



## **BUDGET SUBMISSION 2021-22**

**Mental Health Carers Voice**

June 2021

## ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH CARERS VOICE

A division of Carers ACT, Mental Health Carers Voice (MHCV) is the Peak Body for Mental Health Carers in the ACT. MHCV actively engages with mental health carers to have their voice heard and create positive change in the sector through individual and systemic advocacy. The Mental Health Carers Voice Advocacy and Policy Advisory Group (APAG) provides a guiding voice for our Mental Health Carers Voice Peak Body work. APAG is made up of mental health carers and provides Mental Health Carers Voice with significant input. Mental Health Carers Voice regularly consults mental health carers to understand current problems and major concerns within that community.



**For information contact:**

Ms Lisa Kelly  
Chief Executive Officer  
Carers ACT  
Unit 2, 80 Beaurepaire Crescent  
HOLT ACT 2615  
Telephone: 02 6296 9970  
Email: [lisa.kelly@carersact.org.au](mailto:lisa.kelly@carersact.org.au)  
Website: [www.carersact.org.au](http://www.carersact.org.au)

This submission was prepared by:

Mx C Moore, Policy Officer, Mental Health Carers Voice, Carers ACT  
[c.moore@carersact.org.au](mailto:c.moore@carersact.org.au)

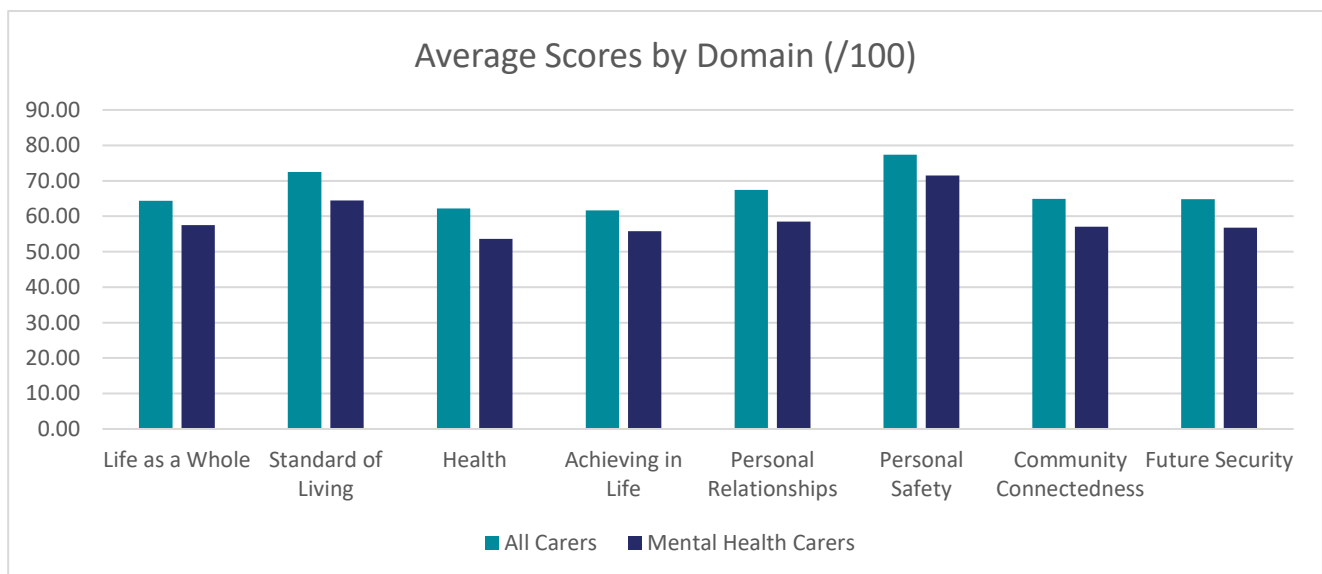
## INTRODUCTION

Mental Health Carers Voice is the peak body representing unpaid carers of people who experience mental ill health in the ACT. Mental Health Carers Voice welcomes the opportunity to respond the ACT Government’s consultation on the 2021-22 budget.

Our submission to this budget consultation focuses on the commitments made under the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for the 10<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly and 2020 election policy commitments by ACT Labor and the ACT Greens. Fulfilment of these commitments in this budget cycle will align with the completion First Three Year Action Plan (2018-2021) of the ACT Carers Strategy 2018-2028<sup>1</sup>, and support mental health carers in the ACT’s recovery from COVID-19. The Budget ask has been formed by members of the community of Mental Health Carers through their Policy and Advocacy Advisory Group.

## BACKGROUND

Mental health carers are more likely to experience poor wellbeing compared to both the general population and carers more generally. An analysis of personal wellbeing indices collected by Carers ACT found that mental health carers scored lower than carers in every domain of wellbeing, and particularly poorly in their satisfaction with their personal relationships and health, compared with all carers. The average PWI for all carers in this data set was 66, while mental health carers averaged 59. In comparison the normative range for Australia is 73.4 -76.4.



<sup>1</sup> ACT Carers Strategy and First Three Year Action Plan <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/home/act-carers-strategy-2018-2028/2018-2028-act-carers-strategy-first-three-year-action-plan>

Mental health carers experience higher rates of mental ill health themselves and are more likely to have poorer self-reported health. Mental health carers also report experiencing poor financial wellbeing and difficulties maintaining employment because of workplace discrimination and lack of support services for their care recipient. In 2016, Mind Australia published a report which showed that mental health carers save the Australian economy approximately \$13.2 billion each year in informal care for their care recipients. The same report found that approximately half of primary mental health carers had unmet support needs and said that “*prioritising provision of carer support services would do much to ensure that mental health carers can continue to perform their role without significant financial disadvantage and psychosocial distress.*”<sup>2</sup>. When mental health carers are left unsupported, they cannot fulfil their caring role, placing greater burden and cost on the mental health system. To fully meet their needs, carers need a range of support options which include respite care/replacement care, training and psychoeducation, counselling/psychosocial interventions, support groups and practical help in the home<sup>3</sup>. Several of these supports are available through Carers ACT and the Carer Gateway, however there are notable gaps, particularly in respite for mental health carers.

In recent budgets, funding has been directed at addressing the acute and time limited mental health difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. While we welcome the increased funding for several much-needed initiatives in the mental health sector, comparatively low levels of funding for community mental health services have added strain on carers supporting their care recipient in the home. Where carers are supported to remain involved in the care of a person with mental illness, they are able to stay out of hospital, lower the length of hospital stays, improve adherence to medication and reduce psychiatric symptoms<sup>4,5</sup>. Without urgent funding for initiatives to support mental health carers, such as respite and improvement in workplace conditions, the strain on the acute mental health system will continue to grow.

---

<sup>2</sup> Diminic S, Hielscher E, Lee YY, Harris M, Schess J, Kealton J & Whiteford H. The economic value of informal mental health caring in Australia: summary report. Brisbane: The University of Queensland; 2016  
[https://www.mindaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/The\\_economic\\_value\\_of\\_informal\\_mental\\_health\\_caring\\_in\\_Australia\\_summary\\_report.pdf](https://www.mindaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/The_economic_value_of_informal_mental_health_caring_in_Australia_summary_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Hill, T., & Broady, T. (2019). *Understanding the social and emotional needs of carers: final report* (Australia).  
<https://apo.org.au/node/219596>

<sup>4</sup> Worthington, A., Rooney, P., & Hannan, R. (2013). *The Triangle of Care, 2nd Edition*. London: Carers Trust.

<sup>5</sup> McMahan, J., & Hardy, J. (2010). *Carers Identified?* Canberra: Department of Health and Ageing.

## FUNDING PROPOSALS

### Scoping Study into Respite for Mental Health Carers

Funding and service options for respite for mental health carers is currently extremely limited in the ACT, with carers reporting that they cannot access respite that is flexible and responsive to their needs. This means that mental health carers cannot take time and space to rest and restore themselves, leading to carer burnout, relationship breakdown and poor health outcomes for both carers and care recipients. In some cases, carer burnout results in relinquishment, placing the substantial costs of replacement care for the care recipient on the mental health system. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this lack of respite by restricting families to their homes, interrupting service delivery, and increasing the demand on inpatient mental health services. In the Mental Health Carers Voice's 2021 carer's survey, respite was a priority area for improvement. Reports have also raised that providing mental health respite facilities may reduce family violence, as carers and care recipients will have space and time to de-escalate when difficult behaviours occur<sup>6</sup>.

During the 2020 election campaign, the ACT Greens committed \$100,000 for Carers ACT to undertake a co-designed scoping and feasibility study for a dedicated mental health respite facility<sup>7,8</sup>. This promise aligns with both Labor and the Greens commitments<sup>9</sup> to the ACT Carers Strategy and the first three-year action plan, which includes the action *"Define respite care and promote access to suitable respite care"*<sup>10</sup>.

The proposed scoping study would define an appropriate model of respite care for mental health carers and consumers in the ACT. Mental Health Carers Voice would use a co-design approach to draw on the expertise of carers engaged with Carers ACT and consumers engaged with our regular stakeholder organisations. Currently, there is no model for this kind of facility in the ACT, or across Australia, so it is essential that any such study be properly funded to achieve a true co-design process with carers, care recipients and the mental health sector to ensure that it meets the needs of the ACT community.

---

<sup>6</sup> Scetrine, A. Family Caring, Mental Illness and Violence Discussion Paper, Carers ACT. 2016.

<https://www.carersact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Family-Caring-Mental-Illness-and-Violence-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> ACT Election Policies and Promises for MH Carers by Main Parties, October 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/carersact/act-election-policies-promises-for-mh-carers-by-main-parties>

<sup>8</sup> ACT Greens Mental Health Policies, 2020 <https://greens.org.au/act/mental-health>

<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for the 10<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory [https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/1654077/Parliamentary-Agreement-for-the-10th-Legislative-Assembly.pdf](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1654077/Parliamentary-Agreement-for-the-10th-Legislative-Assembly.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> ACT Carers Strategy and First Three Year Action Plan <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/home/act-carers-strategy-2018-2028/2018-2028-act-carers-strategy-first-three-year-action-plan>

## Outcomes

The outcomes for this scoping study are:

1. A model of care for a respite facility supported by carers and consumers
2. The views of mental health carers direct the planning and delivery of services that support them and the people they care for.
3. Mental health carers knowledge and experience is recognised and valued
4. Delivering on the government’s commitment to respite for carers in the Parliamentary and Governance Agreement

The co-design process would include development of potential performance indicators and outcomes for a mental health respite facility to be considered in collaboration with the ACT government in a future implementation plan.

The scoping study would primarily address the Governance and Institutions domain of the Wellbeing Framework through meaningful participation of carers in the design process. Once established, the respite facility would benefit carers across several domains including Health, Time, and Safety.

Wellbeing Domain	Indicator	Measure
Governance and Institutions	Feeling that voice and perspective matter	Living Well in the ACT Region Survey Annual surveys of carers through Carers ACT and Mental Health Carers Voice
Health	Mental Health	ACT General Health Survey Carers ACT DASS Scores for carers accessing counselling
	Access to mental health services	Living Well in the ACT Region Survey Mental Health Carers Voice Annual Survey
Time	Unpaid work including caring	Living Well in the ACT Region Survey Carers ACT and Mental Health Carers Voice data
Safety	Feeling safe	Mental Health Carers Voice Annual Survey

***Recommendation: That the ACT Government fulfil the \$100,000 commitment to a co-designed scoping and feasibility study for a mental health respite facility in the ACT.***



## Carer Awareness Training in the ACT Public Service

Mental Health Carers Voice's Advocacy and Policy Advisory Group also sought a commitment from both parties at the 2020 election for greater awareness of mental health carers in the workplace through compulsory training of managers and supervisors in the public service<sup>11</sup>. Workplace support, such as carer awareness training, was flagged by carers as a much-needed initiative in Mental Health Carers Voice's 2021 carers survey. This is supported by research which shows that mental health carers have lower participation rates in the workforce because of inflexible work arrangements<sup>12</sup> and poor employer understanding of the caring role. Supporting mental health carers to stay in work helps to relieve the financial burden of caring and supports them to maintain personal connections outside their caring role.

As one of the territory's biggest employers, the ACT Government has a significant role to play in setting an example of best workplace practice. Improved carer awareness would also improve outcomes for carers both working in the ACT Public Service and accessing services from the ACT Government. This training, developed by carers facilitated by Carers ACT, would be aimed to improve the recognition of carers' skills, knowledge and contribution to the community, support managers to treat carers equitably in the workplace and improve understanding of the unique needs of mental health carers. Mental Health Carers Voice recommends a \$40,000 commitment to create and deliver this training package, in alignment with the ACT Carers Strategy.

### Outcomes

The outcomes of this proposal are:

1. Delivering on the government's commitment to carers through the the Parliamentary and Governance Agreement
2. Carers report reduction in stress and improved capacity to continue in the caring role and employment
3. Carers report feeling more valued and acknowledged in their caring role in ACTPS workplaces
4. An increase in the perception of carers that Canberra is a community that cares for carers

---

<sup>11</sup> ACT Greens Social Inclusion Policies, 2020 <https://greens.org.au/act/promoting-social-inclusion>

<sup>12</sup> Diminic, S., Hielscher, E., & Harris, M. G. (2019). Employment disadvantage and associated factors for informal carers of adults with mental illness: are they like other disability carers? BMC Public Health, 19(1), 587. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6822-1>

This proposal will deliver against the following wellbeing indicators:

Wellbeing Domain	Indicator	Measure
Economy	Employment	ABS Participation rate
Time	Work-life balance	Living Well in the ACT Region Survey
Health	Mental Health	ACT General Health Survey Carers ACT DASS Scores for carers accessing counselling

***Recommendation: That the ACT Government provide \$40,000 towards compulsory training for ACT public service managers and supervisors in carer awareness, including mental health carers.***

## Conclusion

Mental Health Carers Voice’s recommendations for a co-designed mental health respite scoping study and carer awareness training in the ACT Public Service are two cost-effective initiatives that will feed into long term actions and outcomes under the ACT Carers Strategy.

By funding these initiatives, the ACT government will support mental health carers to maintain their wellbeing, reduce the burden on acute mental health services and promote a better workplace culture in the ACT Public Service.