

CARERS ACT RESPONSE

7 June 2017

Mental Health in the ACT Budget 2017-18

Carers ACT is pleased to see the ACT is committed to funding the mental health of Canberrans as a priority in the ACT Budget 2017-18. The Budget has articulated funding will be directed to:

- 1) the Office of Mental Health,
- 2) suicide prevention,
- 3) the continued funding of *headspace* and the Detention Exit Outreach program,
- 4) a focus on youth mental health including funding to undertake mental health assessments for year 7 students, and
- 5) new rehabilitation beds at the Dhulwa Mental Health Unit.

We welcome the \$2.9 million the ACT Government has committed to establishing the Office for Mental Health. In the brief description in the Budget papers, the role of the office is said to 'support the coordination of services and work towards closing gaps in the ACT mental health system'. We are eager to see how the Office will be undertaking this function and await our opportunity to provide the voice of mental health carers into its formation and delivery.

We commend the \$1.8 million committed to fund the Way Back support program and the Black Dog Institute's Life Span Suicide Prevention Program in the ACT. The Lifespan program will be new to the ACT and has a compelling evidence base using a systems approach, implementing nine evidence-based strategies simultaneously within a localised area. This integrated systems approach is expected to prevent 21% of suicide deaths, and 30% of suicide attempts. By choosing this particular model for suicide prevention, the ACT government is making a strong statement that they are dedicated to funding evidence based programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes to reduce the incidences of suicide in our community.

Of particular interest to mental health carers will be the description of the \$5.3 million funding "*Better care when you need it – Supporting mental health for vulnerable Canberrans*". The ACT Government has identified that there will be a particular focus of this funding on perinatal mental health services and those for children and young people. They have also identified that it will be continuing to support *headspace*, PANDSI and the Detention Exit Outreach program. Furthermore, it is mentioned that a portion will be dedicated to undertaking minor upgrades at the Brian Hennessey Rehabilitation Centre. This facility had been touted to close as soon as the residents could find appropriate alternative options. This commitment to upgrading the facility responds to many mental health carers' concerns that there were no appropriate alternatives currently available in the ACT that would provide the residents and their families with the sense of community and safety that Brian Hennessey provides. The ACT Government's commitments in this section of the budget demonstrate that they have heard the community's concerns regarding mental health service gaps. However, we have some concerns

regarding the detail of this funding. In the 2017-18 financial year the ACT Government has provided \$2.634 million, this then decreases significantly for the following 3 financial years (\$879 000, \$897 000 and \$915 000). We are uncertain as to how this money can be divided amongst these activities and still achieve positive outcomes and would like further details from the Government regarding the funding split.

Alongside the overarching plan for better mental health care for Canberrans is the '*Better care when you need it – Year 7 Health Checks*'. \$2.68 million has been committed to the funding of health checks for Year 7 students from 2018-19. These new health checks are specifically aimed at attempting to identify students at risk of developing mental health issues or chronic diseases. We have concerns regarding mental health assessment tools in youth mental health, where there are few validated assessment tools that can accurately predict the onset of mental health issues. We applaud the governments intent at early intervention and prevention but we are concerned that in this context the assessments could do more harm than good. We are hopeful that positive outcomes could include decreasing stigma, increasing conversations about looking after your mental health and encourage help seeking in youth. Again, this is simply an area that raises more questions for us and has the potential to be a very interesting project.

The 'big spender' of the ACT Budget 2017-18 for mental health is undoubtedly the Dhulwa Mental Health Unit with \$13.8 million dedicated to delivering seven new rehabilitation beds. When considering the mental health system in its entirety, this is an enormous spend proportional to the amount of Canberrans it impacts. Carers ACT has heard concerns from carers of people living with Mental Health about the model of care at Dhulwa and we look forward to seeing how this funding will be used to support rehabilitation and increase care.

Within the mental health system in the ACT, there has been a focus on developing the stepped model of care, ensuring that that people get the right level of supports to best support their level of need. As we can see in the ACT budget there is a focus on the early intervention (in age and stage) end and a very large spend on the long term, severe mental illness, particularly the forensic mental health services. It is important to acknowledge that this was anticipated given the federal funding that is directed through the Primary Health Networks, such as our own Capital Health Network that are working within the low and moderate mental health space as well as the NDIS where psychosocial disability supports are driving the community organisations mental health services market.

However, within this context, we are still concerned about the large amount of funding going towards the Dhulwa Mental Health Unit, a secure mental health facility specifically focused on those people who are a danger to themselves or others when they are in the community. This does not represent the majority of people with a mental illness and more realistically, the number of people who experience this level of severity with their mental illness would be very low in the ACT and yet the facility will receive more than half of the mental health budget allocation.

In summary, this budget has provided a great deal of funding towards mental health services and programs, it is clear that the ACT Government have the mental health of Canberrans as a priority. It is encouraging to see that the concerns raised by mental health carers regarding Brian Hennessey Rehabilitation Centre have been heard and acted upon as well as the focus on youth mental health and yet we are concerned about the proportion of funding going towards Dhulwa and the translation of that into a positive impact on Canberrans. We understand that the various funding streams within mental health system can produce gaps and make it difficult for mental health carers to navigate. However, we are hopeful that the Office for Mental Health may be able to oversee the complexity of the mental health system in Canberra and ensure that there is fair and accessible mental health for all residents when and how they need it.

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