the Capital Health Network.

The evidence of the impact of Meridian's gender-affirming clinical work is clear; Responses to formalised distress scaling pre and post clinical sessions clearly shows clients moving from a common state of "severe distress" to "mild distress" and "likely to be well".

Rising demand

In recent years, demand for these services has grown exponentially due to the following reasons -

- The trans and gender diverse communities of Canberra have expressed an increased need and demand for services.
- There has been a significant GP workforce crisis, resulting in excessive waiting times to see GPs.
- The ACT has the lowest bulk billing rates in the country.
- The recent closure of Hobart Place General Practice has had a significant and negative impact on trans and gender diverse community members; it was providing gender-affirming care to a high number of clients.
- Following the consultation undertaken for the development of a gender-affirming multidisciplinary service through the LGBTIQ+ Health Scoping Study, stakeholders and community alike have high expectations of increased availability and access to appropriate care for the LGBTIQ+ community.
- In May and June 2021, Meridian advised CHN that Inclusive Pathways had reached capacity. This occurred again in May 2022, October 2022, and January 2023, and as a result, we have had to close our waiting list each time. This outcome is distressing for our clinicians, who know that vulnerable members in our community are in desperate need of support, experience barriers to accessing other mental health services, and have nowhere else to turn.
- Meridian's current capacity for primary health care is 10 hours (2 sessions) a week. This capacity cannot support the community's need.



What we need to meet current demand

Meridian is currently providing a gender-affirming, trans-informed, multi-disciplinary service with funding from a range of Commonwealth and ACT Government one-off and time-limited grants. As such, we are 'in part' meeting the needs that were anticipated for a gender-affirming multi-disciplinary service. However, we are beyond capacity and cannot fully meet the healthcare needs of our communities without additional funding. **We urge the ACT Government to provide an ongoing budget to support sustainable primary healthcare for some of our most at-risk community members.**

Meridian has set up and established the clinic in terms of infrastructure, systems, processes, evaluation methodology, and clinical governance. However, we require funding to attract, recruit, and train a strong GP workforce capable of delivering gender-affirming care and HIV specialist care provided by GP's who are s100 prescribers.

Further, due to limited care-coordination resources to support LGBTIQ+ people with complex needs, people can fall through the gaps and often do not access the healthcare they need in a timely manner. With an increased care-coordination budget, Meridian can address this need.

Meridian therefore proposes an immediate scaling up of our primary healthcare clinic to increase our capacity to provide gender-affirming care along with HIV prevention and support and care coordination.

There is an urgent need for action from all of us. Meridian remains committed to stepping up to meet the needs of the communities we serve and is actively engaged in primary healthcare as a priority. Any service we facilitate, including the primary healthcare clinic, is complemented by Meridian's Inclusive Pathways program (delivered by psychologists and social workers) and counselling and psychosocial services funded by the Capital Health Network and the ACT Government. This demonstrates that we offer gender-affirming multi-disciplinary services, and we have the capacity to grow and further meet the needs of the community if we are given the appropriate resourcing.

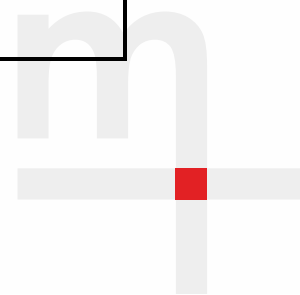
Contribution to the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework

Providing Meridian with an ongoing sustainable budget to cover operational costs will fulfill all of the domains and indicators in the ACT Government Wellbeing Framework.

Domain: Health – Being healthy and supported with the right care

Indicator: Access to health services

Meridian supports the health and wellbeing of the LGBTIQ+ community to ensure they are supported with the right care. Without operational funding, we cannot open our doors and provide the critical services our communities need.



Indicator: Mental health

Mental health services provided by peer-led organisations such as Meridian are essential for improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, with research showing that LGBTIQ+ specific services are most effective in improving the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ clients.ⁱ Preliminary data from Meridian’s Inclusive Pathways counselling service shows that 92% of clients have experienced health and wellbeing improvements as a result of using the service, with 85% saying that the improvement was to their mental health. 100% of clients say the program has helped them improve their emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Indicator: Access to health services

LGBTIQ+ peer-led services, such as those provided by Meridian, 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.ⁱⁱ Preliminary findings from Meridian’s research into the value of peer-led services (report forthcoming) adds to this evidence base, with 63% of respondents having actively avoided or delayed accessing support because they feared stigma, discrimination, or abuse when accessing mainstream healthcare services. Further, 84% of survey respondents said they would be more likely to access support if a peer-led service were available.

Domain: Identity and belonging – Being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society

Indicator: Sense of belonging and inclusion

Peer-led services have been shown to increase connection to community and a sense of belonging. According to Meridian’s peer-led services research, 75% of respondents said that it is important or very important that healthcare and support services increase their connection to community, and 78% said that peer-led services always or sometimes provide this connection. Evaluation of Meridian’s Inclusive Pathways service shows that 98% of clients agree or strongly agree that they feel accepted and safe to be themselves when using the service. When asked what outcomes they have experienced relating to increased access to relevant information services and support, 69% said they feel more connected to community.

END NOTE

ⁱ Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M. and Lyons, A. (2020) *Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia*. ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 122. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Alpert, A. B., Cichoski Kelly, E. M., and Fox, A. D. (2017) What Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex patients say doctors should know and do: A qualitative study. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(10), 1368–1389; Thompson, H. M., Karnik, N. S., and Garofalo, R. (2016) Centering Transgender Voices in research as a fundamental strategy toward expansion of access to care and social support. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(3), 241–242.

