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Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

Via email: LACommitteeHCW@parliament.act.gov.au

To the Health and Community Wellbeing Committee,

Submission to Inquiry into the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) is pleased to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022. Improving access to facilities and resources that mitigate and prevent period poverty is a human rights issue and requires urgent action to achieve equitable outcomes for our community.

ACTCOSS has been supportive of the introduction of this Bill as a means to address period poverty and the stigma associated with periods in the ACT. Ensuring reasonable access to free period products is essential and it is promising to see an emphasis being placed on provision at places of education and at ACT Government-run locations.

Period poverty affects many people in Australia and manifests itself in ways including a lack of access to: sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, hand washing facilities or appropriate waste management.

Circumstances, causes & implications of period poverty

The impacts of period poverty are exacerbated for Canberrans on low incomes given [increasingly high costs of living in the ACT](#). The effects of period poverty are also felt by people in vulnerable positions including those experiencing family violence and

those without stable housing. For people experiencing homelessness, a lack of a safe place to sleep also means a lack of access to clean, safe toilets and disposal facilities.

The challenges posed by period poverty include lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, clean toilets, hand washing facilities or appropriate waste management. Without access to these basic amenities, people with periods experience shame that discourages participation in school, work and public life.

[Period Pride's 2021 'Bloody Big Survey'](#) showed that 15% of ACT respondents had been unable to afford period products at some point in their life. It is concerning that members of the Canberra community are being financially locked out of access to menstruation products that afford basic dignity. Almost half of the survey's respondents reported using products longer than recommended on the basis of cost. Overuse of these products is highly dangerous given the increased risk of developing toxic shock syndrome or pelvic inflammatory disease. Additionally, having to overuse period products or improvise products (from newspaper or old clothes, for example) often causes a deep sense of shame for people about their periods.

[Share the Dignity's 2021 Annual Report](#) noted that based on data collected in the 'Bloody Big Survey', there is a clear impact from period poverty on educational achievement and outcomes as well as emotional and mental health. If children and young people cannot afford or access the appropriate products (including supports to manage pain and other issues associated with periods), they are likely to avoid school while on their periods.

An average menstruator could have more than 450 periods in their lifetime. If they are spending an average of \$20 a month on period products, this amounts to approximately \$10,000. This is an extraordinary amount of money for someone living on income support. The high cost of living in the ACT compounded with the long-term financial impacts of COVID lockdowns on many people means that people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to period poverty.

[Access to period products and facilities at suitable places](#)

ACTCOSS's member organisations have reported spending significant sums on providing period care items people on low incomes and experiencing disadvantage. We are pleased to see that service providers will be able to apply to be included in the scheme and receive ACT Government assistance to provide free-of-charge period products. It's not clear from the drafted legislation whether organisations will receive extra funding to provide period products through their services.

Section 10 (1) (b) of the draft legislation requires that entities may be suitable if they provide their services from the place they are applying from. This constraint does not account for service providers who run events or provide services in a variety of community facilities or from a travelling service. For many community organisations,

flexibility of location feeds into their ability to provide services to people who are or are likely to be experiencing period poverty on a much larger scale.

The need to fund the community sector to provide period products is particularly vital given that community organisations are a likely contact point for vulnerable people and Canberrans on low-incomes. The ACT Government should consider funding services to provide period products for facing people who are experiencing domestic violence, homelessness or vulnerable families including the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Roundabout Canberra and any of the Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT.

It will also be important not to discriminate against people with periods who are gender-diverse including transgender people and non-binary people. In order to ensure that these groups have equal access to period products and facilities these products must be made accessible outside of gender-segregated bathrooms. Further where products are being offered or distributed by approved 'suitable places', it is imperative that providers be briefed around the importance of making products widely available and not limiting provision to woman-passing individuals.

[Access to education about menstruation](#)

We are pleased to see the introduction of menstrual information and education resources in public schools and at ACT Government-run locations such as libraries. Reducing the social stigma associated with periods is an essential step in empowering people with periods to participate in school, work and/or social life.

Improving health literacy is also an important step in removing barriers to reproductive healthcare, including shame, stigma and lack of knowledge around the existence and options for period pain interventions and other health issues associated with periods.

It is important that both menstruators and non-menstruators are delivered the same level and content of education about periods in order to avoid stigma and discrimination.

As mentioned, it is necessary that education does not take on an overtly gendered view of periods. Educational materials must represent and be inclusive of the wide variety of people who experience periods.

[Urgency of further action](#)

Fixing period poverty in Canberra is a major social justice concern but it also points to the urgency of a meaningful increase to JobSeeker and other income support payments. Following the conclusion of provision of the Coronavirus Supplement, the payment has returned to just \$44 a day. This rate keeps people in poverty and makes it near impossible to cover basic costs including; rent, food, clothing, petrol – not to mention personal products including period products. For some people, this

means choosing between feeding their families and accessing appropriate and hygienic period care.

The cost of healthcare and finding a GP in the ACT is also significant barrier to accessing health services to deal with reproductive healthcare including period pain. The ACT has one of the [highest rates of people delaying seeking medical attention](#) because of cost, and the lowest number of bulk billing GPs in the country.ⁱ For people on low incomes the shortage of bulk billing medical services in Canberra creates a major barrier to care given they cannot afford to seek out private providers. To provide equitable and affordable healthcare, the ACT needs to increase the supply of bulk billing providers in the long term.

We need to ensure that everyone who menstruates has free and ongoing access to period products as well as clean and sanitary public toilets in which to use them. However, reducing and preventing period poverty requires addressing poverty more broadly and ensuring that all Canberrans have access to a safety net that will maintain their dignity.

We would be happy to discuss this feedback further. Please contact our Head of Policy, Dr Gemma Killen, at gemma.killen@gmail.com, or myself at the address below.

Yours sincerely



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ⁱ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services: Primary and Community Health*, Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022, accessed 15 August 2022.