



YWCA CANBERRA

**2018-19 ACT Government
Budget Consultation Submission**

About YWCA Canberra

YWCA Canberra is a feminist, secular, not-for-profit organisation that has provided community services and represented women's issues in Canberra since 1929.

Through our national Member Association, YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 125 countries across the globe.

Our rich history of supporting women and girls in Canberra through the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the rapid social and cultural changes Canberra has experienced in recent years, continues to inform and influence our work.

Today we provide quality, innovative services for women, girls and families in the ACT and surrounding regions. We work in the areas of children's services, community development, housing, youth services, personal and professional training, women's leadership and advocacy.

As a membership-based, non-religious organisation, we encourage the participation of people of all cultures, beliefs and ages in our movement. Strengthened by diversity, we welcome members who are committed to recognising and celebrating the value of every human being.

Introduction

YWCA Canberra welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for the 2018-2019 ACT Government Budget Consultation Process. YWCA Canberra's submission outlines areas where immediate action can be taken to achieve a greater social impact within current budget allocations, as well as areas where a modest additional investment can result in significant benefits to the community.

This submission also outlines the practical steps that the ACT Government can make to increase the economic participation of all Canberrans, and ensure our most vulnerable community members are not left behind.

To be a city where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential, all Canberrans need the best start in life through quality early learning education, through the provision of support for young people who are falling through the gaps, through safe and affordable housing, and through systemic change that results in true gender equality.

Recommendations made in this Budget Submission are provided under our four areas of expertise including gender equality, early education and care, safe and affordable housing, and Young people and STEAM. These recommendations are based on sound analysis, and may be incorporated into the existing fiscal infrastructure.

Recommendations

YWCA Canberra recommends the ACT Government prioritise four key areas in which to invest in the 2018-2019 ACT Budget, as outlined below:

1. Gender equality – Leading the way

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its commitment to gender equality by taking the following actions:

- Allocate resources to ensure the effective implementation of the first two years of the ACT Women's Plan, including its ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- Undertake a rigorous gendered analysis of the budget to understand its impact on women, across all of Government. Include women and their organisations in this process and publicly release the results of this analysis.
- Invest in building women's leadership capacity in the ACT, and empower women and their organisations through a dedicated leadership grants fund.
- Provide adequate resources to the Ministerial Advisory Council for Women to play its intended role of advising the Minister for Women.
- Commit \$615,000 per year to continue targeted Respectful Relationships educational programs to ensure all young people in ACT public primary and high schools have the tools and skills to form respectful relationships.

2. Essential to wellbeing - Safe and affordable housing for women

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government acts to ensure that women are provided with access to housing and homelessness services by taking the following actions:

- As part of the new housing innovation fund, recognise community housing providers as the best suited to establish a commercial real estate agency. Support these organisations by providing exemptions from commercial real estate taxes and obligations.
- Ensure that the new ACT Housing Strategy includes targets on developing innovative housing models for women, including options to provide appropriate and affordable single unit dwellings for older women.
- Introduce a tenancy advice and support service for older women as a critical step in connecting them with the avenues and options available, as well as ensuring that services meet their diverse needs. In its first year, allocate \$100,000 towards a dedicated gender and older person's specialist, to both build the capacity of One Link staff and to carry out analysis, to inform and improve the gender responsiveness of current services.
- Ensure that the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) commits additional resources to transitional housing support for women and children escaping

domestic violence. Ensure that future funding models incorporate the full costs of providing intensive, specialist support for women and children who have experienced violence and trauma.

3. Young people and STEAM - Bridging the digital divide

YWCA Canberra recommends that the ACT Government demonstrates its ongoing commitment to supporting young people by taking the following actions:

- Extend the Canberra Free Wifi more broadly to include Tuggeranong and West Belconnen.
- Prioritise funding in areas of need, including Tuggeranong and West Belconnen.
- Increase the digital literacy skills of disadvantaged young people in the ACT.
- Partner with community organisations to enhance digital inclusion, as the most appropriate mechanism for reaching disadvantaged young people.
- Feature digital inclusion as an overarching theme of the new Smart Cities Strategy, with specific targets and resources allocated to young people.
- Equip young people with the knowledge and skills to be safe online.

4. The Best Start in Life – Early Childhood Education and Care

YWCA Canberra as part of the Children First Alliance, recommends that the ACT Government commits to improving the accessibility, affordability, and enhanced quality of Early Childhood Education and Care. We refer to the Alliance's pre-budget submission for specific priorities and detailed costings for the 2018-2019 budget.

Priority area 1: Gender equality – Leading the way

Overview:

- *The ACT is slipping in terms of its gender equality ranking in Australia.*
- *Violence against women and gender equality are inextricably linked.*
- *Prioritise commitments that will bring about long-term system change.*
- *Fulfil existing commitments, including adequately resourcing the ACT Women's Plan and undertaking a transparent gendered budget analysis.*

Our role in progressing gender equality

- YWCA Canberra is part of a global movement working in 101 countries. Together we are working towards the goal of '100 million young women and girls transforming power structures to create justice, gender equality and a world without violence and war; leading a sustainable YWCA movement, inclusive of all women' by 2035¹.
- We provide professional development opportunities to women and girls across the ACT through a diverse range of leadership programs. In 2016-2017, 39 students graduated with a She Leads Diploma of Leadership and Management. A further 870 people engaged with our She Leads professional development activities and events.
- We also deliver school-based leadership programs for girls in years seven and eight through our Y-Aspire program. In 2015-16 Y-Aspire was delivered to 110 girls in the Belconnen and Tuggeranong regions.
- YWCA Canberra also provides Great Ydeas grants of \$20,000 to women and girls to pursue professional development opportunities, develop pilot projects, kick-start business ideas, or address a need in the community. Nine Great Ydeas grants were awarded in 2017.
- We also offer a Board Traineeship Program providing a unique opportunity for young women to gain experience in governance and holding directorships. In addition to the Traineeship Program, our Board has a quota requiring 30 per cent of our Board positions to be held by women age 30 or under.

Rationale for pre-budget priorities

Australia's progress in gender equality has steadily declined in the global gender equality rankings over the past two decades: Slipping from 15 out of 115 countries in 2006 all the way down to 36 in 2015¹. The ACT is no exception to this widening inequality: the recent WGEA reporting found that the gender pay gap increased from 10.9 per cent to 12.4 per cent in 2016-2017².

¹ Global gender gap report (2016): <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/economies/#economy=AUS>.

² Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Australia's Gender Pay Gap Statistics: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-pay-gap-statistics.pdf>, Page 4

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' most recent survey into personal safety (2012) found that 1 in 5 women (19.4%) have experienced sexual violence in Australia³.

It is widely accepted knowledge that that women's public and economic participation and the violence perpetrated against women are inextricably linked: that gender inequality both leads and helps to perpetuate violence against women. Today this is reflected in public policy approaches in Australia, with states such as New South Wales and Victoria taking a holistic approach to gender equality. Victoria's Safe and Strong strategy recognises that Gender equality is a precondition for the prevention of family violence and it sets out a broad range of legislative changes, institutional, governance structures, employment practices, budget, policy, procurement, funding decisions and advocacy⁴ to drive this change.

The ACT has a strong foundation from which to build: over the past two years, we have seen significant investment in responding to family violence through the establishment of the addressing domestic violence through the Safer Families Package and family safety hub.

Additionally, the launch of the 2016-2026 ACT Women's Plan is a positive step towards a whole of government approach and features the required architecture, with delegated authority to Directorates leadership, to drive institutional change. However, to date the plan has been deprived of the necessary resources for this plan to be effectively implemented.

As the plan enters its second year, we call on the ACT Government to prioritise actions from the first and second year of the implementation plan.

In its first year, the women's plan commits the government to developing gendered impact statements including the review and redesign of the Triple bottom Line Analysis⁵. This should be a transparent, participatory process with women and their organisations central to the tool's design and application.

YWCA Canberra also recommends that the ACT Government appropriately resource the Office for Women to enable it to play a coordinating role in supporting all Directorates in working towards gender equality, and in ensuring that all legislation and policy contributes to gender equality. Both upwards accountability to a central coordinating office, as well downwards accountability to women and their organisations, are both central components to effective, appropriate and targeted and gender responsive policy.

This must be supported by ongoing, evidence-based research into the status of women across the ACT to help unpack the disparities in wealth across the state and how this impacts diverse women.

³ ANROWS, Violence against women in Australia: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey, 2012 (Oct 2015), http://media.aomx.com/anrows.org.au/PSS_2016update.pdf, page 22

⁴Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy, Strong and Safe:

http://www.vic.gov.au/system/user_files/Documents/women/161108_Victorian_Gender_Equality_Strategy_ONLINE.pdf, page 1

⁵ https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/1040375/ACT-WOMENS-PLAN-2016-26-FIRST-ACTION-PLAN-2017-19-WEB.pdf

YWCA Canberra calls on the ACT Government in the 2018-19 Budget to address the disproportionate amount of funds directed towards response, and increase investment in long term measures that will address the root causes of violence and inequality.

Funding for Respectful Relationships educational programs was discontinued in the last budget cycle, and there is no current approach to educating young people on critical topics such as consent.

YWCA Canberra held a consultation with youth workers earlier this year, and it was revealed that many young people do not understand the laws around, and meaning of consent. Their level understanding becomes even vaguer when it comes to social media platforms and communicating online. In the context of new laws pertaining to the non-consensual sharing of images, a comprehensive approach is required to ensure all public primary and high school age students are aware of the law and their rights.

Currently there is an ad hoc approach to education in this space, with many schools choosing to contract external providers to relay messages around cyber safety and sexting. To ensure consistency, this should be taught as part of a broader syllabus that takes a holistic approach to gender equality, and that challenges damaging gender norms that support and perpetuate violence against women.

A 2014 evaluation of a range of Respectful Relationship initiatives underscores the importance of curriculums covering the gendered nature of violence and the integration of feminist philosophy into project design⁶. When a holistic, whole-of-school approach is taken, evidence demonstrates that levels of violence are lowered and more equal, healthier relationships flourish.

Recommendations:

- Allocate resources to ensure the effective implementation of the first two years of the ACT Women's Plan, including its ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- Undertake a rigorous gendered analysis of the budget to understand its impact on women, across all of Government. Include women and their organisations in this process and publicly release the results of this analysis.
- Invest in building women's leadership capacity in the ACT, and empower women and their organisations through a dedicated leadership grants fund.
- Provide adequate resources to the Ministerial Advisory Council for Women to play its intended role of advising the Minister for Women.

⁶ Le Brocque, Kapelle, Meyer, Haynes (2014) ISSR's Respectful Relationships Evaluation: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2016/3-1-respectful-relationships-evaluation-summary-of-findings.pdf

- Commit \$615,000 per year to continue targeted Respectful Relationships educational programs to ensure all young people in ACT public primary and high schools have the tools and skills to form respectful relationships.

Priority area 2: Essential to wellbeing - Safe and affordable housing for women

Overview:

- *The ACT Government has immediate opportunities to address the unmet need for safe and affordable housing through the new housing strategy and the NHHA.*
- *The new NHHA must be gender responsive, secure long term funding, and increase resources to transitional housing support for women and children escaping domestic violence.*

Our role in housing

YWCA Canberra provides housing support to Canberrans through a number of programs. YWCA Canberra's Housing Support Unit assisted 188 people in 2016-17, including 52 who were affected by domestic and or family violence. We also operate three affordable housing properties: Lady Heydon House, two Eclipse Apartments, and Betty Searle House, amounting to a total of 14 tenancies for women in Canberra.

As part of a consortium with Woden Community Service and Belconnen Community Service, we also provide the Supportive Tenancy Service (STS). STS supports individuals and families to sustain their tenancies. In 2016-17 STS supported 365 people.

Rationale for pre-budget priorities

The following pre-budget priorities respond to the current housing policy environment in the ACT. Specifically, the new ACT Housing Strategy due to be finalised at the end of this financial year, as well as the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Bill (NHHA) currently being passed by the Commonwealth Government.

The recommendations below focus on the immediate opportunities that can be seized by the ACT Government to ensure that housing policy responds to the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women, particularly those who are escaping violence, as well older women.

YWCA Canberra welcomed the recent consultation process that has taken place to inform the new ACT Housing Strategy. We now look forward to seeing a rigorous prioritisation process that draws on available data and evidence, based on responding to the most vulnerable in our community, specifically those in the bottom two quintile groups.

As part of this process, YWCA Canberra recommends undertaking a rigorous gendered housing needs analysis to ensure that the strategy responds to, and caters for the needs of women, recognising that there is a broad range of options required to cater for the diverse experiences of women.

The recent announcement to introduce the first annual affordable, public and community housing supply target is a promising step in this regard. As the primary beneficiaries of social housing, women make up the majority of public and community housing tenants (61.5 per

cent)⁷. Therefore, specific targets relating to the needs of women are required, particularly for single older women.

Secondary dwellings, community land trusts, and co-housing arrangements are autonomous, secure, and are preferable affordable housing solutions⁸ along with universal design features that can be adapted as the tenant's age. These targets must be supported by the collection of disaggregated data by age and gender⁹.

There is an ongoing issue with many older women in Canberra who do not fulfil the criteria for social housing, particularly while the private rental market remains unobtainable and insecure for many. It's important that the eligibility criteria is reviewed from a gendered perspective and reformed to respond to older women and their particular circumstances.

We echo the calls now made by numerous housing and community sector organisations to introduce a tenancy advice and support service for older women as a critical step in connecting them with the avenues and options available, as well as ensuring that services meet their diverse needs¹⁰. Within this tenancy service, staff should be trained in gender sensitivity with an older person specialist¹¹.

In its first year, YWCA Canberra recommends allocating resources towards dedicated gender and old person expertise, to both build the capacity of One Link staff and carry out analysis, to inform and improve the gender responsiveness of current services.

We note the recent progress made to launch an innovation fund first announced in the Parliamentary Agreement¹², with a commitment to establish HomeGround Real Estate in the ACT. This is a crucial step in ensuring that the private rental market is accessible to vulnerable groups such as older women, who currently face discrimination and/or are priced out of the market.

Key to the success of HomeGround, was their existing management experience of as well as a deep understanding of the community they were serving, familiarity with the issue of homelessness, and knowledge of how to work effectively with these groups of people¹³.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017). Supplementary tables: Social housing tenants (AIHW). Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2017/data>

⁸ Ibid, Page 20-24

⁹ Submission of the Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) to Setting the Agenda (Sept 2017):

<http://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ERA-Setting-the-Agenda-Submission-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ ACT Shelter, 2014, Page 3

¹¹ ERA (2017).

¹² Parliamentary Agreement of the 9th General Assembly of the ACT:

http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1013792/Parliamentary-Agreement-for-the-9th-Legislative-Assembly.pdf

¹³ Rivkah Nissim (Nov 2016) A Bit of Housing Justice – the story of HomeGround Real Estate

<http://apo.org.au/node/72475>

The strength of HomeGround as a durable solution to housing affordability, has been its ability to act as a conduit between low-income tenants and real estate agencies, brokering leases for those who are commonly disadvantaged and discriminated on in the private rental market.

The community housing providers in the ACT are well positioned to play this role. In order for this to take place, exemptions from commercial real estate taxes and obligations are required.

We note the recent tabling of the new Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), intended replacement of National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness¹⁴. Given that one of the central tenets of the new agreement was its inbuilt flexibility towards state-specific housing markets, we are concerned by the lack of bilateral negotiations with state and territory governments leading up to the drafting of the Bill. YWCA Canberra notes the ACT Government's track record for being a vocal advocate to the Commonwealth Government to upwardly influence this new partnership agreement.

It is crucial that women are a central consideration in the NHHA negotiations surrounding the modalities of this agreement. Domestic violence is the number one cause of homelessness among women and children in Australia.^{15,16} The shortage of transitional housing options for families escaping violence is of profound concern. Lack of affordable accommodation is the leading reason women return to abusive relationships.

While the demand for housing services has increased in the ACT, funding cuts have reduced the level of transitional housing services available to families fleeing domestic violence. As a result of Australian Government funding cuts to the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and the National Affordable Housing Agreement, funding to ACT homelessness services has been steadily eroded over the past three years, with \$3.7 million cut in 2013-14, and a further \$2.2 million in 2014-15.

In response to the reduction in funding, the ACT Government developed a revised costings model to determine the allocation of funding cuts across the ACT's housing and homelessness sector. This has resulted in a reduction in overall funding across the ACT sector. In addition, the revised funding model neglects the complex nature of domestic violence and does not factor in the more intensive support that women fleeing domestic violence require.

Within the context of dwindling funding and recognising services are already unable meet demand, we echo ERA and AWAVA's call that the new agreement must be gender-responsive

¹⁴<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F70925501-1175-42e6-9bca-2765dbecf673%2F0017%22>

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), (2013). *Specialist homelessness services:2012–2013*. Cat. no. HOU 27. Canberra: AIHW. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129545638>

¹⁶ Tually, S., Faulkner, D., Cutler, C., & Slatter, M., (2008), *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness: A Synthesis Report*. Report prepared for the Office for Women, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/synthesis_report2008.pdf

and include funding increases¹⁷. Without a significant increase in the supply of transitional housing for those escaping family violence, many women will leave abusive partners only to find they have nowhere to go.

Recommendations

- As part of the new housing innovation fund, recognise community housing providers as the best suited to establish a commercial real estate agency. Support these organisations by providing exemptions from commercial real estate taxes and obligations.
- Ensure that the new ACT Housing Strategy includes targets on developing innovative housing models for women, including options to provide appropriate and affordable single unit dwellings for older women.
- Introduce a tenancy advice and support service for older women as a critical step in connecting them with the avenues and options available, as well as ensuring that services meet their diverse needs. In its first year, allocate \$100,000 towards a dedicated gender and older person's specialist, to both build the capacity of One Link staff and to carry out analysis, to both inform and improve the gender responsiveness of current services.
- Ensure that the new NHHA commits additional resources to transitional housing support for women and children escaping domestic violence. Ensure that future funding models incorporate the full costs of providing intensive, specialist support for women and children who have experienced violence and trauma.

¹⁷ ERA (2017) A Gender Responsive National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, <http://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ERA-AWAVA-letter-to-State-and-Territory-governments-re-NHHA.pdf>

Priority area 3: Young people and STEAM: Bridging the digital divide

Overview

- *Youth educational disengagement, underemployment, and unemployment are a cost to the ACT community, both socially and economically.*
- *The discontinuation of the nationally funded Youth Connections service at the end of 2014 has left a major gap in assisting young people to re-engage with education, training or employment.*
- *There is also a lack of community-based science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) education initiatives, which contributes to vulnerable young people being left behind.*
- *Funding is needed to ensure vulnerable young people have access to the skills, networks and resources to help them stay in school, and equip them for the jobs of the future.*

Our role in supporting young people

The Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Centre (MLYCC) plays an important role in the local community by providing myriad opportunities to engage in social, cultural, recreational and educational activities. Our MLYCC team is committed to promoting community self-determination, ownership and empowerment through different community development opportunities.

Our Youth Engagement team also deliver services on behalf of the ACT Government, working with vulnerable, at-risk young people in the Tuggeranong region. Programs run by our Youth Engagement team include the A-Z social support group for gender and sexuality diverse young people and allies, casework and outreach, the LGBTQIA + Allies Prom, a school holiday program, and an afternoon drop-in service.

YWCA Canberra also operates the YWCA Canberra Clubhouse (the Clubhouse), located at Richardson Primary School in the suburb of Richardson, which has the highest number of people in the ACT (24 per cent) who fall into the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of all 15-64 year old Australians.¹⁸

¹⁸ ACT Government, *Detecting Disadvantage in the ACT: Report on the comparative analysis of the SEIFI and SEIFA indexes of relative socio-economic disadvantage in the Australian Capital Territory*, 2012

The Clubhouse Network is a global community of 100 Clubhouses in 19 countries, providing 25,000 young people with access to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) resources, skills, and experiences to help them succeed in their careers, contribute to their communities, and lead outstanding lives. The Clubhouse Network has a 25 year track record of successfully engaging young people to develop the skills, confidence and networks to pursue STEAM careers.¹⁹

The Clubhouse theory of change is that the Clubhouse learning model empowers vulnerable young people to become more capable, creative, and confident learners, therefore increasing their likelihood to finish school, and pursue further studies or careers in STEAM.

The *Developing Youth: Highlight of the International Clubhouse Youth Impact Survey 2016* showed that:

- 94 per cent plan to continue with their education after high school
- 97 per cent of Alumni said the Clubhouse was the most important source of support for setting high goals and expectations for themselves
- Members have learned to use more technology (91 per cent), are more confident using technology (88 per cent), and use technology more often (84 per cent) as a result of the Clubhouse
- 87 per cent of YWCA Canberra Clubhouse members who were surveyed said that the Clubhouse has increased their interest in studying some aspect of STEAM in the future.²⁰

The *YWCA Canberra Clubhouse 2016 Impact Report* demonstrated that:

- 90.5 per cent of members agreed with the statement “I know if I work hard enough I can solve almost any problem I have”.
- 76 per cent of members of members agreed that coming to the Clubhouse has made them feel happier in life and also that they felt they were an important member of the Clubhouse.
- 93 per cent of members say that continuing their education after high school is important or very important to them.²¹

Rationale for pre-budget priorities

Youth educational disengagement, underemployment, and unemployment come at a cost to the ACT community, both socially and economically. In recent years, the youth unemployment rate in the ACT has been steadily growing, with 11.4 per cent of 15-24 year olds unemployed at August 2015. This is more than double the overall unemployment rate for ACT (4.8 per cent).

¹⁹ The Clubhouse Network, <http://www.computerclubhouse.org/>

²⁰ Clubhouse Network, *Developing Youth: Highlights of the International Clubhouse Youth Impact Survey, 2016* <http://www.computerclubhouse.org/sites/default/files/Clubhouse%20Youth%20Impact%202016.pdf>

²¹ YWCA Canberra, *YWCA Canberra Clubhouse Impact Report 2016*, http://ywca-computerclubhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/YWCA-Canberra-Clubhouse-2016-Impact-Report_WEB.pdf

One in four people who experience homelessness in the ACT, and one in three at risk of becoming homeless, are aged 12 to 24.²²

In ACT schools, children and young people experiencing poverty and social and educational disadvantage are often hidden or unacknowledged. In terms of educational outcomes, there is a persistent and widening gap for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to those from more affluent families. The ACT is one of the most poorly performing jurisdictions when it comes to equity in educational outcomes for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.²³

While schools struggle to support students who are disadvantaged and/or at-risk of disengagement, the lack of adequately resourced youth and community support services are having profound consequences for those who drop out of education. Almost half of all early school leavers find themselves on the margins of the labor force, either in part-time or casual jobs or out of work altogether. Some will face ongoing unemployment and will be more likely to suffer poorer health, experience social isolation, or even find themselves in trouble with the criminal justice system. This will adversely impact on their capacity to fully participate in society.

Young people who leave school early often experience complex and interconnected barriers to remaining in school, both within and beyond the school gate. These include learning disorders and underdeveloped literacy and numeracy skills, bullying, low self-esteem, family violence, and a combination of low-expectations and limited adult support. Difficulties beyond the school gate are often experienced as causal or compounding factors. Crucially, none are 'pull' factors; most students do not leave for greener pastures, but due to a lack of support.

A key factor that further exacerbates this issue is the inability for at-risk young people and their families to keep up with the increasing need to provide access to technology and the internet to meet contemporary educational demands. It is clear that the digital economy will dictate a vastly different set of roles, skills and knowledge from workers, to those of the past.

A 2015 report from the Foundation for Young Australians revealed troubling findings for today's young people:

- 70 per cent of young Australians are getting their first job in roles that will either look very different or not exist in the next 10-15 years
- Nearly 60 per cent of students (70 per cent in vocational education and training) are currently studying or training for occupations where two thirds of jobs will be automated
- More than 50 per cent of jobs will require significant digital skills²⁴.

²² Sawa, Mark, 'More than a third of Canberra's homeless aged 25 or under', Canberra Times, 20 April 2015, www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/more-than-a-third-of-canberras-homeless-aged-25-or-under-20150418-1mnudb.html#ixzz3pLn8apOZ

²³ Roberts, P, & Leonard, S, (2013). 'PISA results show ACT schools fare poorly in teaching disadvantaged'. Canberra Times. accessed 5 October 2015, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/pisaresultsshowactschoolsfare-poorlyinteachingdisadvantaged201312092z1xa.html>

²⁴ Foundation for Young Australians, 'The New Work Order: Ensuring Young Australians have skills and experience for the jobs of the future, not the past,' 2015, p.2. (<http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/fya-future-of-work-report-final-lr.pdf>)

The ability to use and access computers and the internet is vital to schooling and education generally, as well as participating effectively in the economy and many aspects of modern society.²⁵ Empirical research demonstrates that there is a growing and persistent digital divide between students of low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.^{26,27}

Young people who don't have access to technology while in school, then go on to suffer further disadvantage when attempting to enter the workforce. The Australian Workforce and Development Agency acknowledges that the shift to higher work skills necessitated by technology and international competition and economic opportunities, runs the risk of leaving the low skilled and unskilled behind. Young people, older workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people with a disability are identified as being especially exposed to this risk.²⁸

The current policy environment

The discontinuation of the nationally funded Youth Connections program at the end of 2014 has left a major gap in assisting young people to re-engage with education, training or employment. The Youth Connections program consistently delivered positive outcomes for young people in the ACT. It provided tailored case management for young people, taking into account their individual vulnerabilities and barriers to accessing education or employment opportunities.

The Program worked with around 350 young people in the ACT each year, and proved highly successful.²⁹ Six months after leaving the program, an average of 93 per cent of young people were still engaged in some kind of training, education or employment; after two years, 89 percent remained engaged.³⁰

Since Youth Connections ceased, there has been no comparable program implemented, placing young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, in an increasingly precarious position. Schools are not equipped to fill this gap, and there is a pressing need to invest in intensive programs modelled on the Youth Connections program.

²⁵ Vinson, T et al (2015). *Dropping off the Edge: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia 2015*, http://k46cs13u1432b9asz49wnhcx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/0001_dote_2015.pdf

²⁶ Ritzhaupt, A., Liu, F., Dawson, K., Barron, A., (2013) "Differences in student information and communication technology literacy based on socioeconomic status ethnicity and gender evidence of a digital divide in Florida schools," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 45.4 Summer

²⁷ Marcoux, E., (2014) "Bridging the divide," *Teacher Librarian*, 42.1 October

²⁸ Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2012). *Australia's skills and workforce development needs*, July 2012, <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/future-focus-australias-skills-and-workforce-development-needs-discussion-paper-2012.pdf>

²⁹ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), (2013). *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. Australian Capital Territory Annual Report*.

³⁰ (2014). *Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts: Interim Report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny_of_Government/Budget_Measures/Budget_Measures/~/_media/Committees/budgetcuts_ctte/First_Interim_Report/report.pdf

In the ACT Government's Digital Canberra Action Plan: 2014-2018, the Government commits to a vision where "all Canberrans can participate online, regardless of age, ability or economic status, where partnerships are established between government, business and the community to promote digital initiatives, and where digital skills are promoted throughout the community to bridge the digital divide." Further, the report's Guiding Principle 6: Social Inclusion states that the ACT Government will "work to address the digital divide by providing regular and effective access to digital technology, training and learning spaces."³¹

However, in the ACT Government's more recently released Digital Strategy 2016-19, it is unclear as to how these commitments have been carried forward, with no reference to addressing the digital divide, and inclusion themes focused on digitisation of service delivery, rather than enhancing access and education for vulnerable individuals.³²

As 2019 looms, the ACT Government now has a narrow window of opportunity to act on these commitments to address the digital divide in the Territory.

Policy roadmap for action

It is imperative that the ACT Government takes action to ensure vulnerable and 'at-risk' young people receive the support and opportunities they desperately need to participate in the workforce of the future.

While the factors relating to the disengagement of young people are complex and interconnected, when provided with adequate learning, wellbeing and practical support, young people can flourish. A lack of resources and flexible learning options within the ACT education system means that many schools do not have the capacity to support students experiencing disadvantage to stay in school. These difficulties are compounded by the withdrawal of the Youth Connections program and the widening inequalities that exist within many ACT schools.

Out-of-school, community-based education spaces play a vital role in supporting vulnerable young people to stay in school. It is imperative that funding is allocated to programs that assist vulnerable young people and their families to access the internet and emerging technologies.

While in-school education is of the utmost importance, we know that many at-risk young people are alienated by traditional learning approaches. School-based education may also exclude young people already disengaged from education or dealing with difficulties such as bullying at school.

It is therefore critical that programs provide a holistic approach, are offered both inside and outside the school system, and work in partnership with community services beyond the school setting.

³¹ ACT Government, *Digital Canberra: A Leading Digital City Action Plan 2014-2018*, 2014
http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/565566/digcbractionplan_print.pdf

³² ACT Government, *Digital Strategy 2016-2019*,
http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/981952/ACT-Government-Digital-Strategy-2016-full.pdf

Recommendations

- Extend the Canberra Free Wifi more broadly to include Tuggeranong and West Belconnen.
- Prioritise funding in areas of need, including Tuggeranong and West Belconnen.
- Increase the digital literacy skills of disadvantaged young people in the ACT.
- Partner with community organisations to enhance digital inclusion, as the most appropriate mechanism for reaching disadvantaged young people.
- Feature digital inclusion as an overarching theme of the new Smart Cities Strategy, with specific targets and resources allocated to young people.

Priority area 4: The best start in life – Early Childhood Education and Care

Overview:

- *There is a significant body of research demonstrating that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has a positive and lasting impact on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan.*
- *Significant reforms have been made to ECEC in Australia over the past decade, including the introduction of the National Quality Framework for ECEC, and the National Partnership for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. However, Australia still lags behind the rest of the world in the provision of quality ECEC.*
- *Quality ECEC should be a priority for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government to ensure that children are given the best start in life. Urgent action is needed from both the ACT and Australian Government to extend and improve ECEC, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.*

Our role in Early Childhood Education and Care

YWCA Canberra has been providing ECEC in the ACT for more than 30 years. We have three ECEC centres; Campbell Cottage, Winyu in Gungahlin, and Conder Early Childhood Services. Through these Centres in 2016, we reached 523 children from 405 families.

We are also one of the largest employer-based providers of Family Day Care in Australia. In 2016-17, 122 children from 110 families accessed our Family Day Care.

YWCA Canberra also delivers nationally recognised qualifications for ECEC educators through our Registered Training Organisation (RTO- National Number: 1373). In our RTO in 2016-17 alone, 92 people commenced ECEC training (Certificate III and Diploma) and 110 people received First Aid training.

Recommendations

As a Children First Alliance member, we support the Alliance's calls to prioritise ECEC in the 2018-2019 budget round, that will contribute to improving the access, quality and affordability of Early Childhood Education and Care.