
Attacking Poverty
ACTCOSS Submission on the
2002-03 ACT Budget



March 2002

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Background

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations and disadvantaged and low-income citizens of the Australian Capital Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS has the twin roles of representation and advocacy. The Council's objectives are the representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy and the development of a professional, cohesive and effective community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

Submission Themes

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS) has three main representative responsibilities, including ~~representing the interests of consumers, the interests of community service providers and the sector, and the public/community interest in the Territory.~~ It is with the interests of all three in mind that the Council provides these submissions to the Legislative Assembly on the 2002-03 ACT Budget.

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The timing of the budget process has presented problems, as it has been extremely difficult to adequately engage with and consult stakeholders in the limited period available between the release of the Standing Committees' details and the dates for submissions. As a result we are presenting a single submission, copies of which will go to each Committee.

ACTCOSS is presenting its submission under the theme of 'Attacking Poverty'. Within the theme are 5 sub-themes, each of which aims to address the sources of poverty and help people to avoid, or climb out of, poverty:

- Accessing Rights and Entitlements
- Reducing Financial Inequality
- Assuring Essential Services
- Prioritisation of Preventative Health
- Policy Interventions for Improving Community Health

The sub-themes have been developed in response to the findings and recommendations of the Poverty Task Group, contained in the report 'Sharing the Benefit' *Final Report of the ACT Poverty Task Group Outlining Recommendations for Responding to Poverty in the ACT*. (December 2000).

The themes support the recommendations of the Task Group, which were to:

- address issues of structural disadvantage and enhance accessibility
- acknowledge that all members of the community have rights and entitlements to a minimum level of resources and services
- embody self-determination principles to ensure affected communities are empowered to respond to issues linked to poverty and have control over their futures
- encourage community participation and ownership by all sectors of the community.

Summary of Recommendations

Theme 1: Accessing Rights and Entitlements

Recommendation 1.1

That funding be allocated for a People's Charter to be drawn up, according to the principles recommended by the Poverty Task Group, and that the Charter be used as a basis for community education and prioritisation of service provision.

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Recommendation 1.2

That funding be targeted at ensuring community information services and community service providers are able to provide information in a wide range of formats and languages.

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Recommendation 1.3

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to develop a plan for development and redevelopment of accommodation for community services across the ACT, with considerable investment funding allocated in the 2002-03 year and the out years, particularly taking into account:

- location with respect to street/ pedestrian frontage;
- location with respect to geographic/transport accessibility (ie put services accessible bus exchanges as is the case with commercial services); and
- the amount of physical space needed for current use and future needs.

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Recommendation 1.4

That the Central Canberra Community Facilities Strategy recognises the importance that accessible, high-profile locations for community services plays in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society, and prioritises community facilities above profits for commercial developers.

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Recommendation 1.5

That the ACT Council of Cultural and Community Organisations can be fully involved in the Griffin Centre reconstruction, and effectively represent the needs and requirements of the community sector.

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Recommendation 1.6

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to:

- formally acknowledge and agree to uphold the principles embodied in the Compact

- meet the undertakings as outlined in the Compact to 'recognise the importance of and support the sustainability and long-term capacity of the community sector'. This could be achieved through the development of a Community Services Industry Development Plan. *Page 18*

Recommendation 1.7

That greater contributions by the community be made possible by allocating funding for co-operative policy development and service planning processes. This funding would be used to:

- enable peaks and other representative bodies to facilitate consumer and service provider participation in consultative processes for planning and policy development, including reimbursement of costs incurred by participants;
- reimburse consumers and service providers for the costs of representation on government committees and working groups, and pay sitting fees where appropriate. *Page 18*

Theme 2: Reducing Financial Inequality

Recommendation 2.1

That Government concessions and rebates be made more flexible, and are increased to provide support for people living with poverty, and those making the transition out of poverty. *Page 19*

Recommendation 2.2

That the above mentioned review be continued, with further community input, with a view to implementation in the 2002-2003 financial year. *Page 19*

Recommendation 2.3

That the ACT Government implement a community based review of tax revenue raising, focussing on progressiveness, equality and increased revenue. *Page 20*

Recommendation 2.4

That stamp duty windfall gains be used specifically to attack poverty and disadvantage in the ACT in the 2002-03 budget. *Page 21*

Recommendation 2.5

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to provide funding for:

- the establishment of a consumer legal centre;
- a review of the Legal Aid Commission, and a commitment to fund the Commission to allow fair and equitable representation before the ACT courts;
- increased availability of low cost financial advice for people on low and fixed incomes. *Page 22*

Theme 3: Assuring Essential Services

Recommendation 3.1

ACTCOSS understands that the Affordable Housing Task Force (AHTF) will be investigating this issue in detail and providing recommendations to the Government for longer-term solutions. However, the urgency of need in Canberra requires some more direct and immediate solutions, such as:

- increased funding and support of non-profit accommodation providers to enable them to meet costs and remove the need for tenants to make down payments and/or pay bonds.
- independent funding to support the AHTF, to ensure that essential CSHA funds are used to address the most urgent need. *Page 23*

Recommendation 3.2

ACTCOSS calls for the immediate creation of an independent central housing referral service. This service would provide:

- referral for emergency housing, public housing, community housing and housing provided by non-profit organisations, to ensure that available housing is allocated in the most equitable manner possible, and barriers to obtaining housing across all categories are fully understood and can be addressed
- outreach services to promote the participation of particularly marginalised groups such as indigenous people in need of housing options; and
- data collection for the Affordable Housing Task Force and to inform future housing policy development. *Page 23*

Recommendation 3.3

That the Government provide sufficient funds for the expansion of the community development worker program within ACT Housing. *Page 24*

Recommendation 3.4

ACTCOSS asks that the Government provide funding for the recommendations from the Committee's report 'Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT', including the following on housing issues:

- that the Government develop housing policies that reflect the special circumstances of the Indigenous population, ie a comprehensive Aboriginal Housing Policy which is informed by the Indigenous communities of the ACT and the housing sector; and
- that the Government design and develop public and community housing aimed directly at Indigenous families, particularly where women and children are escaping domestic violence. *Page 24*

Recommendation 3.5

ACTCOSS recommends that the Government excludes the income of residents under the age of 25 who are in full or part-time study, when calculating eligibility for rental rebates. *Page 25*

Recommendation 3.6

That funds be allocated for a detailed study (conducted jointly by Government and the sector) into unmet need for advocacy services for disadvantaged people who are unable to independently defend their rights. *Page 25*

Recommendation 3.7

That a joint project be undertaken between advocacy groups and the Government to develop quality service standards for advocacy work, based on the principles of the Compact on working relationships between the community sector and government. *Page 25*

Recommendation 3.8

That the Government acknowledge their responsibility for addressing mobility requirements of disadvantaged people by allocating funding for:

- increased taxi subsidies for people with disabilities and frail older people to at least bring subsidies into line with other states;
- increased frequency of buses on weekends; and
- ensuring buses are operated as a community access service and not solely a commuter service. *Page 26*

Theme 4: Prioritisation of Preventative Health

Recommendation 4.1

Specialised health promotion programs for people living in poverty be made central to the work of the Health Promotions Unit, and targeted at single parent and single person households. *Page 27*

Recommendation 4.2

Resources be committed by the health promotions unit to undertake independent action research into this largely uninformed area of policy for the ACT. *Page 27*

Recommendation 4.3

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to allocate funding for the following health education initiatives:

- an increased focus on life skills in schools and adult learning centres, including units aimed at increasing self esteem and raising awareness of mental health issues; and
- development of programs specifically aimed at raising awareness of self care and preventative health strategies among groups identified as being at risk of falling into poverty (eg those suffering from different forms of addiction). *Page 28*

Recommendation 4.4

That the Government provide financial support for people on low and fixed incomes to access adult and community based education. *Page 28*

Recommendation 4.5

ACTCOSS calls on the ACT Government to ensure:

- that welfare services provided through the school system, such as “Schools as Communities” be evaluated and extended; and
- that welfare services in the broader community be extended and evaluated to ensure they are able to meet demand from, and improve their linkages to, the school based services. *Page 28*

Recommendation 4.6

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to provide funds for the establishment, in consultation with ACTCOSS and relevant stakeholders, of a Substance Abuse Task Force, which would have a major role in prevention and educational programs around substance abuse. *Page 29*

Recommendation 4.7

In anticipation of a positive result, ACTCOSS proposes that funds be set aside in the Health budget to provide for the establishment of an ACT injecting room trial. *Page 29*

Theme 5: Policy Interventions for Improving Community Health

Recommendation 5.1

That all reviews and inquiries promised by the ALP be fully resourced and not draw resources from programs and services within portfolios. *Page 31*

Recommendation 5.2

Funds be committed to implementing the findings and recommendations of the Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT after appropriate discussion with indigenous communities. *Page 32*

Recommendation 5.3

In ACTCOSS’ submission there are three distinct recommendations regarding the data collection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- that the Indigenous Social Survey be given funds to ensure a robust sample size in the ACT. The ACT Government should also agree to provide funds for ACT specific data collection at a later date, and not rely solely on the ISS to provide a coherent picture of circumstance within the ACT indigenous community;
- that any further data collection be conducted after extensive discussions with the providers of indigenous-specific services to determine what data is necessary for relevant service development; and

- that a clearing house be established for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander issues in the ACT, to collect and store data from all ACT departments, as well as any relevant national data available. *Page 32*

Recommendation 5.4

That the Government continue to collect data which shows the nature and extent of poverty in the ACT, and which is capable of identifying changes in causal factors, such as ill health. *Page 33*

Recommendation 5.5

That policy making be supported by adequate data collection, for example in the area of early discharge policy. *Page 33*

Recommendation 5.6

The Report into Elder Abuse be used as a blueprint for the provision of services to Canberra's residents who find themselves in need of care due to frailty and age. *Page 33*

Recommendation 5.7

That the Government implement its policy and promises on transitional care in an open and consultative way, spelling out in the budget its timetable for implementation and the process that will be used to determine spending priorities. *Page 33*

Recommendation 5.8

That the Government provide a timetable and outline of its plans to provide an extra \$1million for respite care in the ACT. *Page 34*

Recommendation 5.9

While it is impossible to recommend funding be allocated before these issues are addressed, ACTCOSS urges the Government to provide a significant increase in funds to implement reform in the areas of disability and mental health services as identified and recommended by the various reports and reviews currently underway. *Page 34*

Recommendation 5.10

Continue the ACT's progressive research into and use of alternatives to prison sentences for people before the courts. *Page 35*

Recommendation 5.11

Provide relief from overcrowding at the Belconnen Remand Centre by developing a new remand facility in the ACT as a matter of urgency. *Page 35*

Recommendation 5.12

Provide a "step down" facility or half way house to support Canberra community members retuning from incarceration interstate. *Page 35*

Recommendation 5.13

Address the over-representation of people with mental health problems in the corrections system as a priority. *Page 35*

Recommendation 5.14

Consider the detention of women prisoners as an issue separate from the construction of a traditional prison, recognising the special needs and differing crime patterns of women sentenced to prison terms. *Page 35*

Recommendation 5.15

Make the full range of preventative and primary health care services available within the community available to people on remand, including access to drug and alcohol related services. *Page 35*

Theme 1

Accessing Rights and Entitlements

The theme of Accessing Rights and Entitlements has two complementary aspects:

- raising community awareness of rights and entitlements to human services by increasing the availability and accessibility of information; and
- strengthening and integrating human services to improve access and co-ordination.

Research conducted by the Poverty Task Group found that:

- there are particular groups who have greater difficulty accessing services. These groups included our local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with disabilities and chronic illness, people from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, second families, young people and single-parent families
- there is a range of reasons why these groups face greater difficulties. These include physical and cultural barriers to access, discrimination, and lack of information.

The following recommendations are targeted at addressing these issues.

Raising Awareness

People's Charter

The Poverty Task Group recommended the development of a People's Charter, which would affirm the rights and entitlements of all members of our community, including people experiencing poverty, and ensure all members of our community are treated with dignity and respect.

Adherence and commitment to the Charter would be demonstrated by:

- awareness in the broader community of the range of services available
- clearly articulated and communicated entitlements and eligibility criteria
- the ability of people using Government and community services to negotiate the way in which those or other services might be provided
- people being treated with dignity and respect
- individual's life circumstances being acknowledged and respected.

Recommendation 1.1

That funding be allocated for a People's Charter to be drawn up, according to the principles recommended by the Poverty Task Group, and that the Charter be used as a basis for community education and prioritisation of service provision.

Information Services

Raising awareness of the rights and entitlements of people on low incomes requires accessible and appropriate information services. This means that information must be held in a variety of formats to be accessible by people with disabilities and in a variety of languages for people from different cultural backgrounds. Research conducted by ACTCOSS has shown that there is a significant lack of funding available in the community sector for translation of written materials.

Key information services in the ACT include CIRSACT (the Community Information and Referral Service), radio, newsprint, ACT Government Shopfronts and libraries, and community service providers.

Recommendation 1.2

That funding be targeted at ensuring community information services and community service providers are able to provide information in a wide range of formats and languages.

Strengthening the Community Sector

Accessibility of Community Services

Awareness and accessibility of community services cannot be achieved if profits from residential and commercial facilities are consistently allowed to take precedence over the need for effective community space. To achieve prominence, recognition and accessibility, community organisations must have high-profile street frontage and a broad footprint, and be close to transport and adequate parking.

Recommendation 1.3

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to develop a plan for development and redevelopment of accommodation for community services across the ACT, with considerable investment funding allocated in the 2002-03 year and the out years, particularly taking into account:

- location with respect to street/ pedestrian frontage;
- location with respect to geographic/transport accessibility (ie put services accessible bus exchanges as is the case with commercial services); and
- the amount of physical space needed for current use and future needs.

The Government also needs to ensure that, as a matter of urgency:

Recommendation 1.4

That the Central Canberra Community Facilities Strategy recognises the importance that accessible, high-profile locations for community services plays in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society, and prioritises community facilities above profits for commercial developers

Recommendation 1.5

That the ACT Council of Cultural and Community Organisations can be fully involved in the Griffin Centre reconstruction, and effectively represent the needs and requirements of the community sector.

Funding of Indirect Costs

The Government has already announced that the current purchaser-provider model of funding community organisations will be reviewed, and ACTCOSS applauds the Government for this initiative.

The sustainability of services for people affected by poverty is under threat from the increasingly complex and costly legal and regulatory environment, and from the lack of funding for indirect costs of service provision that results from restrictive purchaser provider arrangements. The ALP recognised this in the election campaign with its commitment to fund the real cost of service provision, including many of the hidden costs. The review must therefore ensure that future budgets include funding for the indirect costs incurred by service providers, such as:

- needs analysis
- training of staff in essential skills
- OH&S
- public relations, marketing
- participation in seminars, sectoral networks, policy development forums and Government consultations
- increasing insurance costs
- auspicing and development of smaller agencies
- compliance with contractual reporting requirements.

One mechanism for achieving this result is the Compact between the community sector and the ACT Government, published in 2001. The aim of the Compact is to develop better relationships between the Government and community sectors for the benefit of the people of the ACT.

Recommendation 1.6

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to:

- formally acknowledge and agree to uphold the principles embodied in the Compact; and
- meet the undertakings as outlined in the Compact to 'recognise the importance of and support the sustainability and long-term capacity of the community sector'. This could be achieved through the development of a Community Services Industry Development Plan.

Co-operative Policy Development and Service Planning

There is a tendency for the current policy development and service planning processes to result in inappropriate decisions, with outcomes being based on historical or national factors rather than current data and up-to-the minute experience from local practitioners and consumers. The resulting Service Agreements are often too rigid, with funding being targeted at a narrow base of traditional services without necessarily considering broader community needs and allowing for innovation.

One of the findings of the Poverty Task Group was that the profile of ACT households in poverty is different from that in other parts of Australia, indicating that national or generic policy approaches cannot be assumed to be applicable. Increased consumer and service provider participation in policy development and service planning would help to ensure that services are appropriately targeted to the ACT population and address the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community.

Recommendation 1.7

That greater contributions by the community be made possible by allocating funding for co-operative policy development and service planning processes. This funding would be used to:

- enable peaks and other representative bodies to facilitate consumer and service provider participation in consultative processes for planning and policy development, including reimbursement of costs incurred by participants; and
- reimburse consumers and service providers for the costs of representation on government committees and working groups, and pay sitting fees where appropriate.

Reducing Financial Inequality

Concessions and Rebates

Community participation has been nominated as a goal for successive governments in the ACT, and has been reaffirmed in the ALP platform (Social Justice – The Goal of the ACT ALP – p. 9) and by the Chief Minister in his major address to the Assembly in December 2001.

In its 2000 report “Sharing the Benefits”, the ACT Poverty Task Group found that people on low incomes faced greater barriers to participating in society, particularly because of the costs of that participation, and the high expectations of the ACT community. (“Sharing the Benefits”, December 2000. pp.5, 21 and 26)

To progress the idea that all Canberrans have a right to participate in the community and that this participation contributes to the strengthening of the community, actions must be taken to alleviate the financial burden of such participation on people on low and fixed incomes. One way of doing this is by extending, and making more flexible, the range and quantum of Government concessions and rebates.

ACTCOSS is aware the review of concessions commenced in August 2001 will continue, with a discussion paper based on consumer comments and an independent consultant’s report due for release in April. It is imperative that the focus of the review be the reduction of financial disadvantage, not the justification of current restrictions on concessions.

There is also a need to assess the timeframe for providing concessions, for example in transport. For people who have been unemployed, ACTCOSS believes concessions should be maintained for a short period after they gain employment in recognition of the additional expenses that need to be met in the first weeks, such as travel, before they actually receive their first wage.

Recommendation 2.1

That Government concessions and rebates be made more flexible, and are increased to provide support for people living with poverty, and those making the transition out of poverty.

Recommendation 2.2

That the above mentioned review be continued, with further community input, with a view to implementation in the 2002-2003 financial year.

Progressive Taxation

The ACT economy has experienced solid growth over recent years and this can reasonably be expected to continue over the coming few years. The Council is concerned however that the benefits of this growth have not been distributed equitably. The opportunity therefore exists for this ACT Government and Legislative Assembly to institute change which directs a greater portion of the benefits of economic growth to disadvantaged Canberrans.

This ACT Government came into office with the intent of creating a Social Plan for Canberra. Naturally a Social Plan will have, as an intrinsic part, an economic plan for growth which provides some of the capacity to create social change. ACTCOSS urges this Government in the strongest terms to recognise that some forms of economic growth will exacerbate social inequality.

The current literature strongly refutes the idea that economic growth will have multiplier effects or automatically trickle down to create benefits for those not directly participating in the growth. In fact if economic growth is considered in isolation from the important issue of inequality by this Government then the implementation of all the recommendations ACTCOSS has provided in this document may at best allow the ACT Government to merely stand still in terms of inequality and poverty alleviation.

An example of economic growth creating further inequality is the types of business we aim to attract to the ACT. If we purely concentrate on attracting high value-added industries such as information technology we will continue to enhance employment prospects for an already advantaged group and further disadvantage those without high level qualifications.

The tax system is another mechanism by which inequality is further exacerbated in the ACT. ACTCOSS does not necessarily argue that the Government should aim for a balanced budget. Nevertheless, in this submission the Council has not provided revenue measures to pay for the proposed expenditure. This is because the current ACT tax mix is already regressive.

The Council believes what is needed is a review of our tax system with an aim to achieving a more progressive and equitable tax regime. ACTCOSS' previous work in this area suggests that such a review would need strong community involvement to ensure that there is a sound understanding and willingness for change.

Recommendation 2.3

That the ACT Government implement a community based review of tax revenue raising, focussing on progressiveness, equality and increased revenue.

One form of taxation that has some elements of progressiveness is stamp duty. It is widely accepted that this year there will be a further windfall gain in stamp duty due to real estate sales. ACTCOSS urges the ACT Government to strategically use this increase for some important one-off measures which attack poverty, decrease inequality and engage and empower people who experience disadvantage within our community.

There are a number of examples of such revenue measures that can be drawn from the recommendations in this submission. Some of these include increasing low cost housing, investing in buildings for community organisations and reviewing some services with an aim to explore how these services meet the needs of people living in poverty and other forms of disadvantage, and identifying any gaps in service provision in the ACT.

Recommendation 2.4

That stamp duty windfall gains be used specifically to attack poverty and disadvantage in the ACT in the 2002-03 budget.

Financial and Legal Services

Financial disadvantage can be significantly reduced through effective access to services aimed at the prevention or relief of debt and associated hardship.

In the past, the ACT has had a strong reputation for developing and defending consumer rights. That reputation has been diminished in recent years, with a reduction in the resources and subsequent capacity of the ACT Fair Trading Office. Another example of reducing commitment to delivering protection was the closure of the ACT's first and only specialist Consumer Credit Legal Service in June 2000.

Numerous reports, including the recommendations of the ACT Poverty Task Group and the Australian Institute for Gambling Research ACT Needs Analysis, have pointed to the lack of consumer legal advice resources in the ACT. Without recourse to consumer services, our most disadvantaged citizens become easy targets for unscrupulous traders and large, impenetrable corporations.

An opportunity exists to reaffirm the Territory's commitment to a safe and fair market through the establishment of a consumer legal centre for the ACT. Areas of work for such a centre could include:

- consumer credit law
- telecommunications law
- the delivery of utilities and
- general trade practices and fair trading.

Legal aid has also been restricted in recent years, leaving many people without adequate representation when dealing with the ACT's legal system. There has been no review of the Legal Aid Commission for over a decade, a serious omission when considering the severity of the issues faced by people appearing before the courts.

There is also a need for more low cost financial advice for people living on low and fixed incomes, particularly people with disabilities. Simple advice and support can help people to remove themselves from the destructive debt cycle caused by excessive use of credit cards and poorly structured or high interest loans. While

financial services for people on low incomes do exist, the demand on these is great and they cannot easily expand their services without an increase in Government assistance.

Recommendation 2.5

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to provide funding for:
the establishment of a consumer legal centre:

- a review of the Legal Aid Commission, and a commitment to fund the Commission to allow fair and equitable representation before the ACT courts; and
- increased availability of low cost financial advice for people on low and fixed incomes.

Assuring Essential Services

Housing

Providing access to secure and affordable housing is critical to reducing poverty. The Poverty Task Group emphasised the importance of housing in its reports to the Government, and made a number of housing related recommendations to reduce poverty in the ACT.

Housing costs are one of the biggest single expenses for people in poverty, and having access to secure and affordable housing is a pre-requisite for meaningful participation in economic and social activity. With the steady depletion of accessible low-cost housing (eg: the redevelopment of the Macquarie Hostel into high cost apartments, increased rents in caravan parks, and down payments and bonds being charged by non-profit housing providers), coupled with rising private rents and low vacancy rates, both emergency housing and longer-term housing assistance has become one of the highest priority issues for the Government in the 2002-03 Budget.

Recommendation 3.1

ACTCOSS understands that the Affordable Housing Task Force (AHTF) will be investigating this issue in detail and providing recommendations to the Government for longer-term solutions. However, the urgency of need in Canberra requires some more direct and immediate solutions, such as:

- increased funding and support of non-profit accommodation providers to enable them to meet costs and remove the need for tenants to make down payments and/or pay bonds; and
- independent funding to support the AHTF, to ensure that essential CSHA funds are used to address the most urgent need.

Recommendation 3.2

ACTCOSS calls for the immediate creation of an independent central housing referral service. This service would provide:

- referral for emergency housing, public housing, community housing and housing provided by non-profit organisations, to ensure that available housing is allocated in the most equitable manner possible, and barriers to obtaining housing across all categories are fully understood and can be addressed;

- outreach services to promote the participation of particularly marginalised groups such as indigenous people in need of housing options; and
- data collection for the Affordable Housing Task Force and to inform future housing policy development.

The ACT Government's move to place four community development workers within ACT Housing to assist tenants is very welcome. ACTCOSS now expects the Government to give this initiative support by ensuring the workers have access to the specialised support services required by many ACT Housing tenants, and by placing more community development workers in similar support roles as required.

Recommendation 3.3

That the Government provide sufficient funds for the expansion of the community development worker program within ACT Housing.

Indigenous Housing

The Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health and Community Care recognised in August 2001 that housing is a critical issue for Indigenous people and their health, with overcrowding and homelessness being exacerbated by racism and discrimination. A submission to the Committee from Beryl's Women's Refuge noted that 'ACT Housing stands alone in the country as the sole public housing provider with no Aboriginal housing policy.'

Recommendation 3.4

ACTCOSS asks that the Government provide funding for the recommendations from the Committee's report 'Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT', including the following on housing issues:

- that the Government develop housing policies that reflect the special circumstances of the Indigenous population, ie a comprehensive Aboriginal Housing Policy which is informed by the Indigenous communities of the ACT and the housing sector; and
- that the Government design and develop public and community housing aimed directly at Indigenous families, particularly where women and children are escaping domestic violence.

Rental Rebate Calculations

ACT Housing policy assesses the gross income of all residents over the age of 16 when calculating rental rebates. This includes the income of residents who are studying full or part-time. ACTCOSS calls upon the Government to amend this policy to exclude students under the age of 25, to (a) encourage people to

undertake study and reduce their risk of being trapped in poverty, and (b) ensure that students have sufficient income for books, travel and student fees without creating unnecessary stress and hardship.

Recommendation 3.5

ACTCOSS recommends that the Government excludes the income of residents under the age of 25 who are in full or part-time study, when calculating eligibility for rental rebates.

Advocacy Services

Effective and accessible advocacy services are essential for the protection and advancement of the legal, human, and service rights of disadvantaged people.

The Poverty Task Group research uncovered evidence which shows decreasing access to appropriate advocacy services for people affected by poverty. Further analysis of this issue is necessary in order to develop strategies to respond to this need.

People for whom advocacy services are essential include those whose ability to defend their rights is restricted by income, disability, illness, language, or susceptibility to discrimination.

All areas of advocacy indicate that it has become increasingly difficult to provide constructive input into government program and policy development. ACTCOSS believes that some collaborative work is required to improve this problem.

Recommendation 3.6

That funds be allocated for a detailed study (conducted jointly by Government and the sector) into unmet need for advocacy services for disadvantaged people who are unable to independently defend their rights.

Recommendation 3.7

That a joint project be undertaken between advocacy groups and the Government to develop quality service standards for advocacy work, based on the principles of the Compact on working relationships between the community sector and government.

Transport

Few would dispute that the increasing availability of home-based service provision has brought many benefits to frail older people and people with disabilities. Governments however, have a responsibility to address the altered mobility requirements that accompany policies of de-institutionalisation and community participation by ensuring access to effective and affordable transport.

Recommendation 3.8

That the Government acknowledge their responsibility for addressing mobility requirements of disadvantaged people by allocating funding for:

- increased taxi subsidies for people with disabilities and frail older people to at least bring subsidies into line with other states;
- increased frequency of buses on weekends; and
- ensuring buses are operated as a community access service and not solely a commuter service.

Theme 4

Prioritisation of Preventative Health

Health Promotion

The ACT Poverty Task Group found that ill health could put individuals and families at risk of slipping into poverty, or prevent them from escaping poverty. Since the 1999-2000 study, there has been evidence that the position in the ACT is unchanged. ACTCOSS therefore reiterates the recommendations of the Poverty Task Group:

'That the Government commit ongoing resources to develop the quantitative and qualitative evidence base of poverty in the ACT' and

'That the Government provide resources to undertake an inclusive, evaluative process to determine the impact, nature and extent of poverty in the ACT.'

Many people on low incomes cannot afford special sports clothes, sports equipment, or memberships at gyms and clubs. The Government's role in educating people within the community on issues of concern should be extended to include health promotion programs specifically targeted at people living in poverty.

The Poverty Report found that in the ACT, those living with poverty are more likely to be single people, or in single parent families. With one in 12 Canberra households experiencing poverty, there is a need for specific support programs targeted at these groups.

Recommendation 4.1

Specialised health promotion programs for people living in poverty be made central to the work of the Health Promotions Unit, and targeted at single parent and single person households.

Recommendation 4.2

Resources be committed by the health promotions unit to undertake independent action research into this largely uninformed area of policy for the ACT.

Health Education

Another issue for people living with poverty is the range of life skills needed to help ensure health and wellbeing are maintained. Life skills and support services are both necessary to ensure that those who are living in poverty have the resources they need to change their situation.

Recommendation 4.3

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to allocate funding for the following health education initiatives:

- an increased focus on life skills in schools and adult learning centres, including units aimed at increasing self esteem and raising awareness of mental health issues; and
- development of programs specifically aimed at raising awareness of self care and preventative health strategies among groups identified as being at risk of falling into poverty (eg those suffering from different forms of addiction).

People living with poverty may not have the financial resources to access skills training to help them improve their personal situation. This could be a lack of adequate, affordable childcare, the expense of tuition fees, or even the costs and timetable problems of commuting by public transport.

Recommendation 4.4

That the Government provide financial support for people on low and fixed incomes to access adult and community based education.

The ACT Department of Education and Community Services introduced a pilot program into colleges, schools and preschools early last year, called "Schools as Communities". \$700,000 in recurrent funding was provided to initiate outreach services and in-school facilities to support students and their families. ACTCOSS believes this program should be expanded to ensure all children and their families and carers have improved access to services, to help in better targeting services to those in need, and to improve the links between schools and community services.

Recommendation 4.5

- ACTCOSS calls on the ACT Government to ensure:
- That welfare services provided through the school system, such as "Schools as Communities" be evaluated and extended; and
- That welfare services in the broader community be extended and evaluated to ensure they are able to meet demand from, and improve their linkages to, the school based services.

Drug Law Reform

Fundamental to any discussion of preventative health issues is the need to provide alternative treatments and preventative programs on drug abuse and misuse. ACTCOSS has long advocated for the establishment of a Substance Abuse Task Force, which could provide independent expert advice to Government on programs and policy.

Recommendation 4.6

ACTCOSS calls on the Government to provide funds for the establishment, in consultation with ACTCOSS and relevant stakeholders, of a Substance Abuse Task Force, which would have a major role in prevention and educational programs around substance abuse.

In the interim, there is anecdotal evidence that the heroin injecting room trial in Sydney has produced very positive results. While the Chief Minister has stated he wants to wait until he has seen the evaluation of this trial before committing his Government to support for a Canberra trial, the funds need to be available as soon as the issue is settled.

Recommendation 4.7

In anticipation of a positive result, ACTCOSS proposes that funds be set aside in the Health budget to provide for the establishment of an ACT injecting room trial.

Theme 5**Policy Interventions for Improving Community Health**

ACTCOSS would like to commend the ACT Government on its approach to the difficult area of health policy. The Health Summit has been a promising start to what ACTCOSS hopes is a reordering of priorities, and a refocussing on to areas of health promotion and illness prevention. This will necessitate a cross portfolio approach. As the Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT found, the determinants of health are not simply access to doctors and hospitals, but include a range of issues including housing, discrimination, substance abuse and education, along with more mainstream health access problems.

Overall, ACTCOSS believes that there needs to be a fundamental shift in priorities for health funding in the ACT, to provide more balance between tertiary care provided by the hospital system and primary and preventative health care, provided by a range of community based services.

The change will necessitate a period of increased investment in health before financial efficiencies achieved in the acute care system can be passed on to the primary health care system. At a time of burgeoning stamp duty revenue, it would seem appropriate that this type of windfall be used to provide sustainable and long term change in areas such as health, to provide better services, and health, to all who live in the national capital.

ALP Promises

The ACT Government has made several promises on the consultative nature of its future policy development, promising a wide range of inquiries and reviews. Many of these have been announced, and ACTCOSS acknowledges these. However there is concern that these may deplete resources, particularly in areas of need.

Recommendation 5.1

That all reviews and inquiries promised by the ALP be fully resourced and not draw resources from programs and services within portfolios.

Indigenous Health

ACTCOSS congratulates the Government for its recent meeting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and hopes this type of constructive dialogue will become a hallmark of the fifth ACT Legislative Assembly.

As mentioned previously, the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health and Community Care produced a report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT in August 2001. This provides a blueprint for further action, to be undertaken in conjunction with the ACT's numerous indigenous service providers and community groups.

Recommendation 5.2

Funds be committed to implementing the findings and recommendations of the Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the ACT after appropriate discussion with indigenous communities.

Data Collection

The ALP in its policy platform and election commitments spoke of the need to collect and then utilise data to ensure evidence-based policy is developed to meet the needs of the community. This is exemplified by Labor's commitment to a Social Plan.

There was a particular commitment to collect data in the area of indigenous policy. ACTCOSS feels there is an opportunity for the collection of useful data by the Australian Bureau of Statistics during the Indigenous Social Survey later this year, and urges the ACT Government to make resources available to ensure the sample size in the ACT is big enough to provide statistically significant findings. There is also a need to collate, disseminate and discuss the data collected.

Recommendation 5.3

- In ACTCOSS' submission there are three distinct recommendations regarding the data collection on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:
- that the Indigenous Social Survey be given funds to ensure a robust sample size in the ACT. The ACT Government should also agree to provide funds for ACT specific data collection at a later date, and not rely solely on the ISS to provide a coherent picture of circumstance within the ACT indigenous community;
- that any further data collection be conducted after extensive discussions with the providers of indigenous-specific services to determine what data is necessary for relevant service development; and
- that a clearing house be established for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander issues in the ACT, to collect and store data from all ACT departments, as well as any relevant national data available.

ACTCOSS is also concerned that the issue of poverty alleviation not be forgotten, and that data is collected over time to ensure that progress is being made in helping people improve their situation. As part of the Social Plan, ACTCOSS asks

the Government to ensure that indicators of poverty, and risk factors continue to be monitored.

Recommendation 5.4

That the Government continue to collect data which shows the nature and extent of poverty in the ACT, and which is capable of identifying changes in causal factors, such as ill health.

The collection of other data should also be extended to ensure current health policies are achieving their stated goals. Of particular concern is the issue of early discharge, and the connection between this policy and emergency readmissions.

Recommendation 5.5

That policy making be supported by adequate data collection, for example in the area of early discharge policy.

Aged Care

Also in August 2001, the Standing Committee on Elder Abuse released a report that outlined necessary actions to address this disturbing aspect of ACT society. ACTCOSS would also like to see this report's recommendations implemented.

Recommendation 5.6

The Report into Elder Abuse be used as a blueprint for the provision of services to Canberra's residents who find themselves in need of care due to frailty and age.

One issue of particular concern in terms of aged care has been the lack of facilities for a staged return to independence and their home environment after an acute health episode. Funds have been allocated to provide a "step down" facility in Canberra, but there are limited details being made available to the community. ACTCOSS is concerned that any planning for transitional care should include extensive consultation with those who provide the services that support people in their homes, or else risk that planning being irrelevant.

In general there is an urgent need to make a transition from an over reliance on acute care services to a range of community care options. Aged care is a stark example of this.

Recommendation 5.7

That the Government implement its policy and promises on transitional care in an open and consultative way, spelling out in the budget its timetable for implementation and the process that will be used to determine spending priorities.

During the election campaign, the ALP also made a strong commitment to improving the availability of respite care in the ACT. The ACT community is very keen to see this promise put into action.

An expectation has arisen of this increase in resources being an extra \$1 million per year. However the allocation of funds needs to be indicated in the 2002-03 budget and there would be some benefit in referring the detailed planning of the expenditure to the HACC/Disability Services Strategic Forum.

Recommendation 5.8

That the Government provide a timetable and outline of its plans to provide an extra \$1million for respite care in the ACT.

The Gallop Report

The Council congratulates the ACT Government on its decision to table the Gallop Report into Disability Services in the ACT and to provide supplementation to the current budget to allow for disability service reforms.

While it will be some months before the Gallop report is formally responded to, ACTCOSS would urge the Government to make sure that the 2002-2003 Budget contains sufficient resources to meet the challenges posed by the inquiry.

Unfortunately, there have been a number of incidents in recent years, which indicate there are still problems in the disability and mental health areas that will have resourcing implications. For example, the Coroner's inquiry into the death of mental health activist, Bob Beatty.

Recommendation 5.9

While it is impossible to recommend funding be allocated before these issues are addressed, ACTCOSS urges the Government to provide a significant increase in funds to implement reform in the areas of disability and mental health services as identified and recommended by the various reports and reviews currently underway.

Corrective Services

The ACT's lack of a prison and secure mental health facility has placed strains on the health and wellbeing of not only those who end up in the custodial system, but their families as well. Incarceration and separation produce particular problems for those who have been sent to jail, making it difficult for them to obtain employment and accommodation on their release, exacerbating their risk of falling into poverty. Families also suffer because of the effects of separation, the costs of visits to interstate jails to maintain contact, and the adjustment of all family members after release.

The former ACT Government started the process of developing plans for a jail, which met with some community resistance. The ALP has committed itself to choosing a different path, with a program driven facility, which puts an emphasis on rehabilitation.

It is important that ACT community members who find themselves caught up in the corrections system, and their families, have their rights protected and their needs met. There is also a need to ensure people returning from incarceration are given every chance to reintegrate into the ACT community.

ACTCOSS urges the government to immediately consider the range of non-prison corrective services measures which can be implemented in the ACT while it carries out the detailed planning required to develop a prison model.

The following recommendations come from the deliberations of the ACT Community Coalition on Corrective Services, which calls on the Government to:

Recommendation 5.10

Continue the ACT's progressive research into and use of alternatives to prison sentences for people before the courts.

Recommendation 5.11

Provide relief from overcrowding at the Belconnen Remand Centre by developing a new remand facility in the ACT as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 5.12

Provide a "step down" facility or half way house to support Canberra community members returning from incarceration interstate.

Recommendation 5.13

Address the over-representation of people with mental health problems in the corrections system as a priority.

Recommendation 5.14

Consider the detention of women prisoners as an issue separate from the construction of a traditional prison, recognising the special needs and differing crime patterns of women sentenced to prison terms.

Recommendation 5.15

Make the full range of preventative and primary health care services available within the community available to people on remand, including access to drug and alcohol related services.

