



Budget Submission 2015 – 2016

Submitted via www.act.gov.au/budgetconsultation

By:

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ACT Mental Health Consumer Network 2015-16 Budget Submission

This submission has been prepared by the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network in response to the invitation from the ACT Treasurer, Andrew Barr MLA, to provide feedback as part of the ACT 2015-16 Budget consultation process.

The Network is the peak body for mental health consumers in the ACT. Run by consumers for consumers, our aim is to advocate for services and supports for mental health consumers which better enable them to live fuller, healthier and more valued lives in the community. We do this through advocacy, representation, lobbying and active involvement in new developments in the mental health sector, as well as in the wider health and community sectors.

The Network recognises the budgetary challenges faced by the ACT, and welcomes the Government's commitment to ongoing investment in the ACT. We agree that a focus on the four key areas set out by the Government is an appropriate focus for that investment. In particular, mental health consumers will benefit from an ongoing focus on the areas of 'Healthy and Smart' and 'Liveability and Opportunity'.

We make the following specific recommendations:

Recommendation: In honouring its commitment to growth funding for community managed mental health services, the ACT Government should fund services provided by peer support workers.

The ACT Government is well aware of the significant disparities within the ACT population in relation to economic and social opportunities. The Network congratulates the ACT Government on its support for the community mental health sector and its commitment to supporting the vulnerable and disadvantaged. We note that in the *2012 ACT Labor-Greens Parliamentary Agreement* the Government agreed to provide additional mental health funding, including approximately \$500,000 in new funding to community managed mental health services.

The Network expects the Government to honour that commitment. In doing so, the Network would like to see a focus on providing peer support. There is significant evidence of the benefits of peer support workers to a range of mental health consumers¹. The Government has invested in developing training for peer support workers, and it is time to expand the range of services employing peer support workers. We suggest that all new funding to community managed mental health services should be for services provided by peer support workers.

¹ See, eg, National Mental Health Commission, *National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, 2012

Recommendation: The ACT Government must ensure that mental health consumers who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme are able to access mental health supports and services.

The Network commends the ACT Government for the efforts it has made, mainly through the ACT NDIS Taskforce, to take a consultative approach to implementation of the NDIS. ACT Health is also to be commended for the way in which it is seeking to ensure that eligible mental health consumers currently receiving services transition to the NDIS as smoothly as possible.

Mental health consumers have a wide range of conditions, some mild, some acute. Some with severe illness will not be eligible for the NDIS. Those whose illness does not fit the definitions for permanent disability will continue to need support, and the Network welcomes the Government's commitments to date to continuity of service. No one should lose access to mental health supports because of the introduction of the NDIS.

However, simply ensuring continuity of service for those already receiving services is not sufficient. A greater focus on preventative care and on providing supports for people with mild to moderate mental illness is required. The Network calls upon the ACT Government to ensure that mental health services and supports are available to all people in the ACT who need them.

Recommendation: Funding to ACT Health must include sufficient funding for mental health to enable facilities to be fully staffed and Models of Care to be implemented.

Mental health consumers regularly report on ways in which the Model of Care is not being implemented in the Adult Mental Health Unit. There have been periods in which access to various programs and facilities have been compromised by the lack of staff. Seclusion rates are rising in the ACT. This is unacceptable, and is contributed to by staff workloads.

Two new mental health facilities are currently being developed. Very large numbers of ACT Health staff hours are being devoted to the development of these facilities, and their Models of Care. We are concerned that the new facilities will suffer a similar fate to the Adult Mental Health Unit if sufficient funding and staffing are not available.

The Network calls upon the Government to ensure that adequate funding is allocated to enable all ACT mental health facilities to provide a decent level of care.

Recommendation: Increase access to legal and advocacy services to meet the needs of mental health consumers.

As a 'human rights jurisdiction', the ACT has in place legislative and administrative protections of human rights, such as the *Human Rights Act 2004* and the *Charter of Rights for people experiencing mental health issues*.

However, rights protection is incomplete without access to appropriate advocacy, and legal advice and representation. A right that cannot in practice be asserted or enforced is illusory. Vulnerable people, including mental health consumers, therefore need to be able to access advocacy and legal services to assist them to assert and protect their rights.

The Network is concerned that the Public Advocate, Legal Aid Commission, ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service, Advocacy for Inclusion and the ACT Human Rights Commission all have insufficient funding to enable them to deliver services to those who need them. Mental health consumers, by virtue of being among the most vulnerable groups in the ACT, are likely to need advocacy services in their interactions with government and non-government agencies. These may include clinicians, health service providers, Housing ACT, Centrelink, financial institutions and courts and tribunals. Appropriate support and advocacy can prevent small problems escalating, and potentially ending up in the courts. Too often, Network members are unable to obtain support, advice or advocacy when they need it, or early enough to facilitate a productive solution.

The Network believes that there is a strong need for a specialist mental health service (similar to Youth Law) to meet the particular needs of mental health consumers.

There would be significant savings to the court system, government agencies and the community if mental health consumers were provided with adequate support, advice and advocacy so that difficulties do not spiral into larger disputes.

The Network calls upon the Government to ensure that skilled advice, advocacy and representation are available to mental health consumers. This will require sufficient funding to community advocacy services, the Public Advocate, the Legal Aid Commission and the Human Rights Commission to enable them to meet the need for these services.

Recommendation: That accommodation options and supply be expanded to enable mental health consumers to access safe, affordable and appropriate housing.

The ACT Government is well aware that there is insufficient affordable or supported accommodation for a range of vulnerable groups, including people with mental health issues. This includes long term and emergency/short term accommodation. The Network continues to have members unable to obtain accommodation and therefore sleeping in parks and other public land, or on couches.

Lack of appropriate housing has a significant negative impact on a mental health consumer's recovery path. Whether living rough or 'couch surfing', the experience of homelessness compounds many difficulties in navigating daily life. Providing a safe and stable 'base' by expanding the capacity of both short and long term housing options would enhance consumers' ability to access services and supports.

Housing alone will not solve everything, but housing, together with supports specifically designed to enable consumers to maintain their tenancy, goes a long way. It can be the difference between participating in daily activities together with other members of the community and isolation which exacerbates the difficulties of living with mental illness.

The Government needs to do more to encourage and support innovative housing approaches to provide residents of the ACT with safe and sustainable housing options.