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ATTORNEY GENERAL MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT  
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MEMBER FOR GINNINDERRA



Senator Steve Hutchins  
Chair  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee of  
Inquiry into Poverty in Australia  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Hutchins

I am writing to you in response to your letter of 13 November 2002, requesting a contribution to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's Inquiry into Poverty in Australia.

The ACT has already undertaken significant work to address poverty, as a result of the ACT Poverty Project, a joint initiative of the ACT Government and the ACT Council of Social Services.

It gives me great pleasure to present you with the ACT submission to the Inquiry into Poverty (copy attached). This comprehensive response details actions taken so far to implement the recommendations of the ACT Poverty Task Group.

I would also like to highlight the approach used in the ACT for addressing poverty issues, which arose as a result of the work undertaken through the Poverty Task Group. In August 2001 a Joint Community Government Reference Group was established to monitor the implementation of the Poverty Project recommendations and to provide strategic advice to Government on social issues. This approach has worked particularly well and has facilitated close collaboration between the ACT Government and the community. As poverty needs to be addressed in a systematic approach using collaboration and coordination at every possible opportunity, I believe it would be advantageous if other States and Territories considered the approach used in the ACT.

I thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and look forward to hearing of the outcomes from the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Jon Stanhope MLA  
Chief Minister

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**ACT Joint Community Government Reference Group  
Response to the  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee**

**INQUIRY INTO POVERTY IN AUSTRALIA**

**POVERTY IN THE ACT**

**April 2003**

## POVERTY IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

### The ACT Poverty Task Group (PTG)

The ACT undertook the Poverty Research Project in response to concerns about poverty in the ACT. The project was a joint initiative of the ACT Government and the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS). ACTCOSS managed the project and provided support to the Poverty Task Group.

In December 2000, the Task Group presented its final report, *Sharing the Benefits*, to the Government. The final report represented the culmination of nearly two years' work by the Task Group.

The purpose of the project was to provide information to the Government on the nature, level and impact of poverty in the ACT. The project was conceived as a mechanism to engage the ACT community in discussion of issues relating to poverty in the context of a broader revenue/expenditure debate.

The definition of poverty applied by the Task Group was a broad one incorporating not only the economic situation of individuals and families but also their ability to participate in the community and their access to resources.

The Task Group included representatives from all ACT Government agencies and a broad range of community sector organisations, as well as the Licensed Clubs Association of the ACT and the Canberra Business Council. A number of whole-of-government policies are directly relevant to people in poverty and those at risk of poverty. Employment policies and initiatives directly respond to the needs of those at risk of poverty. Government policies relating to community health, education, housing and transport include reference to the needs of those at risk.

The ACT Government responded formally to the Poverty Task Group's final report and published its response in April 2001 (**Attachment A**).

The Government made a commitment to addressing issues relating to poverty and disadvantage in the ACT. In its policy fact sheet *Delivering To Those In Need*, it states that a Labor Government will undertake an audit to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of service delivery and to establish the extent of unmet need within the Canberra community. The fact sheet and the Party statement on *Poverty and Disadvantage* (April 2001) states that this information will be used for social planning (see media release - **Attachment B**).

A number of policy frameworks are already in place to address specific demographic groups within the ACT community, such as the Women's Action Plan, a range of Indigenous strategic plans, the Framework for a Multicultural ACT and the Young People's Framework. The Government Plan for Older Canberrans is a key strategy to address the needs of older people in the ACT, and its implementation will be monitored by the newly established Ministerial Council on Ageing. It is relevant to note the poverty research identified that these demographic groups have specific risk factors in relation to poverty.

Within this policy framework in 2002-03 the ACT Government will provide a wide range of services and programs which are directly relevant to people affected by poverty. The Poverty Task Group's reports provide a context within which these programs and services can be re-examined to ensure they are appropriately targeted and are meeting their objectives.

A number of research activities were undertaken in the context of the PTG and are available in the following reports:

- *Telling the Story: Poverty in the ACT* (the report of the consultation phase of the project) (**Attachment C**)
- *Counting the Need: Poverty in the ACT* (the report of the service provider data-collection phase of the project) (**Attachment D**)
- *Building the Profile: Poverty in the ACT* (the report of the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling report to the ACT Poverty Project) (**Attachment E**)
- *Sharing the Benefits: Poverty in the ACT*, the ACT Poverty Task Group's final report (December 2000) (**Attachment F**)

The PTG recommendations have been addressed in a systematic manner, as illustrated in the attached matrix (**Attachment G**). Details of activities are listed below.

#### **Recommendation 1**

The government, business and the community work together to reduce the level of poverty in the ACT through coordinated, resourced and energetic strategies.

The **Joint Community Government Reference Group** was established in August 2001 to monitor the implementation of the Poverty Project and to provide strategic advice to Government on social issues (See Terms of Reference and JCGRG Newsletters at **Attachment H**). It comprises representatives from community-based organisation, umbrella bodies and senior bureaucrats. The JCGRG has been meeting monthly and has focused on developments relating to the *Compact*, the *Canberra Social Plan*, and the *Community Facility Needs Assessment* project undertaken by Planning and Land Management.

The ACT Government established the **ACT Homelessness Advisory Group (HAG)** under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP IV) Bilateral Agreements with the Commonwealth Government in June 2002. HAG is an important mechanism to ensure the ACT's response to homelessness is informed by broad based expertise including that of community members, service providers and other jurisdictions. A key responsibility of the HAG is to develop an *ACT Homelessness Strategy*. This strategy will provide input to the ACT Social Plan.

The ACT Government will shortly conduct a review of Financial and Material Assistance. The review will consider services that provide Financial and Material Assistance purchased through the Community Services Program (CSP) and Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Information gained through the review process will inform future service purchasing arrangements to better meet the needs of the community. This review will ensure the effective distribution of emergency relief funds.

To address gambling-related poverty issues, the ACT Government has funded the program **Gambling Care**, by providing \$149, 000 of recurrent funding to Lifeline Canberra. Gambling Care will meet the high level of demand for its services by providing face-to-face counselling to those members of the community who are experiencing problems with gambling and the associated financial difficulties.

### **Recommendation 2**

A charter be developed which affirms the rights and entitlements of all members of our community, including people experiencing poverty, and ensures all members of our community are treated with dignity and respect

In April 2002, the ACT Chief Minister established an inquiry to consider whether or not the ACT should have a Bill of Rights (see **Attachment I**). The terms of reference specifically direct the committee conducting the inquiry, to consider whether rights protected by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) should be contained in any ACT Bill of Rights.

The ICESCR includes rights such as the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work, the right to the enjoyment of just and favourable working conditions, the right to social security, the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions, the right to education and the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

The Committee will report to the Chief Minister early in 2003. If the ACT enacts a Bill of Rights containing protection for the ICESCR rights, it may be used to address poverty amongst working and non-working individuals and households.

Information on the Bill of Rights is available at <http://www.act.gov.au/rights/>

### **Recommendation 3**

When contracting human services, the Government resource the implementation and evaluation of, and adherence to, the Charter.

Jointly with the community sector, the ACT Government has developed the Compact (**Attachment J**), a document which outlines the rights and responsibilities of community sector and of the Government. The document also outlines how agencies work together to enhance social capital in the ACT.

An important part of the Compact is to provide a clear avenue for resolving disagreements between parties and a process for achieving mutually acceptable outcomes. To this effect, the proposal is that a panel be established to intervene and mediate between parties. The panel, which would be a non-judicial body, would report to the Chief Minister. It would comprise three people (with gender balance), representing government and community sector, and feature knowledge of the issues involved. Where necessary, a representative from the Indigenous communities may be asked to join the panel. A review of the dispute resolution mechanism and of the effectiveness of the panel, should occur after 12 months.

The Government launched the project **Raising the Standard** in October 2002. The project involved collaboration between Government and a range of community service providers, to

develop a set of generic service standards for human services in the ACT and a process for using the standards in continuous quality improvement.

This project has delivered a number of outcomes including:

- a set of generic community service standards;
- a process and tools for self-assessment, designed to assist organisations review their practice and management against the standards and develop plans for improvement;
- piloting of the standards and assessment process;
- initial training provided to a range of service providers in November 2002
- further training is scheduled for February 2003

All ACT Government agencies, in partnership with alcohol and drug services and relevant community groups, are committed to promoting a healthy safe and caring community as outlined in *ACT Drug Strategy 1999: From Harm to Hope*. In particular, they will focus on activities such as:

- Building local support for public health action and developing local participatory approaches to health and environmental issues through the Healthy Cities Program
- Enhancing community safety through improved urban design
- Addressing public health and safety issues through the provision of facilities to enable injecting drug users to dispose of injecting equipment in a responsible manner
- Target recreation activities at young people at risk from drugs, crime, suicide and other harms to assist in behavioural change and building self esteem
- Ensuring continued commitment to data collection and research to inform policy decisions

**Recommendation 4**

Ongoing resources to develop the qualitative and quantitative evidence base of poverty in the ACT.

**Recommendation 5**

Resourcing of an inclusive evaluative process regarding the impact, nature and extent of poverty in the ACT.

Between July and October 2002, the ACT Government worked on collecting information on Government-provided and funded services and programs, and mapped a comprehensive overview of the services available to those who are disadvantaged and in poverty. This mapping review was undertaken using several approaches, through the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), and with the assistance of the ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS). Details of these approaches are listed below.

NATSEM was commissioned to estimate poverty at the suburb level, in the year 1999. Their report (dated 13 September 2002, at **Attachment K**) estimated the number of people living in poverty and the poverty rates by suburb. It examined the characteristics of people in poverty in the most disadvantaged suburbs. The study examined the 1996 Census data and the 1994 Household Expenditure Survey, referencing the information with recent Centrelink

and employment data and first release of Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census of Population and Housing.

This work provides an interim snapshot of poverty in the ACT and will be updated when further data from the 2001 Census are released. While it is recognised that the NATSEM work is based on estimated characteristics of the population, it is a structured approach to assessing poverty that does not rely on anecdotal evidence. It is interesting to note that the NATSEM study largely supports the findings of the Poverty Task Group (published in 2000) that indicated poverty is spread across the ACT but has different impacts in different suburbs.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) was commissioned to provide the Government with an empirical picture of the need for and provision of human services in the ACT, based on nationally consistent data.

Government-provided and funded services (including refuges, mental health, alcohol and drug services, aged care, home and community care services, health services and emergency relief) were mapped to give a comprehensive overview of the location of services available to poor and disadvantaged people (schools and hospitals were excluded as everyone has access to these services). Concessions provided by the ACT Government were not included in this work as they are the subject of a separate review, along with one-off grants.

The ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) was commissioned to map the non-government organisations in the ACT that do not receive any ACT Government funding and provide services for the disadvantaged and those in poverty. This included organisations funded privately or by the Commonwealth.

Other poverty related data is provided to national data collections on housing funded through the Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement, and services funded by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. This data provides information on both the facilities/ services available and the information about those using them, including presenting needs.

A number of whole of government, internal reviews have been completed or are currently examining key areas such as housing affordability, disability services, mental health, respite care and drug and alcohol initiatives. These reviews will provide the Government with further information about the needs of the disadvantaged.

**Recommendation 6**

That human service planning be integrated to address the issues of:

- coordination and referral
- location
- physical access to services
- transport options to services
- outreach activities
- costs of accessing services for individuals and families
- gaps in services available

As a result of a health summit held in Canberra in February 2002, the ACT Government has developed the ACT Health Action Plan 2002 (see **Attachment L**). The plan outlines the

values, strategies and strategic areas of focus which guide the delivery of health services from 2002.

In line with the National Standards for Mental Health Services strategy, the ACT Government has worked towards the development of an **integrated approach in Mental Health services in the ACT**. See the reference to the project *Raising the Standard* at recommendation 3.

Assessment of drug-related issues had shown that problematic drug use is both a determinant and a consequence of poverty. The ACT Government ensures that many ACT drug and alcohol programs provide links to a range of health and community services through responsive and integrated services, such as:

- Skillsplus program ADD(Inc), a vocational and life-skills program for injecting drug users, especially aged under 25, which provides a link back into training, employment and life-skills
- Late Night Drug Information and Referral Program ADD (Inc): provides counselling, drop-in and referral services to drug dependent youth. The program seeks to provide early intervention by referring young people into treatment and more structured programs such as the Skillsplus program;
- Family Support Program (ADFACT): provides early intervention for children of drug dependent people as well as parenting skill development. The aim of the program is to reduce the harm caused to young children of drug dependent people including breaking the cycle of poverty and improving equity.

The ACT Government has also developed a new program to address drug issues, the Opiate Dependent People's Healthcare Project (ACT Division of GPs). This program started in 2001 and provides a coordinated, community based health care service to people with opiate dependency, including methadone clients. The service links this population group into health and community services through an outreach support model.

The ACT Government has developed a **Home-based Outreach Support for Young People with Special Needs**. Arising from a need highlighted in the Report of the Youth Housing Taskforce, this service is an innovative way to ensure support is provided to young people with special needs in sustainable accommodation arrangements. This model is not attached to a particular accommodation service, and provides support to clients living in their own homes.

To improve the health and well-being of young people in the ACT, the ACT Government has created the **Junction Youth Health Service**. The Service will provide special emphasis on services for at-risk young people and co-ordinate, brokerage health and social services for young people; and will also evaluate these services and collect data.

Another focus on young people is provided through the GP outreach services provided by the ACT Division of General Practice, through ACT CC to schools, health centres, youth centres and the Junction Youth Health Service. These GP services aim to reach disadvantaged clients who are hard to target.



## Memorandums of Understandings

To improve service coordination, the ACT Government is encouraging all service providers to use Memorandums of Understandings with all health services.

The ACT Government provides specialist services through the **Women's Centre for Health Matters**. The Centre provides information, referral, community development and representation services to the Act community.

### Recommendation 7

That a group be drawn from government, business and community to address critical issues regarding the provision of affordable, appropriate housing for all ACT residents, with the Terms of Reference from that group to be guided by the strategies identified by the Task Group.

The cost and availability of housing is an important determinant of poverty. In 2001-02 the Commonwealth and States provide about \$1.4 billion for housing programs under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA), and the Commonwealth provides over \$1.8 billion to individuals under its Commonwealth's Rent Assistance Program (CRA). The current CSHA expires on 30 June 2003.

Commonwealth funding under the CSHA has been declining whilst funding under CRA has increased over the last decade. The Commonwealth has been critical of the direct provision of housing assistance under the CSHA, and considers that it has been badly targeted and that rental policies have been a disincentive to work. However, public housing tenants pay a maximum rent of 25% of income (or the market rent, whichever is the lesser) under the CSHA. This provides greater after-housing income for many households when compared to low-income households in the private rental sector. It should be noted that public housing has become more targeted and attracts a greater number of people on benefits, pensions and allowances. As their incomes may be very low, many public (and community) housing households may still face financial difficulties despite the 25% of income rule.

A major issue of concern is that the CRA is not an effective mechanism for achieving affordable housing outcomes, particularly in high rent markets such as Sydney and Canberra.

Recognising that there is an affordability crisis in housing in the ACT, the ACT Government moved quickly to appoint a Taskforce to explore ways of alleviating the level of housing stress in the community. On 12 December 2002, ACT Housing Minister Bill Wood launched the report titled *Affordable Housing in the ACT - Strategies for Action*, prepared by the Ministerial Taskforce on Affordable Housing (see **Attachment M**). The Taskforce was established in February 2002 and comprised representatives from the community, business and government sectors. Its terms of reference were to identify levels of housing stress in the community, and to recommend strategies to Government to increase the supply of affordable housing, as well as improving housing affordability levels in the community generally. The Taskforce's strategic report contains 46 recommendations covering many aspects of housing affordability.

The Affordable Housing Task Force Report shows that in the ACT, in 2001, more than 70%\* of CRA recipients (nearly 3,300 income units) were paying more than 30% of their income as rent and 33% (1,000 income units) were paying more than 50% of their income as rents. At the time this was the second highest level in Australia. [\*This is without the

payment of CRA]. The forthcoming Report on Government Services broadly supports this though the number of recipients appears to have fallen.

The AHTF also found that based upon 2001 Census data, around 9,200 households in the ACT were living in housing that was unaffordable. This supports the need for more resources to be allocated for housing for low-income households and more innovative responses to the issue of affordable housing. The States and Territories would also point to the importance that social housing plays in providing stability for people to enable them to participate in society and access services. These and related issues are being considered by the Commonwealth, States and Territories in the context of the renegotiation of the CSHA.

#### **Recommendation 8**

That the increased risk particular groups in our community face of being affected by poverty are both responded to in the short and medium term, and investigated further.

See notes about mapping human services (NATSEM) at recommendations 4 and 5.

Indigenous people are one of the key groups at risk of poverty in the ACT. The Aboriginal Youth Outreach Service (Gugan Gulwan Aboriginal Youth Corporation) provides a coordinating link for young people to access a range of health care and community services such as housing, family and education services as well as specific drug and alcohol treatment.

In recognition of the difficulties faced at times by people in need of emergency accommodation, the Government has funded the Canberra Emergency Accommodation Service.

The objectives of the Service are: to network with emergency accommodation providers in order to obtain up to date information about the availability of emergency accommodation; to provide information about and appropriate referral to emergency accommodation; to provide funds where it is necessary to purchase that accommodation, and; to assist people to maintain or enter long term accommodation. The service will also collect information on the level and type of demand, service gaps and barriers to access.

ACT Housing has five Housing Manager Specialists (HMS), whose task is to assess the needs of tenants and potential tenants identified as being at risk of being unable to maintain tenancies. The Housing Manager Specialists support tenants in sustaining their tenancies.

The ACT CC **Migrant Health Unit** delivers tailored services to overseas-born people in the ACT community; these services include community education, interpreter and liaison services.

The ACT Government has developed the **ACT Women's Action Plan 2000-2001 (WAP)** which aims to improve services to women in the ACT through more diverse service promotion, targeted and mainstream service delivery, and better service coordination. The plan was implemented and a final report of the implementation was published in August 2001. The ACT Women's Action Plan and the Final Implementation Report are available from the website at <http://www.act.gov.au/government/womenact/WAP/00womact.pdf> and <http://www.act.gov.au/government/womenact/WAP/final%20report%20pdf.pdf> respectively. (Also see copies at **Attachment N**).

**Recommendation 9**

That the obligation to ensure access for clients to services be reflected:

- in service provision
- in current and developing service standards
- in the pricing of services
- in the development of any Charter.

See notes about the implementation of **the National Standards for Mental Health Services** in the NGO sector at recommendation 6 and **Raising the Standard** at recommendation 3.

The generic contract used between Government and non-Government organisations (NGO's) providing human services includes a requirement that the NGO comply with any standards relating to that area, or the generic standards for human services.

The **ACT Transcultural Mental Health Project** aims to develop and implement a pilot community and mental health service provider education and training program to improve mental health outcomes for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the ACT. This includes a catalogue of mental health services in the ACT and a public information campaign in selected migrant communities.

**Recommendation 10**

That a consistent, user-friendly external complaints mechanism be developed for human services

A consistent, user-friendly external complaints mechanism is provided by the **Community and Health Services Complaints Commissioner**. The role and responsibilities of the Community and Health Services Complaints Commissioner are outlined in **Attachment O**.

The ACT Government is also planning to have a '**Review of Community Advocacy and Statutory Oversight Agencies**' which will look at the functions and powers of the Community and Health Services Complaints Commissioner, and those of similar agencies, for example the Discrimination Commissioner, the Community Advocate, the ACT Ombudsman.

**Recommendation 11**

A dynamic promotional strategy in community languages, using a variety of media is developed to address information barriers in access to resources.

The ACT Government has developed a Framework for a Multicultural Australian Capital Territory 2001-2005 (**Attachment P**). The Multicultural Framework is a practical whole of government approach to multicultural affairs in the ACT, and was developed as a result of extensive public consultation. The Multicultural Framework stresses that the benefits of multiculturalism can only be realised if the community, business and government work together and are willing to respond to the aspirations and needs of all groups that make up the ACT community. The ACT Government has stressed that the cultural diversity of the ACT population is significant in building the social capital of Canberra.

To improve community with people of languages other than English, the ACT Government has provided an avenue for web-sited information to be translated into nine community languages through Canberra Connect, using the Babel-Fish translation tool. This initiative

will assist to overcome the information barriers of people whose language is not English. In addition, telephone enquiries to Canberra Connect in languages other than English can be managed with the assistance of the Telephone Interpreter Service. Canberra Connect also provides the TTY and Auslan service through the call centre.

**Recommendation 12**

An inclusive stakeholder review into the effectiveness and adequacy of current concessions and rebates in assisting people affected by poverty to participate in the community.

A review of ACT Government concessions is also nearing completion. It will consider options to extend concessions (including transport concessions) to more low-income groups, to meaningfully address poverty and financial disadvantage. An important part of the concessions review has been the undertaking of extensive community consultations, which have been published in the consultations report (**Attachment Q**).

**Recommendation 13**

Strategies be identified and implemented which promote the role and use of community facilities and structures to provide links and a better focus for community participation.

The ACT Government has initiated the **Community Facility Needs Assessment** project (through PALM), to bring into focus the issue of planning for community facilities in Central Canberra, Belconnen and Gungahlin. A purpose of the project is to undertake a comprehensive assessment of need for the provision of community facility land in Central Canberra, Belconnen and Gungahlin.

The project will identify existing community facilities, assess the current and future provision of community facilities in response to demographic trends and any changes in service delivery or government policy. It will also inform future analysis of development proposals that may impact on Community Facilities Land. Further details on the project can be obtained from the web page at [www.palm.act.gov.au](http://www.palm.act.gov.au) and follow the link to the study on the consultation page.

The ACT Government has developed a project to foster community-based psychosocial rehabilitation. This community-based 'partnership' between the ACT Mental Health Services and the Belconnen Community Services Inc. offers psycho/social rehabilitation opportunities to enhance quality of life for people who suffer from, or who are at risk of suffering from, mental illness. These activities include recreational and sporting activities based in the existing community centres and other non-government organisation venues across the Canberra region.

**Recommendation 14**

The principles of social capital be supported, and that the potential of the concept to enhance participation and address poverty be recognised and progressed.

The **Canberra Plan**, to be comprised of the **Social Plan**, the **Spatial Plan** and the **Economic White Paper**, is due to be completed in 2003. Extensive consultations on the Canberra Spatial Plan have already taken place through Planning and Land Management (PALM). The Canberra Plan will form an important basis from which to establish a blueprint for the development of the principles of social capital in Canberra.

Further information on planning and consultation can be obtained from the following website address: <http://www.palm.act.gov.au/consultation/index.htm>.

The ACT Government has provided more than \$600,000 of funding to be made available for community projects through the **Canberra Community Foundation** Grants program (see media release at **Attachment R**). The Canberra Community Foundation is an ACT Government community grants program, which provides financial assistance to individuals and community groups for the development of activities that enrich the wellbeing of the community. Interested individuals, community groups, charity organisations and legally constituted organisations are invited to apply for funding under the Canberra Community Foundation.

In particular the Foundation encourages participation from specific groups, such as women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and people with disabilities. Applications closed in October 2002 and successful projects were announced in February 2003.

More details about the Canberra Community Foundation can be obtained at <http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/cmd/ccf/index.html>

#### **Recommendation 15**

Strategies be developed and implemented which increase access to information technology for all members of the community.

Following the report of the Poverty Task Group a Digital Divide Task Force was established, with a digital divide grants program. Under this program over \$300,000 was awarded to 19 community organisations to provide IT access and training to disadvantaged people on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Further initiatives designed to address the digital divide in the ACT community have included:

- Commissioning the Connectivity Report - "*Bridging the Digital Divide: a study into connectivity issues for disadvantaged people*".
- Providing funding to schools and libraries to establish free or low cost public access points and provide IT and Internet training.
- Establishing the Community IT Advisory Group as the primary consultative mechanism through which the community can inform the Government on their connectivity needs.

This later group assisted the Government in the development of the **Community IT Access Plan** (January 2003, at **Attachment S**), which sets in place a strategy to close the digital divide in the ACT by 2006. Amongst the initiatives contained in the Plan are:

- Additional PCs to the libraries
- The establishment of Community Technology Centres
- Free IT and Internet training to disadvantaged groups including ACT Disability Housing residents
- The distribution of a free computer-training booklet "*Welcome to the World of Computers and the Internet*".

The response to this Inquiry has been affected by the Canberra Bushfires, which have created additional workloads to the ACT Government and community-based organisations alike. Given these difficult circumstances, a few additional points are mentioned below, and it would be possible for community organisations to provide verbal submissions or answers to questions that may arise.

**Additional anecdotal comments from members:**

Concerns about Commonwealth/States Agreements

- In the fight against poverty, the Commonwealth is an important stakeholder and works jointly with State and Territory Governments. The Commonwealth has a central role in providing income support and a number of concessions. It is important, therefore, that effective policy coordination should take place to ensure optimal results. Where this is not achieved, the casualties are those who are poor and socially disadvantaged, who end up trapped in their harsh circumstances.
- With respect to the role and responsibility of the Commonwealth in combating poverty, which comes into play in the context of Commonwealth/States agreements, it appears that the Commonwealth is showing a trend of not supporting these agreements with appropriate funding. This is particularly conspicuous in the areas of housing and disability. The funding allocation for public (social) funding has been reduced by some \$6m in the last financial year; this is a substantial size of the ACT public housing budget.
- In the field of disability, the Commonwealth recognised the increased level of unmet need in Australia and has even developed a plan to address these. However, in practice, the funding allocated was reduced, which places greater responsibility on the States to meet these needs.
- The same situation has occurred in respect of housing, and there has been a reduction of affordable housing, which has also increased the States' responsibility for attempting to meet the needs. Yet the Commonwealth/State Agreements are supposed to represent a mechanism to realistically evaluate and practically meet the needs of the communities.
- It should be noted that these unmet needs, in respect of affordable housing, tend to compound and exacerbate gender imbalance, because many of the clients seeking affordable housing are single mothers with family responsibilities. The situation with respect to crisis accommodation is also strained, as is that of homelessness.
- It is fair to say that by neglecting and under-catering for the housing needs of socially disadvantaged people - the majority of whom are women - Governments are risking to further entrench poverty traps for women and children.
- It is noted that there are some coordination issues between the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) and other Commonwealth policy issues, for example breaching young people, which results in their becoming homeless. Centrelink's hard work in acknowledging the issues and trying to devise

appropriate responses is noted, but gaps continue to exist and the policy sometimes hinders attempts to achieve a positive outcome.

- The Youth Coalition has highlighted concerns about the level of income support provided to young people and the punitive systems underlying the Common Youth Allowance and Mutual Obligation, which impact on those young people who are most vulnerable. The Youth Coalition points out that, despite numerous reports highlighting the causes and impact of poverty, the Commonwealth Government's setting of income support continues to be based on the belief that the cost of living is cheaper for people under the age of 25 years. Analysis of official poverty line figures by ACOSS (Australian Council for Social Services) revealed the unemployment benefits for singles under 21 years are 33% below the Henderson Poverty line. Consequently the ACT Youth Coalition seeks to highlight the Commonwealth Government's current inequities of its income support system, the vicious cycle of poverty that many young people in receipt of Centrelink benefits find themselves in, and the social impact of these early experiences of poverty.
- Concerns have been voiced that specific areas from the Home and Community Care (HACC) programs are not adequately resourced by the Commonwealth. These areas included Insurance, SACs award increases and to a lesser extent HACC reforms including data collection and assessment processes.
- Another concern is cost shifting and an increased demand for services. For example, clients unable to access HACC services may be inappropriately admitted into hospital (Territory-funded) or residential care facilities (Commonwealth-funded).

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