



ACT Mental Health Consumer Network Inc.  
The Griffin Centre, Level 2, Room 11  
20 Genge Street, Canberra City ACT 2601  
GPO BOX 836, Canberra ACT 2601  
Phone: 02 6230 5796  
Email: [policy@actmhc.org.au](mailto:policy@actmhc.org.au)  
Website: [www.actmhc.org.au](http://www.actmhc.org.au)

**Submission:**

**ACT Government: ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Strategy:  
Stakeholder Engagement Consultation Slides – December 2022.**

Submitted by email to:

Rebecca McIntyre  
[rebecca.mcintyre@act.gov.au](mailto:rebecca.mcintyre@act.gov.au)

6 March 2023



## Submission: ACT Government: ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Strategy: Stakeholder Engagement Consultation Slides – December 2022.

This submission has been prepared by the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network (the Network) in response to the invitation from the ACT Government.

The Network is a consumer-led peak organisation representing the interests of mental health consumers in the ACT in policy and decision-making forums. The Network is committed to social justice and the inclusion of people with experience of mental illness. 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.

A hybrid online and in-person meeting with consumers was held, and additional feedback was sought via email in relation to the ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Strategy (the Strategy). Written and verbal feedback was received from several consumers. This submission incorporates both the written feedback and verbal feedback received.

### General comments

The Network welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Strategy. All due care should be taken to ensure that the actions and outcomes of the Strategy are consistent and compliant with the terms of the *Mental Health Act 2015* (ACT) and the *Health and Safety Act 2011* (ACT). The Strategy should ideally be written in plain language and where appropriate should include illustrations such as easy to follow flow-charts etc.

Consumers noted that the slides contained broad statements but lacked details about the Strategy's planned actions and intended outcomes. Consumers also commented on the lack of information regarding the present state of affairs for detainees at The Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC). This made it difficult to provide feedback regarding the Strategy's intended actions and outcomes.

Due to this, consumer feedback was general in nature. But the feedback we did receive focused on three areas of concern:

- a) the inclusion of stakeholders with lived experience of the prison system in the proposed consultation process;

- b) acknowledgement that incarceration is a process that directly harms a person's health and wellbeing; and
- c) the importance of compassionate, respectful, and culturally appropriate service provision for people in the prison system and their loved ones.

In the next section of the report, each of these concerns will be discussed in further detail.

### **Consumer feedback.**

#### *a. Including feedback from stakeholders with lived experience:*

Consumers noted that the Strategy proposes to consult with a range of stakeholder organisations, but makes no mention of any intent to consult or seek feedback from people who are, or have been, subject to the prison system, or from their loved ones who are their primary support during and after incarceration. Consumers felt that including these stakeholders in the consultation process would benefit the Strategy by providing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of service providers as well as any service gaps or procedural oversights that arise between them. For example, people with lived experience of the prison system are well placed to identify problems of inter-organisation communication, coordination, and continuity of care.

Similarly, the families and loved ones of people who are, or have been, subject to the prison system are also well placed to provide feedback concerning how service providers can better support their health and wellbeing. For example, families and loved ones will be the primary social support for people subjected to the prison system, both during and after their incarceration, and are therefore ideally placed to provide direct insight into the kind, intensity, and duration of supports that are needed to ensure that people who have been subjected to the prison system have a better chance of a positively reintegrating into their community.

#### *b. The practical task of improving the health and wellbeing of people subject to the prison system requires acknowledgement of the inherently traumatic nature of incarceration.*

Consumers stressed that if the practical services and programs designed to improve the health and wellbeing of people within the prison system are to achieve their stated goals, then the Strategy and participating service providers must recognise the inherently traumatic and harmful nature of incarceration. Imprisonment involves the withdrawal of a person from society, the suspension of their rights, and the restriction of their agency within a regime of coercive control. Despite many efforts to

minimise the harm, this is an inherently traumatising procedure that inevitably harms the health and wellbeing the people who are subjected to it.

Consumers felt strongly about this, because improving the health and wellbeing of people within the prison system cannot be achieved unless service providers integrate into their policies and practices the fact that the people they are serving are in the midst of an ongoing traumatic experience. In practical terms, consumers proposed that service providers should ensure that all staff receive appropriate training in trauma informed care and integrate trauma informed care practices into all appropriate policies and procedures.

*c. Improving the health and wellbeing of people within the prison system requires compassionate, respectful, and culturally appropriate service provision.*

Consumers discussed the importance of compassionate, respectful, and culturally appropriate services to and for improving the health and wellbeing of detainees. They highlighted that the deterioration of a person's health and wellbeing within the prison system begins with the process of incarceration and will inevitably worsen if the provision of services during this period further stigmatises and dehumanises them. For instance, interactions and practices that intentionally or inadvertently humiliate, denigrate or otherwise physically harm a person within the prison system will directly damage their health and wellbeing.

In view of this, consumers stressed that the implementation of compassionate, respectful, and culturally appropriate service provision would facilitate the improvement of the health and wellbeing of people within the prison system both during and after incarceration. Avoiding and reducing the occurrence of such additional harms is not only important for improving the health and wellbeing of people within the prison system but also for decreasing the likelihood of recidivism, re-incarceration, and the severity of carceral trauma.

## **ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Strategy**

Recommendation 1: *The Strategy should include at least some details concerning the present state of affairs at AMC so that the issues which the Strategy is being formulated to address can be understood by stakeholders involved in the consultation process.*

Recommendation 2: *The Strategy should seek to include feedback from people who are, or who have been, subject to the prison system as well as families and loved ones.*

Recommendation 3: *The Strategy should explicitly acknowledge, and incorporate into its plan of action, the inherently traumatising nature of incarceration.*

### **Conclusion**

These feedback and recommendations are based on consumer feedback provided to enhance the Strategy slides.