



youth
coalition
of the ACT

Submission to the ACT Budget 2023-24

Strengthening service systems for
young people and their families

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Traditional Owners and continuing Custodians of the lands on which we work, and pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of First Nations children and young people from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today. We acknowledge that First Nations peoples hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern-day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. We celebrate First Nations cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

The Youth Coalition acknowledges the First Nations youth workers, young people and families who have come to Canberra from all across Australia and are making an ongoing contribution to the culture and community of our city. We acknowledge previous generations who have contributed to the history and culture of Canberra.

About the Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in the Australian Capital Territory. The Youth Coalition's vision is for an ACT community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people. The Youth Coalition undertakes policy development, sector development, research and evaluation, advocacy and representation activities to improve outcomes for young people and their families.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services. 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.

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Executive Summary

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is committed to working in partnership with community and government to collaboratively develop and strengthen service systems that will improve outcomes for young people and their families.

The ACT community continues to be affected by and adapt to the impact of COVID-19, whilst also working towards significant legislative and service system change, such as raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. As the Tenth Assembly for the ACT moves towards its final year, a range of opportunities exist to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

In our 2023-24 Budget Submission, we highlight several key areas of unmet need:

- 1. Urgent funding required: ACT youth self-harm and suicide prevention program (WOKE):** \$300,000 per annum to prevent the closure of a free, evidence-based, evaluated, cost-efficient and cost-effective program for young people at high risk of suicide and self-harm, developed by the University of Canberra.
- 2. Service system enhancements to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility:** Allocate funding to deliver and evaluate a service system to support young people under the age of 14 and their families, including: (a) Multidisciplinary Panel, (b) 'frontline' crisis supports, (c) intensive therapeutic family-based programs, and (d) intensive therapeutic case management.
- 3. Youth and community supports in the Gungahlin region:** Allocate funding to (1) progress the establishment of a permanent Gungahlin Youth and Community Centre, and (2) support the infrastructure fit-out and contribute to the ongoing rental costs of an interim location for the 'Gunners Place' youth program.
- 4. Explore accommodation models for homeless young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET):** Explore youth-centred, housing-led models, such as *Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)*, that support a diverse range of young people with complex needs, including those who are not engaged in education, employment or training.
- 5. Establishment funding for an ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Network:** Initial two-year funding to establish, develop and evaluate a proof of concept for this Network, which seeks to identify opportunities to better respond to the mental health needs of children and young people, as a partnership across government and community.

Each of these items is discussed in further detail below. For more information, contact Justin Barker, on (02) 6247 3540 or justin@youthcoalition.net.

Youth Coalition Submission to the ACT Budget 2023-24

1. Urgent funding required: ACT youth self-harm and suicide prevention program (WOKE)

Youth self-harm and suicide is a serious and persistent concern for the ACT community. As demonstrated in the recent *ACT Vital Signs Scorecard*, rates of self-harm among young Canberrans are the highest in Australia. Over half of all young Canberrans who identify as LGBTQIA+ had seriously considered suicide within the last 12 months. With psychological distress exacerbated by the ongoing impact of COVID-19, it is critical that the ACT community works together to support young people to stay safe and well.

The University of Canberra WOKE program provides effective support to young people experiencing **emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation**, who are at high risk of suicide, self-harm and future diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. It does this through delivering Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for Adolescents (DBT-A).

WOKE is an exemplar of a place-based program: it is evidence-based, evaluated, cost-efficient and cost-effective. It was developed to respond to a specific gap in the Canberra service system and to address unmet need within the target population. WOKE achieves positive outcomes for young people, along with their parents and families. Evaluation findings demonstrated significantly reduced suicidal ideation and distress, and improved coping strategies for young people. Furthermore, the WOKE program directly builds the capability of the mental health workforce in the ACT.

Without continued funding, WOKE will end in June 2023. There are currently **73 young people and their families** on the program waitlist, demonstrating the high demand for this Program and level of unmet need. If the program is discontinued, these young people and families will continue to be at risk of adverse outcomes. There are no other free, early intervention, youth focused DBT programs in the ACT.

Community Impact of the WOKE Program

The WOKE program has a demonstrated positive impact for young people, families, the workforce and broader sector in the ACT:

1. **Improved youth mental health outcomes:** Young people who participated in WOKE demonstrated significantly reduced suicidal ideation and distress, and significantly improved their positive coping strategies.
2. **Increased parenting skills and family functioning:** Family members highly valued learning new skills to support their young person, which were also transferable to supporting their other children and family members.
3. **Building workforce capability:** By training intern clinical psychology Masters and PhD students to deliver the program, WOKE both avoids the common workforce recruitment and retention issues experienced across mental health services, while also directly building the DBT capability and confidence of the future mental health workforce in Canberra.
4. **Supporting the youth mental health sector to function more efficiently:** Recent consultations indicated that the presence of a free, early intervention, DBT-A program provided a much-needed referral pathway within the youth mental health sector. This

reduced the level of demand on other services and enabled them to work more effectively with their intended target groups.

Young people and families who have participated in WOKE describe the program as safe and supportive, and recommended it to other young people and families. Their experiences and the positive outcomes they achieved through WOKE are presented in the [evaluation report](#).

Why is the WOKE Program at risk?

The WOKE program commenced in 2019 as a pilot with initial funding from the Capital Health Network, the ACT's local Primary Health Network (PHN). Due to the constraints of Commonwealth funding streams upon the PHN, the Capital Health Network is unable to source ongoing funds for the WOKE Program, despite highly valuing and recognising the significant community need for and achievements of the program.

This issue speaks to a broader systemic concern regarding the constraints placed upon PHNs in Australia to respond to local community needs. Regardless, the WOKE Program is a locally grown, place-based program that has been developed within and to match the Canberra context. It is the responsibility of the ACT community to enable the WOKE Program to continue to support vulnerable young people and their families.

What funding is required now?

The WOKE Program requires a **minimal \$300,000 per year** to be delivered. For this, the program delivers two 14-week group programs to 30 young people and their family members (60 individuals). This includes a combination of group sessions and individual clinical support. Participants each receive up to 70 hours of clinical support.

2. Service system enhancements to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility

Alongside experts and advocates across the human rights, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, medical and legal sectors, the Youth Coalition has supported raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years. A review carried out by Dr Morag McArthur, Dr Aino Suomi and Curijo Pty Ltd concluded that the service system requires reform to improve outcomes for children and families. As such, we support the ACT Government's commitment to initially legislate to raise the age to 12, to provide time to undertake the necessary service system enhancements prior to raising the age to 14.

Key elements that are essential to a service system include:

- 1. Multi-Disciplinary Panel (MDP):** A legislated, collaborative forum that would meet regularly to discuss service options for children and young people with complex needs and provide oversight to service system enhancements.
- 2. 'Frontline' crisis support:** Immediate and on-call crisis support to support ACT Policing when they come into contact with young people under the age of 18, with brokerage for accommodation and assessments; and follow-up referral.
- 3. Intensive therapeutic family-based programs:** Youth-centred, family based therapeutic programs such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) are

evidence-based interventions, that work with the family system to increase adaptive behaviours and reduce maladaptive behaviours. FFT was delivered and evaluated as a pilot in the ACT. The evaluation found that it addressed a service gap within the ACT sector and achieved improved outcomes for young people and families that participated. Ideally, both FFT and MST would be delivered within the ACT, as these programs work effectively alongside each other to respond to the varying needs of families.

4. **Intensive therapeutic case management:** While family-based programs can support a wide range of clients, other services are also required to work effectively with young people at-risk of involvement with the justice system. A current gap is therapeutic intensive case management, which could be delivered alongside or subsequent to involvement in programs such as FFT or MST. It also provides an alternative referral pathway for young people who are not eligible to participate in family-based programs.

We ask the ACT Government to allocate funding to progress and evaluate a service system prior to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

3. Youth and community supports in the Gungahlin Region

Over the last two decades, the culturally diverse Gungahlin region has experienced significant population growth and expansion. In 2021, nearly 20% of the Gungahlin population were aged between 10-24. A larger cohort of children and adolescents is emerging, suggesting that Gungahlin's population of young people will increase over coming years.¹

Population growth, and the geographical expansion of the Gungahlin region, has outrun the development of community infrastructure within both the Gungahlin town centre and across the region. This includes an absence of dedicated, indoor community spaces available for young people.

The Youth Coalition supports work currently underway by the ACT Government to design a permanent Gungahlin Community and Youth Centre. Alongside community stakeholders, the Youth Coalition participated in consultations to inform the design plans, which includes a dedicated space for young people. Noting that the development approval process, and the subsequent infrastructure build will take several years to complete, **we ask the ACT Government to allocate funding in the 2023-24 ACT Budget to begin further progressing the establishment of the permanent Gungahlin Community and Youth Centre.**

In the interim years, a temporary indoor youth premises is necessary to allow 'Gunners Place' to deliver programs and services to young people in the Gungahlin region. This is a collaborative youth program that has operated since 2017 without a permanent home. In 2021, Barnardos, Northside Community Service, and the Multicultural Hub collaborated to hire commercial space within the Gungahlin Marketplace. Up to 45 young people attended Gunners Place each week, participating in a range of activities and support groups. Outside of youth program hours, the space was also available for a range of other community activities, such as cultural meetings, art groups, parenting groups, and as a food bank delivered by Helping Hands.

¹ ABS Census of Population and Housing 2016-2021, compiled and presented by .id (informed decisions).

Due to limitations competing in the commercial rental market, Gunners Place moved premises twice within a two-year period on a month-to-month lease. **There is currently no premises for this program.** The absence of a physical drop-in location for young people has reduced the availability of support services for young people within the Gungahlin region, and for community groups as this region continues to grow in population size and diversity.

Barnardos, Northside Community Service, Multicultural Hub and Relationships Australia Canberra and Goulburn have developed a proposal to establish an interim youth and community space for the delivery of programs, to support young people and families in the Gungahlin region. These service providers have worked with the ACT Government (ACT Property Group, CMTEDD) to identify options for an interim youth and community space, that may provide a home for Gunners Place to operate until the permanent community centre is established. **We ask the ACT Government to support the infrastructure fit-out and contribute to the ongoing rental costs of the temporary premises, to provide continuity of support to young people in Gungahlin until the permanent centre is complete.**

4. Explore accommodation models for homeless young people not engaged in education, employment or training

Young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are highly vulnerable, and often have a range of complex needs that may present additional barriers to participating in education, employment or training. These may include experiences of family conflict or violence, trauma, mental health issues, and involvement with statutory systems such as child protection and youth justice. There are no medium-long term specialist community accommodation services within the ACT youth housing and homelessness service system, for young people with complex needs who are 'not engaged in education, employment or training' (NEET). This creates bottlenecks for youth emergency accommodation services that find it difficult to transition young people into longer-term housing. This leads to young people staying in emergency accommodation longer than expected; thereby limiting youth emergency accommodation vacancies.

Evidence-based frameworks such as **Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)** provide potential approaches to developing youth-focused 'housing-led' models. HF4Y, developed in Canada, is a youth-focused adaptation of the adult Housing First model. It includes a set of core principles, a program and system approach that recognise the unique developmental needs of young people.² It recognises that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adult homelessness, and that an early intervention approach with young people can prevent entrenched adult homelessness. **We ask the ACT Government to explore youth-centred, housing-led models such as HF4Y that could support a diverse range of young people with complex needs,** including those who are not engaged in education, employment or training.

² Gaetz, S., Walter, H. and Story, C. (2021). THIS is Housing First for Youth. Part 1 – Program Model Guide. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

5. Establishment funding for an ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Network

The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and Capital Health Network, in partnership with the Youth Coalition, has commenced work to establish a new ACT child and youth mental health sector network. The (currently unnamed) Network aims to provide a structured, ongoing formal mechanism for community, government, private service and people with lived experience to identify and progress key sector priorities, improve communication, collaboration and connection, and shared decision-making. This is a positive opportunity to identify opportunities to better respond to the mental health needs of children and young people, as a partnership across government and community.

A range of services across the mental health, and child, youth and family sectors have participated in strategic planning activities to design the Network structure and goals. The structure includes mechanisms for stakeholders to participate in strategic forums, a community of practice, project working groups, and a youth reference group. The Network will be overseen by a Coordinating Committee comprised of government and community members. **Initial two-year funding will provide support to establish, develop and evaluate Network structures and processes, including to develop a proof of concept for its ongoing delivery.**

The establishment of the Network follows work undertaken by the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing, Capital Health Network and the Youth Coalition to understand the needs of children and young people with moderate to severe mental health issues, who experience difficulties accessing services (known as the 'missing middle'). This research led to the release of the ['Missing Middle' report by the ACT Government](#) in 2022. Findings described the need for services across sectors to work collaboratively to address service and system constraints and challenges that contribute to the 'missing middle'.

For more information

For more information about the items included in the Youth Coalition's submission to the ACT Budget 2023-24, contact Dr Justin Barker, CEO, on (02) 6247 3540 or justin@youthcoalition.net.

If you work in or have an interest in youth affairs in the ACT, subscribe to the Youth Coalition eBulletin at www.youthcoalition.net.