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Caring for the most vulnerable in the community

More and more families are in need of support to make ends meet, Roslyn Dundas writes.

Living in the capital of the lucky country, we have always had the assurance that if ever things got really bad for us or our family, there always would be someone in the community we can turn to for help. For most of us, we get reassurance from the charities and community groups that make up the 600,000 not-for-profit organisations around Australia. But a growing number in the community get much more than just reassurance.

Last year alone, community services helped 6.5 million Australians, ranging from people experiencing financial hardship, homelessness, domestic violence, child abuse, unemployment, disabilities and other hardships. A lot of the time these grassroots groups are the last resort for people who slip through society's cracks, forming a vital glue that keeps Australia's social fabric together.

As the local community sector gathers for its biennial conference, the ACT Government has begun work on developing its next Budget. Chief Minister Jon Stanhope is convening roundtables and solutions are being sought for the housing affordability crisis, public transport woes and our often hidden rates of underemployment. And interest rates keep going up. While the averages show Canberra as an affluent city, this hides the growing portion of the community who are finding it tough to make ends meet.

One in six Canberra families earn less than \$650 a week just \$200 above the average rent and one in 10 people face multiple deprivation and are missing out on access to some of life's essentials, like affordable healthcare, shelter or food. Demand on the community sector is increasing, as more and more families need extra support as they face hard decisions about their home, education and health.

But the community sector is not just assisting those who knock on its door. Last year's Productivity Commission study into the not-for profit sector showed the sector is worth about \$43 billion a year to the national economy, contributing as much as 4.1 per cent to gross domestic product, and employing about 8 per cent of the workforce. Yet despite the enormous contribution of the sector, community workers are largely undervalued and underpaid, earning between \$10,000 and \$30,000 less than if they had comparable jobs in government. An equal pay case for social and community service workers is being considered under the Commonwealth Government's

new industrial relations system Fair Work Australia. This case holds the promise of redressing decades of disadvantage faced by community workers earning unfair and inadequate wages. It will also help keep talented people in the sector for longer so they do not move on to similar but higher-paying jobs.

The success of that case will be a major step towards achieving equal pay for community workers. Of course, funding is equally important. The sector will need more funding to cover the cost of paying workers what they are worth, otherwise services and the people they help will suffer. Although all Australian governments are facing budget constraints, providing insufficient funding to the community sector will be a false saving because of the vast amount of work it does supporting the vulnerable that the Government would be forced to take on instead.

Despite the sector's work, tomorrow morning, more than two million Australians will still be living in poverty. Australia spends only 3.2 per cent of GDP on income support, which is less than half the OECD average of 6.5 per cent. Yet for 73 per cent of households with the lowest incomes, these government pensions and allowances are their main source of income. It is no wonder you are more likely to be living in poverty if you rely on the sole parent pension, a disability support pension or the Newstart Allowance. The rising costs of housing, energy, food and transport are compounding to put pressure on low and fixed income households. These "big four" expenses shape the ability, or inability, of individuals, families and households to participate fully in society. Economic growth does not automatically lead to a reduction in poverty. There must be holistic, concerted action and intervention to tackle the key underlying factors that cause and maintain poverty and disadvantage. Governments cannot legislate to eradicate poverty, but they do have control over many of the conditions that affect our vulnerability to poverty. Research shows societies where the gap between richest and poorest is smallest have better health and social outcomes for the whole community. Not tackling poverty means everyone suffers.

The community sector is an essential component in the development of an equitable and socially inclusive community in the ACT. And as more and more in our society seek more than reassurance from the community sector, the sector itself must be recognised and valued. Supporting the sector that works with Australia's most vulnerable supports us all.

Roslyn Dundas is director of the ACT Council of Social Service - the peak body for the local community sector.