



**Submission to the
ACT Government
2007/08 Budget**

Submission to the ACT Budget 2007-08
© Youth Coalition of the ACT
November 2006

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Acknowledgement

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Ngunnawal culture and the invaluable contribution it makes to our community.

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Introduction

Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT (Youth Coalition) is the peak youth affairs body in the Australian Capital Territory and is responsible for representing the interests of people aged between 12 and 25 years of age and those who work with them. The Youth Coalition works to actively promote the well being and aspirations of young people in the ACT with particular respect to their political, cultural, economic and social development.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on a range of issues related to young people and youth services.

The Youth Coalition works collaboratively with a range of other service providers and organisations, a key role being the provision of coordination and analysis of the implications of ACT policy and program decisions for young people and youth services.

As the peak body for the youth sector, the Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

The Youth Coalition has a history of experience and broad range of knowledge upon which we have drawn to prepare this submission. The Youth Coalition maintains networks and runs forums for our members, young people and interested organisations and individuals. We host a monthly forum where we discuss current issues, listen to guest speakers, participate in consultative processes (and learn about other opportunities to participate), and share information. We also hold a bi-annual Policy Forum and Conference and other forums and working parties as issues arise. We aim to inform our members of new developments, funding opportunities, reform processes and other issues through our regular E-Bulletin service, website and other avenues.

The Youth Coalition has also consulted with young people and youth and community services to inform our 2007 / 2008 ACT Government Budget Submission.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Sector Viability/Capacity

1.1 Community Sector Wages

That the ACT Government provide further increases to community sector wages to address the significant disparity between the ACT Public Service and the community sector for positions with similar responsibilities and duties.

1.2 Youth Services Program Funding

That the ACT Government increase funding to Youth Services Program in recognition of the increased demand from programs, such as Youth Support Workers in Schools, and that programs that received pilot funding be sustained as part of the core pool and given status as core services within the program.

1.3 Youth Engagement and Participation

That the ACT Government provide funding, of \$60,000, for a full-time youth participation/engagement officer at the Youth Coalition of the ACT to work with young people to communicate their ideas, and the ideas of their peers, to ACT Government.

1.4 Indigenous Support Services

That the ACT Government provide a total of \$30,000 in recurrent funding to Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Corporation to run their Young Men's Mentor Group, Young Women's Mentor Group and Young Mums Group.

1.5 Refugee & Migrant Services

That the ACT Government increase funding to Multicultural Youth Services for an additional staff member to provide support and develop resources for mainstream organisations working with refugee and migrant young people.

1.6 Services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and / or Queer Young People

That the ACT Government fund a worker to coordinate and support work done in relation to young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and / or queer.

1.7 Training and Professional Development for the Youth Sector

That the ACT Government:

- Establish a youth sector training fund with funding matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis;
- Establish a youth sector traineeship programme where the ACT Government pays base wages of trainees hosted by youth sector organisations; and
- Provide education scholarships to the youth sector to support the part payment of professional development courses, undergraduate and post graduate studies, similar to the Masters of Youth Work run through the Australian Catholic University and supported by the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

2. Mental Health & Dual Diagnosis

2.1 Mental Health Practitioners

That the ACT Government provides additional funding to increase the provision of mental health services in the ACT in the direct provision of counselling, psychological and psychiatric services to meet the growing demand placed upon these services.

2.2 Community Youth Mental Health Services

That the ACT Government fund a position within the peak body for youth affairs that can undertake a scoping study of community based youth mental health services in order to assess the current capacity of this sector and identify gaps in the provision of services for young people.

2.3 Youth Consumer Participation

That the ACT Government allocate resources for the development of a resource package that assists organisations providing mental health services to involve young people as mental health consumers in their organisations. This should also be supported by ongoing sectorial support that can provide ongoing one-on-one organisational support in addition to whole of sector support.

2.4 AOD / Dual Diagnosis Services

That the ACT Government fund 1 full-time equivalent worker to be based at the Ted Noffs Foundation so that the Co-Op Program can run five days a week.

3. Housing/Homelessness

3.1 Innovative Communication

That the ACT Government investigate and implement a system of correspondence that involves the notification of reassessment and success in applying for housing and other important notices by SMS and/or email to young people applying for public housing through Housing ACT.

3.2 Independent Living - Supports & Resources

That the ACT Government fund the development of a guide to independent living for young people who may experience difficulty in sustaining their independent living arrangements.

3.3 Public Housing Access (Capital Investment)

That the ACT Government commit to further increases in the budget for capital investment in public housing to address the high level of demand due to the lack of affordability of the private rental market.

4. Other Initiatives

4.1 Commissioner for Children and Young People

That the roles of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Disability and Community Services are separated to ensure that the Commissioners possess the required knowledge and experience and having a direct and singular focus on their portfolio areas.

4.2 Young People and Industrial Relations

That the ACT Government make funds available for the development of resources and training for young people on industrial relations, workplace rights, occupational health and safety and for the face to face delivery of this resource to young people across the Territory.

4.3 Public Transport

That the ACT Government fund the expansion of ACTION services to include sufficient off-peak services to enable members of the ACT community without private transport to participate in the community.

4.4 Entertainment Events for Young People

That the ACT Government support at least one large-scale event targeted to young people. This should be either aimed at a broad range of young people, for example, similar to the Big Day Out. The focus should be on holding a professional event that would attract young people from not only Canberra, but also the surrounding region.

4.5 Civics Education

That the ACT Government implement a model of civics education that engages with young people and provides them with a sufficient basis from which to engage with Australia's democratic system. The ACT Government should also investigate options for funding a program to work on social issues from a citizenship framework with young people who prefer alternative engagement options than those currently provided by youth development organisations.

4.6 Social and Demographic Profile

That the ACT Government allocates resources to update and reproduce the 2002 publication Youth in the ACT: A Social and Demographic Profile.

1. Sector Capacity and Viability

As raised in previous Youth Coalition ACT Government Budget Submissions, community based youth services continue to face increasingly complex and time-consuming client loads; and insufficient funding for training, recruitment and retention of workers within the sector. This has led to a situation where the community sector is facing significant challenges to the work it is doing and is not able to operate at the optimal capacity that is required to meet the needs of young people in the ACT.

We believe that sector viability is pertinent to all priorities of the ACT Young People's Plan in addition to the effective operation of other key programs such as Turnaround. It is also specifically identified in the ACT *Young People's Plan* that the ACT Government will ensure that:

"Young people are supported and have access to high quality, appropriate and integrated service delivery responses."¹

While the *Social Compact* states that the ACT Government will:

"Recognise the importance of and support the sustainability and long-term capacity of the community sector."²

Community programs and services are vital components to supporting young people in the ACT. Governments have been found to be relying increasingly on non-government organisations to provide services.

The ability of youth services to respond to demand for services by young people is a continuing concern for the Youth Coalition, as outlined in our Budget Submissions for 2004/2005, 2005/2006 and 2006/2007. Issues include:

- Staff Training;
- Recruitment and Retention;
- Salary Increments; and
- Pay Rates (Youth Coalition 2003, 2004, 2005).

According to the Community Sector Taskforce Report 65% of community organisations in the ACT have difficulty attracting appropriate staff due to levels of pay and availability of paid hours.³ Turnover in ACT community sector organisation is also extraordinarily high at 30.7%, compared to the national average of 16.3%.⁴

These issues are of vital importance to the sector and need to be addressed so that it can continue to develop to become a cohesive and viable community sector in the ACT.

¹ ACT Government (2004) *Young People's Plan: Action Plan for Young People* p14

² ACT Government (2004) *The Social Compact*, p. 13

³ Community Sector Taskforce (2006) *Towards a Sustainable Community Sector in the ACT: The Report of the Community Sector Taskforce* p52

⁴ Community Sector Taskforce (2006) *Towards a Sustainable Community Sector in the ACT: The Report of the Community Sector Taskforce* p52

1.1 Community Sector Wages

Recommendation 1.1

That the ACT Government provide further increases to community sector wages to address the significant disparity between the ACT Public Service and the community sector for positions with similar responsibilities and duties.

The youth and community sectors have been unable to keep pace with the increase of public sector wages and are now experiencing a significant disparity between what it is able to pay staff and the remuneration that the ACT Public Service can offer. The wage disparity between community and government means that the community sector is unable to attract staff who may be most qualified for particular positions as the remuneration they can offer is well below that which one would receive working in government. While the indexation for the community sector in last year's budget went some way to addressing this wage crisis by pegging them with a new model of CPI and WPI combined - this in no way makes up for the existing low wages nor for the increase in the ACT Public Service wages that has been far outstripping the community sector.

The Community Sector Taskforce's report has documented both the current disparity in wages and the disparity in wage increases over the past seven years between the SACS Award and the ACT Public Service. Those working in the community sector do not have incremental advances to the extent that are provided by the ACT Public Service and as such, positions with similar duties and responsibilities can vary by up to \$20,000.⁵ For example:

A Health Professional Level 2 and SACS Level 5 may begin doing the same work and receiving a similar base rate, the SACS worker can only advance by just over \$3,100 while the equivalent government position can increase by almost \$16,400. Further, the SACS award does not even provide for levels that exist within the ACT Public Service as the highest level of the SACS Award (CSW Level 8) has a pay equivalent of an ASO5.

Wage disparity also has flow on effects within the community sector with 41% of organisations reporting difficulty in attracting appropriate staff due to poor remuneration. Community sector organisations also have difficulty in retaining staff with a staff turnover rate of 30.7% - *double the national average* for community sector organisations Australia wide and three times that of all organisations in Australia.⁶ These barriers leave community sector organisations with inadequate staffing due to the difficulty in replacing staff and unable to retain corporate knowledge within organisations and within the sector.

These problems are significant and have a clear and concerning impact on the way in which the community sector is able to deliver services. Community sector organisations cannot deliver high quality programs and services with staff shortages, high turnovers and an inability to attract suitably qualified or experienced workers. The low wages in the community sector therefore reduce the capacity of the community sector to provide high quality programs and services to the ACT community.

⁵ Community Sector Taskforce (2006) *Towards a Sustainable Community Sector in the ACT: The Report of the Community Sector Taskforce* p30

⁶ Ibid p52

To increase the capacity of the ACT community sector to deliver programs and services, it is vital that wages have some parity with the ACT Public Service and that wages increase at least at the same rate as the ACT Public Service. Without this, the community sector's capacity will continue to be reduced to unsustainable levels.

1.2 Youth Services Program Funding

Recommendation 1.2

That the ACT Government increase funding to Youth Services Program in recognition of the increased demand from programs, such as Youth Support Workers in Schools, and that programs that received pilot funding be sustained as part of the core pool and given status as core services within the program.

The Youth Services Program (YSP) provides vital services to young people in the ACT and is an integral program if the ACT Government is to achieve the policy goals stated in the *ACT Young People's Plan*, the *Blue Print for Young People at Risk*, the *ACT Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Strategy*, the *ACT Action Plan for Mental Health Promotion Prevention and Early Intervention*, and the *Canberra Social Plan*.

The YSP is critical in building the capacity of young people to work and live as contributing members of the ACT community. The YSP is well placed to assess and implement early identification and intervention of issues before they become significant – and incur significant costs – to the ACT community.

The current YSP funding has been in place for the past 3 years and the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support is currently conducting an evaluation of the program. There has been increased demand on most YSP funded services to respond to requests from schools and in some areas of Canberra where there have been increased numbers of young people wanting to access youth services. Some services have reported significant increases in young people wanting to access their services. Community based youth services have also become increasingly central to the work of government services and programs, such as Youth Support Workers in Schools. When this program was introduced in 2004 there was a recognition that this would lead to increased demand for YSP services as more students were referred to community youth services and youth services engaged more fully within school communities. This has been one of the highly successful outcomes of the program.⁷ However this has increased the demand on youth services requires funding to match this increase.

It is expected that there will be a commitment from the ACT Government to, at a minimum, maintain the existing amount of funding allocated through the YSP funding pool. If the evaluation identifies unmet need, such as lack of support after hours and on weekends, then the ACT Government needs to allocate additional funding to meet these needs.

We have been told that part of the evaluation process will look at programs that were allocated pilot funding. These programs have now become core areas of service provision for young people in the ACT and should be considered core funding of the YSP.

If decisions are made not to fund some of these pilot programs then the funding must stay within the YSP funding pool.

⁷ DET School Excellence Report 2005

1.3 Youth Engagement and Participation

Recommendation 1.3

That the ACT Government provide funding, of \$60,000, for a full-time youth participation/engagement officer at the Youth Coalition of the ACT to work with young people to communicate their ideas, and the ideas of their peers, to ACT Government.

Hearing young people's views, ideas and attitudes is central in any decision making process that may affect young people, however young people have limited opportunities to get their views across to ACT Government. The structures currently in place through the Youth InterACT program allow for the participation of a limited number of young people and do not support young people's ongoing engagement and participation.

There is a need for a program that is able to engage with young people to work with young people to document and present their ideas and views to ACT Government. This kind of participation is not simply about consultation, but about encouraging young people to express their views and the views of their peers through supporting them to write and respond to government inquiries and engaging with peers to gather this information.

We believe this kind of participation is readily facilitated through existing networks and social infrastructure that exists within the community sector. The Youth Coalition has experience in working with young people from a youth participation framework and is well placed to provide support and expertise to young people to facilitate a dialogue between government and young people in innovative and collaborative ways that build on young people strengths and skills. This would also allow for a diversity of voices of young people to be heard at a government level.

The work of Youth Participation/Engagement Officers at other youth peak bodies around the country such as the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia, have resulted in positive projects and excellent models of youth participation. This is an opportunity for the ACT to also increase the ability of young people to communicate their ideas, and those of their peers, to government.

1.4 Indigenous Support Groups

Recommendation 1.4

That the ACT Government provide \$30,000 in recurrent funding to Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Corporation to run their Young Men's Mentor Group, Young Women's Mentor Group and Young Mum's Group.

Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Corporation has been operating successfully for several years as the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Centre in the ACT. The centre has developed high quality and effective programs for working with Indigenous young people across the ACT. This has highlighted the importance of indigenous youth services in providing culturally appropriate and effective programs for indigenous young people.

Gugan Gulwan is currently, without funding, trying to run a Young Men's Mentor Group, a Young Women's Mentor Group and a Young Mum's Group. The young people's participation in these groups is:

- 22 young men attend the Young Men's Mentor Group;
- 19 young women attend the Young Women's Mentor Group; and
- 11 young mums with 9 accompanying children attend the Young Mum's Group.

These groups have to date been relying on in-kind support from external agencies and this support is not sustainable. These groups are at serious risk of having to be abandoned. If funding is not received for these groups approximately 60 Indigenous young people will no longer be able to access the innovative support groups that they have been benefiting from.

Programs such as these groups are vital for indigenous young people who continue to face significant disadvantage within the ACT. Indigenous young people continue to be over represented in many indicators of risk including representing 45% of those remanded in Quamby Youth Detention Centre,⁸ at the age of 17 they are 20% less likely to be in school and nine times more likely to live in out of home care.⁹

These programs provide young indigenous people a safe space to speak with youth workers and other professionals and to implement early intervention and prevention programs designed to reduce the instances of risk factors in indigenous young people in the ACT. This initiative would ensure that the support being provided to indigenous young people is able to continue and will assist in reducing the significant disadvantage experienced by many indigenous young people in the ACT.

⁸ ACT Government (2005) *ACT Criminal Justice Statistical Profile March 2005 Quarter* p23

⁹ ACT Government (2004) *A Social and Cultural Profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Canberra* p23, p19

1.5 Refugee and Migrant Services

Recommendation 1.5

That the ACT Government increase funding to Multicultural Youth Services for an additional staff member to provide support and develop resources for mainstream organisations working with refugee and migrant young people.

Services for refugee and migrant young people have experienced a high level of demand, particularly from newly arrived refugees from countries such as Sudan. The issues facing these young people are numerous and highly complex, resulting from previous trauma, low levels of education and literacy, highly disrupted education, cultural differences, isolation and racism.

Currently the Multicultural Youth Services (MYS), the main service working with young people from refugee backgrounds, receives only limited funding from the Community Inclusion Board. This service has built trust and developed expertise in working with this particular group but they do not have the capacity to respond to demand from young people, other service providers and educators.

MYS have both an increasing client base of young people in addition to an increasing number of other services, including ACT Government Schools, requesting support in their work with refugee and migrant young people. With needs including educational support, training for youth organisations, community services and schools in addition to direct work with young people, the service is significantly under-resourced.

We strongly recommend that this service has increased funding for an additional staff member to provide support and develop resources for those working with refugee and migrant young people.

1.6 Services for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and / or Queer Young People

Recommendation 1.6

That the ACT Government fund a worker to coordinate and support work done in relation to young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and / or queer.

Approximately 1 in 10 people in the community may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and / or queer (GLBTIQ). Despite this there are no services in the ACT that cater specifically and holistically to the needs of these young people. Nor is there a position within any community organisation, nor government, that work specifically and holistically with GLBTIQ young people.

A high proportion of young people are either GLBTIQ or question their sexuality, indeed research suggests that this rate is 8.8% of females and 4.6% of males in secondary school.¹⁰ This population group has unique issues that are becoming increasingly important as young people 'come out' at an earlier age – with over half of young people reporting they identified as same sex attracted by the age of 13.¹¹ Research also suggests that 16% of young people identify as GLBTIQ have experienced physical abuse and a staggering 44% experience verbal and emotional abuse. Verbal abuse included name calling and threats, while physical abuse included damaged clothes and possessions, rape and hospitalisation. A staggering 74% of this abuse occurred in schools.¹²

This leads to significant mental health issues including clear links with self-harming behaviours.¹³ Same sex attracted young people were more likely to self-harm, be sexually active earlier and to have problematic drug use.

The need to address the issues facing GLBTIQ young people is unquestionable and currently, there is very little support for both community organisations and educational institutions to provide appropriate support to young people experiencing these issues. The work that is currently being done with GLBTIQ young people is only achieved through highly dedicated individuals who are passionate about these issues – many of whom are volunteers. However, due to the fragmented and individualistic nature of the work being done, there is the potential for high levels of duplication and for this work to remain unrecognised and limited only to one service or to one school. Work currently being done by individuals include things such as co-ordinating services such as support groups, running anti-homophobia campaigns, individual support and referral for GLBTIQ young people and providing limited training to teachers and other support staff.

In order for the ACT to tackle the significant issues facing GLBTIQ young people, there needs to be, at the least, a funded position to specifically address these issues. This role could be similar to the role of Indigenous Liaison Officers in the Department of Education. The key elements of this role would be to assess the current practice concerning GLBTIQ young people, coordinate responses to GLBTIQ issues, promote best practise, support services and educational institutions in developing and implementing GLBTIQ friendly policies and practices and support organisations who may need assistance in dealing with GLBTIQ issues.

¹⁰ Smith, A, et al. M 2002, Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2002, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University p2

¹¹ Hillier, L et al. (2005) *Writing Themselves In Again – 6 Years On* Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, Latrobe University p22

¹² Ibid pviii

¹³ Ibid pviii

1.7 Training and Professional Development for the Youth Sector

Recommendation 1.7

That the ACT Government:

- Establish a youth sector training fund with funding matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis;
- Establish a youth sector traineeship programme where the ACT Government pays base wages of trainees hosted by youth sector organisations; and
- Provide education scholarships to the youth sector to support the part payment of professional development courses, undergraduate and post graduate studies, similar to the Masters of Youth Work run through the Australian Catholic University and supported by the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

There is a need to invest in training and professional development opportunities for youth workers such as additional traineeships and sponsoring youth workers in tertiary education. Recruitment and retention should also be included in terms of providing youth workers with comparable pay and access to resources that are available to staff in ACT Government.

Many of our member agencies have been regularly informing us for several years of their problems in recruiting appropriate staff.

The youth sector is committed to providing staff with the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge to perform their duties to the highest standard. Training and development is a key part of developing a skilled workforce. Many youth sector agencies provide considerable support and investment into new and existing workers but they do not have the funding to offer staff training and professional development opportunities equal to the opportunities offered through many ACT Government agencies, such as:

- Some agencies paying half to two-thirds of tertiary course fees for staff, and
- Payment of final year study fees for graduates who commit to working in the area of Child Protection for 12 months.

We support these initiatives. However, there is limited capacity under the current funding arrangements for youth sector agencies to offer similar incentives to their staff. It is vital that some ACT Government investment and support be provided to address the shortage of skilled workers in the youth sector. This is also imperative if the youth sector, through their funding partnership with the ACT Government, is to deliver high quality services to young Canberrans.

2. Mental Health & Dual Diagnosis

2.1 Mental Health Practitioners

Recommendation 2.1

That the ACT Government provide additional funding to increase the provision of mental health services in the ACT in the direct provision of counselling, psychological and psychiatric services to meet the growing demand placed upon these services.

Young people's ability to access mental health practitioners such as counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists in the ACT is central to their wellbeing. The ACT Government has made commitments to mental health in a variety of ways, yet timely and affordable counselling, psychological and psychiatric support for young people remains an area of unmet need within the ACT community. The lack of professional support for young people experiencing mental health issues will not dissipate; indeed it will rise in the coming years. While the community based mental health sector may be fragmented and it may be unclear exactly where capacity needs to be increased, it is clear that an increase in the capacity of mental health services is required to young people to access mental health practitioners.

In the current environment, it is well known by those working with young people that the services provided in the ACT are not adequate in meeting the needs of young people for a variety of reasons, with the cost of these services and the demand placed upon them being the key issues. As expected, young people who are the most marginalised feel the lack of services most acutely. The ACT SAAP data for young people living in crisis accommodation suggests that young people in the ACT accessing SAAP services are twice as likely to be unable to access mental health services as the rest of the nation.¹⁴

It is totally unacceptable for the ACT to be a community in which over 44% of highly at risk young people are not able to access required psychological services and over 38% unable to access psychiatric services. Young people in Canberra must be able to access to these essential services, particularly those who are most marginalised.

The insufficient service provision currently being experienced for these services is due to a number of factors including changes to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), which has reduced its target group and is facing increased demand for services. CAMHS is an integral part of the mental health system in the ACT and CAMHS currently appears unable to meet the demand that exists as it has limited its target group and is unable to provide services for all young people who approach them. This has created an unmanageable burden on youth services such as the Junction Youth Health Service and Bungee.

As funding for promotion, prevention and early intervention services continues to rise – as it should given the importance of this area – so too will the demand for mental health services. In reducing stigma and increasing awareness of mental health issues within the ACT community, we inevitably create a greater demand for services that are provided to assist in support for these issues. However, the demand that has been created by young people requiring mental health services is currently outweighing the ability for a response and this is unacceptable. We must act in order to ensure that young people are able to access affordable and timely treatment for their mental health.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) *Homeless Children in SAAP 2004–05: Australian Capital Territory Supplementary Tables* p5
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2.2 Community Youth Mental Health Services Scoping Position

Recommendation 2.2

That the ACT Government fund a position within the peak body for youth affairs that can undertake a scoping study of community based youth mental health services in order to assess the current capacity of this sector and identify gaps in the provision of services for young people.

The provision of youth mental health services is currently highly fragmented throughout a number of different organisations and institutions. Currently community mental health services are provided by schools through counsellors and also by the community sector through support groups, early intervention initiatives, mental health promotion initiatives and direct support. Due to this fragmentation of the current services, it is not possible to effectively identify the gaps for young people in mental health, yet we do know that such gaps not only exist but also are undermining the effective delivery of services. Young people are clearly falling through the gaps of our mental health services and a coordinated and informed approach is required to increase the capacity of the sector to respond to these issues.

The solution for the seamless provision of mental health services for young people is predicated on the ability to assess the current capacities of community based mental health services and identify the existing gaps within this provision of services. It is only from this basis that the community sector can increase its ability to respond to young people who require support. Only through knowing what the current sector looks like, can services respond in a way that will effectively support young people who require assistance from community based mental health services.

Resources are required to invest in a scoping study that can bring together community based mental health services and identify where the sector as a whole is lacking in the ability to support young people and where capacity needs to be enhanced to ensure that young people can access the services they need. In consultations held by the Youth Coalition, community based mental health services have said that this investment would be the single most beneficial contribution that the ACT Government could make to them on the basis of very low cost yet significant outcome that this initiative would achieve.

Without the funding of an initiative such as this, it is not possible to identify the specific areas that are lacking in the provision of mental health services for young people and specific sub-populations of young people. If such an initiative was to be funded, future resources would be invested more wisely and more effectively than if we remain unsure of the distribution of the sector's current capacity to respond to young people in need of mental health services.

2.3 Youth Consumer Participation

Recommendation 2.3

That the ACT Government allocate resources for the development of a resource package that assists organisations providing mental health services to involve young people as mental health consumers in their organisations. This should also be supported by ongoing sectorial support that can provide ongoing one-on-one organisational support in addition to whole of sector support.

The ACT Government has recognised the importance of consumer participation in mental health services has in increasing service quality and appropriateness of delivery through papers such as the *Come to the Table* discussion paper.¹⁵ This has also been recognised through the requirement of services to have consumers participate in their organisations.

This trend in increased consumer participation correlates with the trend in youth participation that has seen a greater focus for all organisations working with young people to include them in the planning, decision making and advising of these organisations. Some general participation literature providing models and advice to organisations attempting to involve young people in their organisations have complemented this.

The involvement of young people as mental health consumers is, however, resource intensive and challenging. There are very few models and few resources that assist organisations developing appropriate models of participation. This is particularly the case for young people participating as consumers, as unique models need to be developed to effectively involve them in mental health services. The skills required to engage with young people as consumers and the way in which this is done is significantly different than engagement of young people for other purposes (for example the Minister's Youth Council).

There is, therefore, a clear gap in resources available for organisations to develop, establish and maintain effective models for the engagement of young people as consumers of mental health services. This is something that must be explored and developed if young people are going to be effectively engaged by service deliverers.

¹⁵ ACT Health (2006) *Come to the Table: A Discussion Paper* June 2006 p4

2.4 AOD or Dual Diagnosis Services

Recommendation 2.4

That the ACT Government fund 1 full-time equivalent worker to be based at the Ted Noffs Foundation so that the Co-Op Program can run five days a week.

Alcohol and other drugs use is a major issue for a many young people in the ACT. Recent University of New South Wales research has identified that the ACT has some of the highest drug use in Australia.

The Ted Noffs Foundation runs the Co-Op program that provides non-residential support through a day program for young people who are experiencing alcohol and other drug issues. The Co-Op can only accept up to 12 young people at a time and is only open 3 days a week - within 3 weeks of the re-opening the Co-Op Program it was full. There is currently a waiting list.

In 2002, 12.4 per cent of ACT secondary students reported that they had used an illicit substance at least once in the last four weeks and 7.8 per cent reported that they had used an illicit substance in the last week¹⁶. Many young people currently accessing the Co-Op have been referred from the Department of Education and Training. This initiative has provides an alternative to suspension from schools to provide appropriate support for young people experiencing alcohol and other drug issues in mainstream ACT Government schools.

The Drug Use Careers of Offenders (DUCO) study conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology found that of the young people incarcerated violent abuse was most frequently reported (36%) followed by emotional abuse (27%) and neglect (18%). When combined, almost half the young people (46%) reported experiencing at least one of these types of abuse in their lifetime. Moreover, the experiences of neglect and abuse also appeared to be linked to both drug use and crime. Young people reporting regular violent or property offending were more likely to report a history of neglect and abuse, as were juveniles reporting high frequency substance use in the six months prior to detention¹⁷.

Youth Justice has been mandating young people to the Co-Op program and this has worked successfully to date. Due to the limited places available in the Co-Op it is unable to meet the needs of young people experiencing alcohol and other drug issues in the ACT.

¹⁶ McDonald, D. The Extent And Nature Of Alcohol, Tobacco And Other Drug Use, And Related Harms, In The Australian Capital Territory, ACT Health. April 2006

¹⁷ Australian Institute of Criminology. 2006. Crime Facts Info No. 118: Experiences of neglect and abuse amongst juvenile detainees

3. Housing/Homelessness

3.1 Innovative Communication

Recommendation 3.1

That the ACT Government investigate and implement a system of correspondence that involves the notification of reassessment and success in applying for housing and other important notices by SMS and/or email to young people applying for public housing through Housing ACT.

Currently, Housing ACT's approach to corresponding to applicants is primarily through mail, however, this method of communication is often not the most appropriate for young people who are applying for Housing ACT. This has resulted in young people missing out on opportunities to take up offers for housing. Alternative communication methods, particularly SMS is an effective tool for communicating with young people and this should be explored and implemented by Housing ACT.

Young people applying for Housing ACT may be homeless or living transiently, and are thus less likely than others to have permanent addresses from which they can receive correspondence. While being an ongoing issue, this has intensified due to the continuous reassessment in place for applicants on the highest priority list. This also places considerable stress on refuges and other services working with young people who receive mail from Housing ACT for clients who have exited the service but have no new permanent address and the service is required to attempt to find them to pass on mail.

There has been a range of examples from around the nation of innovative communication strategies for young people, particularly those at risk of homelessness, that increase the likelihood of correspondence getting through to them. These include Mission Australia and their partnership with Vodafone called 'young people connected' as well as a range of other programs that happen in youth centres and youth services across the nation. Centrelink also use electronic letters through email and SMS reminders of these letters to inform and remind young people. This is a standard practise for many services – including large government agencies – that could be easily adopted by Housing ACT and possibly other ACT Government departments and agencies.

The use of SMS and/or email is another tool that can be used to contact young people. Some young people may not have a permanent address, but many have a mobile phone. Housing ACT could ask young people how they would like to be contacted and young people could select SMS and/or email. This option is also much cheaper for Housing ACT at only \$0.20 per SMS and requires very limited infrastructure/start up funding.

3.2 Independent Living - Supports & Resources

Recommendation 3.2

That the ACT Government fund the development of a guide to independent living for young people who may experience difficulty in sustaining their independent living arrangements.

Young people moving out of home, out of care and out of supported accommodation currently have few supports to ensure their transition to independent living is successful and they are able to live sustainably in an independent environment. Those working with young people living independently or moving to independent living need sufficient training and professional development to delivery appropriate and effective independent living skills training for young people.

Many young people who are unsuccessful in independent living are unable to sustain their independence as a result of relatively minor issues that could be resolved through training by those they are already in contact with. For example, youth services and schools could deliver training. However these trainers also need education regarding independent living skills and tenancy education.

Young people living independently have few resources available to them for basic information regarding everyday living skills including skills such as basic home maintenance, financial management, information about insurance, healthy eating and nutrition and information regarding tenancy rights and responsibilities. Providing training for those working with young people to address these issues would also decrease the instances of re-entry into SAAP services and intensive reengagement of related services such as outreach.

To ensure that those working with young people are adequately knowledgeable about tenancy and independent living skills, the ACT Government should fund the development of a guide to independent living that aims to provide an overview of all this information. In addition to being a training resource, this could also be adapted and made available to all young people who move out into independent living.

3.3 Public Housing Access (Capital Investment)

Recommendation 3.3

That the ACT Government commit to further increases in the budget for capital investment in public housing to address the high level of demand due to the lack of affordability of the private rental market.

Young people currently face considerable barriers to accessing public housing and this is a significant barrier to them successfully exiting from the SAAP system. In order for the SAAP system to operate effectively, young people in SAAP services must have affordable accommodation to move on to. This is particularly an issue for young people in Canberra that has experienced an increasingly more expensive rental market that has led to the large scale exclusion of young people from private rental.

While the Youth Coalition recognises the 2006/07 Budget announcement of \$30 million over three years for capital investment in property, we do not believe that this is sufficient for the maintenance of the ACT public housing system and that more investment is required to meet the high level of demand currently facing the ACT due to high costs of private rental markets.

The waiting lists for ACT public housing have been unacceptably long for an extended period of time and this has led to many young people stuck in SAAP and medium term/transitional accommodation when they are able to live in less supported accommodation. The changes made to the priority list in the 2006/07 Budget may increase the appropriateness of housing allocation and may allocate housing to those most in need in less time than in the past. However, these changes will not alter the reality that there will be an unacceptably long wait for the vast majority of young people applying for ACT public housing due to a completely unaffordable and discriminatory private rental market, if they are allocated a property at all.

We do not believe that the ACT public housing system is one that should be only welfare focused, rather one that should support members of the community who are otherwise unable to access housing – one of the most fundamental of entitlements in our society. To suggest that public housing is only for those in our society experiencing significant and complex disadvantage is to diminish the excellent record of public housing of this city. In order to ensure that all members of our community have access to affordable housing, the ACT Government must commit to further increases above the already committed funds for purchase of further public housing stock.

4. Other Initiatives

4.1 Commissioner for Children and Young People

Recommendation 4.1

That the roles of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Disability and Community Services are separated to ensure that the Commissioners possess the required knowledge and experience and have a direct and singular focus on their portfolio areas.

The Youth Coalition has strongly advocated for a Commissioner for Children and Young People throughout previous budget submissions in recognising the centrality of this role in ensuring the safety, wellbeing and promotion of young people in the ACT. It was therefore with disappointment that we saw the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People amalgamated with the Disability and Community Services Commissioner.

In supporting the Vardon report into care and protection in the ACT, we also agree with Cheryl Vardon that the Commissioner “would have recognised professional knowledge and expertise in fields associated with children and young people” and would be responsible not only for child death review teams but also for systemic advocacy, standard setting, a complaints and investigatory role and community information and education.¹⁸ We do not believe that it is possible to have a Commissioner who is able to fulfil their duties as a Children and Young People’s Commissioner whilst simultaneously possessing the extensive experience in disability and in community services that is also required for this amalgamated position.

The Youth Coalition strongly supports the role and recognises the importance of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Disability and Community Services however we believe that the changes made to these positions by amalgamating them threaten to undermine the purpose and roles. We strongly urge the ACT Government to separate the roles as per the original arrangement for the Commissioners in order to ensure that the ACT supports the wellbeing and promotion of young people while affording children and young people the highest possible level of care and protection.

¹⁸ Vardon, C. (2004) *The Territory as Parent: Review of the Safety of Children in Care in the ACT and of ACT Child Protection Management* p187

4.2 Young People and Industrial Relations

Recommendation 4.2

That the ACT Government make funds available for the development of resources and training for young people on industrial relations, workplace rights, occupational health and safety and for the face to face delivery of this resource to young people across the Territory.

The changes to employment legislation as a result of the Work Choices legislation has significant impacts on young people and young people are more likely to face exploitation than many other groups within society. Young people are unlikely to have experience negotiating with employers as many begin working for the first time. They are also likely to work in industries with high levels of injuries, such as hospitality.

Young people are also less likely than many other sections of the population to have an adequate knowledge of their rights at work and their ability to appeal decisions and to redress their grievances. They require targeted and specialised education campaigns and resources in order for them to be sufficiently skilled and informed about industrial relations and to have an understanding of OH&S. This requires not only the production of resources, but also for the face to face delivery of such resources and information.

We suggest that the ACT Government provide funding for the development and delivery of an employment resource that will aim to educate young people on IR and provide a future reference for them. This would be delivered face to face to young people in schools and community groups, encouraging young people to be informed of their rights at work. This also has the capacity to be done in collaboration with a number of services and organisations such as Unions ACT and the Youth Law Centre ACT.

4.3 Public Transport

Recommendation 4.3

That the ACT Government fund the expansion of ACTION services to include sufficient off-peak services to enable members of the ACT community without private transport to participate in the community.

The recent changes to ACTION bus services are of significant concern for young people who will face the most detrimental impacts of these changes as services during non-peak times are reduced. The ACT Government itself has identified that “Public transport is a major issue for youth, for a variety of educational, lifestyle and social reasons”¹⁹ and further, that “public transport is more important and used more frequently by young people than the overall Canberra community”.²⁰ Over half of young people are regular users of public transport compared with just 21.9% of those aged over 25.²¹

Young people use off peak services to travel from school and to and from work. The majority of these trips are on off-peak services due to the times that young people finish school and begin working both during the week and on weekends. Decreasing the number of bus services in non-peak periods will impact significantly on young people and has the potential to exclude many young people from educational and employment opportunities.

The ACT Government should consider the impact that this will have in the context of school closures that will require young people to be increasingly reliant on services that are becoming less frequent and less accommodating for young people.

Bus services are also used by young people as their sole form of transport for engaging with society through recreational and cultural activities. For example, currently a young person who is dependent on public transport and lives in Gungahlin cannot stay out later than 8pm on a Saturday night to go to the cinemas at Belconnen and once they get on the bus at 7:57pm and it would take them 41 minutes to travel - what is under 11kms if the route was direct - back to Gungahlin.

This demonstrates that services are currently inadequate and changes to off peak services to make them even more inadequate for young people are unacceptable. Any changes to the public transport system should aim to increase the provision of off peak services to ensure that young people are able to access recreational, educational and employment opportunities. Without this, young people face severe social exclusion.

¹⁹ ACT Government (2002) *Youth in the ACT: A Social and Demographic Profile* p72

²⁰ *Ibid* p74

²¹ *Ibid* p71

4.4 Entertainment Events for Young People

Recommendation 4.4

That the ACT Government support at least one large-scale event targeted to young people. This should be either aimed at a broad range of young people, for example, similar to the Big Day Out. The focus should be on holding a professional event that would attract young people from not only Canberra, but also the surrounding region.

Canberra has very few large-scale events that are targeted at young people aged 16-24. This results in few young people travelling to the city for events that they are genuinely interested in, often coming with their family to attend events such as Floriade or to visit the national institutions. This has contributed to the significant number of young people around the country who believe that Canberra is “boring”.²²

This is a belief that could be challenged if the ACT were to have more large-scale events that a variety of young people are interested in. These do not necessarily have to be music events, but could be events similar to Homebake or the Big Day Out. These events are different from the evening performances that occur at places like the university bars and other venues, as they would involve multiple high profile performers and a festival style performance with a very large number of attendees.

Canberra needs to hold events that young people, both in the ACT and beyond, perceive as engaging and fun. This is something that requires substantial investment in order to build a reputation for events and to ensure that they are viable. As such, if the ACT Government provides funding for events of this kind, they should be organised professionally with a focus on entertainment and giving young Canberrans the opportunity to see multiple high profile performers without having to travel interstate.

²² http://www.nationalcapital.gov.au/corporate/media/recent_media_release.asp?media_ID=64

4.5 Civics and Citizenship

Recommendation 4.5.1

That the ACT Government implement a model of civics education that engages with young people and provides them with a sufficient basis from which to engage with Australia's democratic system.

Recommendation 4.5.2

That the ACT Government investigate options for funding a program to work on social issues from a citizenship framework with young people who prefer alternative engagement options than those currently provided by youth development organisations.

The education of young people in the ACT on civics and citizenship is in need of reform if we want to ensure that all young people are active, engaged and informed members of Australian society. The current system of civics education is not engaging young people the way that it must do. The ACT should provide leadership for the rest of the nation in the adaptation or development of an engaging civics education program for young people in the ACT.

The Youth Coalition consulted with over 50 young people from a range of backgrounds when preparing our submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People on lowering the voting age. One of our key findings was that young people felt that the current system of civics education was not engaging and not informative enough to equip them with the skills and knowledge they want to have as active citizens.

The ACT Government has a key responsibility in ensuring that young people in the ACT are provided with an engaging model of civic education that aims to stimulate young people's existing interests in aspects of our democracy and expose young people to any aspects to which they not previously been exposed. Such a course should aim to do four key things; ensure that young people have an understanding of the mechanics of the Australian democratic system; understand the relationship between civil society and democracy; enhance young people's passion for the Australian democratic system and to demonstrate to young people the clear link that exists between issues they care about and democracy in Australia.

This education should be coupled with support for programs that aim to engage young people outside of school in matters concerning politics, democracy and social and environmental issues that they are engaged with. There are excellent examples within the ACT of organisations such as the United Nations Youth Association and programs such as Talkback Classroom that engage young people in ways that appeal to them.

However, while existing programs engage very effectively with a specific target group of young people, they generally are not appealing to other young people who prefer engaging in alternative ways in regards to civic affairs. There is a need for a program in the ACT that engages young people with current social issues in an alternative way to the current opportunities provided by youth development organisations.

4.6 Social and Demographic Profile

Recommendation 4.6

That the ACT Government allocates resources to update and reproduce the 2002 publication *Youth in the ACT: A Social and Demographic Profile*.

In 2002, the ACT Government produced a document entitled *Youth in the ACT: A Social and Demographic Profile* that compiled a range of statistical information on young people. The document provided both government and the non-government agencies with indicators of social and demographic trends for young people.

The production of this document enabled the ACT Government to document the experiences of young people in the Territory and to bring to light the contribution of young people in the ACT, the needs of young people and in Territory and emerging trends for the future.

The document, however, was produced using data from the 1996 Census which is now outdated. For example, there is no mention of African nations in the country of origin for newly arrived young people in the ACT as these were negligible in 1996 but not are a very significant part of the demographic profile.

Therefore, we suggest that a new profile be developed updating the statistics used in this document with, for example, the 2006 Census Data to ensure that the ACT Government and community sector is able to use the best possible data when making decisions about service provision to young people in the ACT.