



Budget Submission 2012 – 2013

Submitted via email to:

budgetconsultation@act.gov.au

By:

ACT Mental Health Consumer Network Inc.
The Griffin Centre, Level 2, Room 11
20 Genge Street, Canberra City, 2601
P.O.BOX 469, Civic Square, ACT, 2608
Phone: 02 6230 5796 Fax: 02 6230 5790
Email: policy@actmhc.org.au
Website: www.actmhc.org.au

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ACT Mental Health Consumer Network 2012-13 Budget Submission

This submission has been prepared by the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network (the Network) in response to an invitation from the ACT Deputy Chief Minister and Treasurer, Andrew Barr MLA, to tender a written submission as part of the ACT 2012-13 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 congratulates the ACT Government on its support for the community mental health sector and its commitment to supporting the vulnerable and disadvantaged. However, the Network believes that the Government can and should do more to enable all people living in the ACT to participate meaningfully in the life of the community and to receive the support they need to do so.

FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

Recommendation: That mental health funding continues to increase as a proportion of health funding so that the agreed goal of 12% is reached, and the proportion of funding provided to the community sector increases to 30%.

While the Network accepts that there are financial constraints upon the Government in shaping the budget, we argue that community-based prevention and recovery services for people living with mental illness – many of whom are among the most vulnerable people in the ACT – are an investment that enhances opportunities for people living with mental illness to participate meaningfully in the community. Enabling individuals to participate meaningfully, including through enhancing opportunities to participate in the workforce, in turn leads to longer term savings.

The Network supports ACT Health's *Mental Health Services Plan 2009-2014* which sets out how the ACT Government will establish a mental health system that is 'consumer oriented and driven', and will 'focus on recovery and rehabilitation'. While the ACT Government has taken initial steps under the Plan, increased funding for community mental health services, including consumer directed and operated services, is critical in order to translate this momentum into concrete, sustainable improvements to the mental health system in ways and areas that consumers want and need.

The Parliamentary Agreement for the 7th Legislative Assembly for the ACT includes a commitment to the goal of 12% of overall health funding being allocated to mental health, and 30% of mental health funding being allocated to the community sector for the delivery of services by 2012. The Network strongly supports the Government allocating funding to the community sector, to provide responsive recovery focussed services.

Recommendation: That sufficient funding be provided to enable adequate staffing and other consumer supports in the new Adult Acute Mental Health Inpatient Unit to implement a recovery based model of care.

Increasing the focus on community based and recovery focussed services should not be at the expense of sufficient funding to acute services to ensure the best possible models of care can be implemented. The Network has been advised that there are questions about the proposed staffing ratio in the new Adult Acute Mental Health Inpatient Unit to be opened at the Canberra Hospital, and that the proposed staffing ration may be less than best practice.

It will be crucial to the operation of the new unit that there is adequate funding to implement the model of care that has been developed in consultation with consumers and carers. A recovery focussed model of care requires appropriate staffing levels and training to enable appropriately interactive care to be provided.

ADVOCACY

Recommendation: That access to legal and advocacy services be increased 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.

Mental health consumers have reported to the Network their difficulty in accessing advocacy and legal services. 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, service providers, Housing ACT, Centrelink and courts and tribunals.

It is clear that the supply of advocacy and legal services is insufficient to meet the need in the ACT. Organisations such as ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS) and Advocacy for Inclusion provide advocacy for people with disability, but mental health consumers commonly come to the Network seeking advocacy, because neither of these organisations has capacity to assist them at the time. Legal advice or representation is similarly in short supply. Where representation is available, funding levels mean there may be insufficient time for legal practitioners to adequately understand the needs and desires of individual consumers.

ACCOMMODATION

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 establishment of First Point has removed the barriers of individuals having to contact each one of a range of possible accommodation providers separately. However this is of little use if there is not accommodation available. During the last year the Network has had members unable to obtain accommodation and therefore sleeping in cars, parks or on couches.

Lack of appropriate housing has a significant negative impact on a mental health consumer's recovery path. Those who are homeless, whether living rough or 'couch surfing', are limited in their ability to access support services. Expanding the capacity of both short and long term housing options would enhance the ability of the community sector to provide services and support to vulnerable individuals.

Accommodation is also critical for those transitioning out of institutions, such as acute inpatient care or prison. Services and connections that assist recovery and reintegration into the community also reduce the likelihood of readmission.

REDUCING STIGMA – TRANSPORT

Recommendation: That mental health consumers being transported to hospital be carried in appropriate vehicles, which are not police vehicles, with appropriately qualified staffing.

The Network welcomes the Mental Health Community Policing Initiative. This Initiative is a positive step towards breaking down stigma and ensuring that health issues are dealt with as such, not as criminal concerns. The Network looks forward to expansion of the training program to ensure that all police operating in the ACT have been appropriately trained in recognising and dealing with mental health issues.

An initiative to put in place arrangements to provide safe transport for mental health consumers being transferred to hospital that avoid the need for transport by police would go hand in hand with the Mental Health Community Policing Initiative and would be a positive step towards reducing the stigma attached to mental health consumers. Mental health consumers report that being transported by police, when there is no allegation that they have committed a crime, can have a detrimental effect on perceptions of them by neighbours and their local community.

The Government should investigate using vehicles that are not identifiable as police vehicles, and options for staffing them, to reduce the stigma that can result when people are seen to be 'taken away' in police vehicles.

PEER SUPPORT

Recommendation: That the Government enhance its support for the development of a peer workforce

The Network strongly supports measures to develop and implement a peer workforce. There is increasing recognition of the particular value that peer workers can provide in supporting mental health consumers' recovery. The Network welcomes programs such as the Personal Helpers and Mentors program funded by the Commonwealth, and other employment of consumers in peer support roles.

In order for peer workers to be employed in services more broadly, further work needs to be done on the ethical, conceptual and practical framework within which such workers operate. Organisations require support and guidance to develop appropriate structures and procedures to ensure that both the workers and consumers are best supported in their endeavours.

The Network supports the work being done by the Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT and others to develop a mental health workforce framework and strategy that appropriately includes and values peer workers. Continued support from the Government will be needed to ensure that community organisations are best positioned to draw on the Coalition's work, and to make best use of the skills and expertise of peer workers.

ADULT SECURE MENTAL HEALTH INPATIENT UNIT

Recommendation: That the Government fund the establishment of a secure mental health inpatient unit

The Network believes that the need for a secure mental health unit is clear. We understand that the Chief Minister has sought a review of demand projections and capital costings and will report to the Assembly on this issue.

The Network strongly supports the provision of a unit to provide care, treatment and rehabilitation for forensic and non forensic ACT residents experiencing mental health issues requiring short to medium term high security care. The options for such consumers are currently very limited and can involve being moved out of the ACT. We believe the ACT has a responsibility to provide appropriate care within the jurisdiction, where families and support networks are able to remain in contact. Remaining in the jurisdiction also means transition out of secure care can be managed in a more integrated and recovery focussed manner.

Holding Alexander Maconochie Centre detainees experiencing mental ill health in the Crisis Support Unit for long periods is inappropriate as the Unit was designed to accommodate people in acute crisis for short periods. The Government needs to provide both interim and long term solutions that enable those who need high security care to receive it in the ACT, in an appropriately therapeutic setting designed for this purpose.