

Submission to the ACT Women's Health Plan

Introduction

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community-based organisation that works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing. WCHM focuses on groups of women who experience disadvantage and uses social research, community development, advocacy and health promotion to empower these women to achieve the highest possible standard of health and wellbeing.

WCHM believes that health is determined not only by biological factors, but by a broad range of social, environmental and economic factors known as the 'social determinants of health'. We also acknowledge that the environment and life circumstances that each woman experiences have a direct impact on her health, and in many cases, women's poor health is rooted in social disadvantage. For these reasons, WCHM is committed to taking a 'whole of life' and social approach to women's health.

WCHM has chosen to limit its responses to those questions relating to areas in which it has the most knowledge and expertise, and to support its responses with evidence published by the Centre and its partners on the specific needs of ACT women.

General comments on the ACT Women's Plan

The review of the ACT Women's Plan offers an opportunity to build on the achievements already made for women and girls in the ACT under the current Plan.

Measuring the success of the Plan

WCHM considers the area of the Plan that is very important in assessing the success of the Plan for women of the ACT, is the measurement of the achievements made against the key themes and the areas for action.

The principles that underpin the ACT Women's Plan include:

- *Participation - Women of all ages should have the opportunity to fully participate in all aspects of their lives, without discrimination. Potential barriers that may limit a woman's control and choices need to be identified and addressed.*
- *Diversity - Women and girls are not a homogenous group and the diversity of women must be recognised, celebrated and encouraged. The needs, rights and choices of all women throughout all stages of their lives must be promoted.*

Yet the indicators of success contained in the current ACT Women's Plan are at an aggregate level for all women in the ACT. WCHM is concerned that a 'one size fits all' approach to measuring the success of the ACT Womens Plan will not be sufficient in ensuring positive outcomes for socially isolated and marginalised women. Aggregated national and Territory statistics already portray Canberrans as being relatively privileged and do not show the pockets of disadvantage or the status of women and groups of women who are at risk.

There is a wide diversity of women in the ACT and if the Plan does not measure or target anything other than the majority of ACT women there is a risk that real gains will not be made for disadvantaged women. The status of, and focus on, these women gets lost if there are not longer term measurable targets for specific groups of women which would help to guide the day to day work and focus of the Plan.

Women from CALD backgrounds, women with a disability, women with mental illness and women leaving institutions already feel socially excluded, and the general community have low expectations of them and insufficient knowledge of how they can contribute positively to the community. Not feeling accepted by the general community is a key isolating factor.

WCHM is concerned that without indicators that set targets to aim for over time for specific groups of women, the barriers that exist for them in the key themes will not be understood by the Departments implementing the areas of action, and their needs will not be identified and addressed. Without this focus the measurements and indicators of success will still show the ACT as having good performance, when in fact improved access for vulnerable groups will not be achieved or limited. Disaggregated data which measures below women as a whole is essential if the ACT Women's Plan is to truly measure improvements for all women – including disadvantaged women in the ACT.

Linkages across the Plan's themes

There is a need for linkages between the silo areas in the Plan, as women fall through the gaps of the key areas of focus. We know from our advocacy work that women from minority groups experience multiple dimensions of inequality in the ACT including discrimination, inadequate housing, issues with access to health care and employment, and lack of inclusion in decision making which are identified as key areas that need to be addressed in the ACT Women's Plan.

The new ACT Women's Plan needs to be connected to other ACT policies, and the key areas of focus in the Plan need to be better linked.

Health and wellbeing for example does not stand alone but is shaped by the environment in which women live. Good health depends upon access to

appropriate housing, secure income, and physical safety, and so all government departments must have a role. Long term change around the health of ACT women needs to be driven by portfolios other than health - those that have large impacts on women's health. Income security, adequate housing, employment status, transport, sport and recreation pursuits and family and community supports affect health, and so a health system that strengthens both prevention and wellness includes provision of suitable housing, affordable child care, adequate income support, accessible community and public transport systems, provision of care that is and tailored to individual needs and culturally appropriate.

The current Plan does not recognise this or link across the themes, and the targets do not emphasise a connection between them to understand the impacts each theme has on the others.

Comments on key themes in the Plan

Representation and recognition

The intent of this theme of the Plan is stated as:

- overcoming discrimination towards women and girls;
- that the diversity of women in the ACT community should be reflected across the range of decision making bodies;
- that all women and girls should have access to a range of opportunities to develop skills and to undertake leadership roles; and
- that women specific strategies, including ones that cater for the diverse groups of women and girls in the ACT, are often essential.

It is reassuring to see the progress already made in the numbers of women who were ACT Government Board members. But the ACT Women's Plan needs to recognise and encourage the inclusion of the diverse groups of ACT women in the current indicators and measurements for this theme. While ACT women overall are under-represented on advisory boards and committees, and in leadership positions, the diversity of the women represented is not measured or reported on in the Plan.

Without measuring and understanding whether there is improved access for the diverse range of women in decision making roles and senior management positions, the barriers to the representation of women from diverse or vulnerable groups will not be addressed.

For example, the Women's Centre for Health Matters has found in its consultations with CALD women that because there are very few CALD women in senior levels/decision making roles, this has led to a lack of CALD women as

role models, and CALD issues are then not seen as being on the agenda at senior levels in the ACT public service.

The Plan needs to recognise that progress on this theme should not just focus on 'mainstream' women being on Boards, but also the need to provide support and prepare a wider and more representative sample of women to do so in the future.

High profile and public targets would make a longer term difference that would complement the general aim to get the total number of women increased on Boards and in senior positions, and would help identify what systemic issues need to be addressed and how best to support women from diverse backgrounds.

Health and wellbeing

The Plan identifies the importance of having appropriate health services that are accessible to all women at all stages of their lifecycle.

Currently all women in the ACT do not have equal access to health and wellbeing services. Our research has found that women are the primary seekers of health care and health and well-being information, not only for themselves, but for their children and other family members. Despite this, ACT women face significant challenges as they try to manage their own and their family's health.

Women in the ACT are confronted by a number of barriers in acting on their health and wellbeing issues. The systemic barriers that prevent women from dealing with these issues are affordability of treatment, long waiting lists for appointments and difficulties with transport.

WCHM has just completed a survey of approximately 650 ACT women which aimed at *developing a better understanding of the ways in which (different groups of) women prefer to access health and wellbeing information*. The preliminary results reinforce the previous findings from research:

- the 3 most important factors for all women in accessing health information were availability (62.3%), accessibility/quality of information (both 54.4%);
- 45.2% of women said that they experience significant barriers in accessing the health and wellbeing information they require;
- 70% of women said they experienced barriers in accessing a GP in the ACT; and
- The most significant barriers in accessing a GP were:
 - Long waiting lists for an appointment (51.5%)
 - Cost (41.4%) and not being able to find a bulk billing GP (20.1%)
 - No new patients being taken by GPs (20.5%).

WCHM is concerned about women in the ACT, particularly those who have low-incomes or who are socially isolated, who may be forgoing essential medical care because they are unable to access a GP who meets their needs due to these barriers.

Consultations with women in the ACT also show that access and service pathways within the ACT Health system are not clear to many marginalised and isolated women. The reasons for this included:

- being unable to understand written information because of language and/or literacy reasons
- lack of support people to assist women in negotiating the system if they do not understand it
- the lack of suitable interpreters for women who need information in their prime language in order to understand the care that they are receiving or being recommended (this may include Deaf women)

From our research and consultations WCHM has identified that the elements of an accessible health system for women must include:

- access to appropriate, affordable and available health and wellbeing services
- pathways of care that are easy to navigate including access to information in preferred formats, a workforce that empathises with women who do not understand the health system and services provided, and access to assistance in navigating the pathways
- the provision of gender and culturally sensitive information on health and wellbeing
- the use of innovative models for reaching the most marginalised women, such as outreach and through-care models of service.

The current measure of success in this theme (**women's satisfaction with health and hospital services increased**) does not seem a relevant indicator and we wonder if it is sufficient to ensure that we can measure positive improved outcomes for access for all ACT women, and to ensure that the health system is being more responsive to ACT women and to those groups of women most at risk.

Satisfaction does not measure improved access or the quality or appropriateness of the access, and it does not take into account key issues that would seem important in ensuring the ACT'S response is achieving more accessible services, including measuring improvements in access for those women most at risk.

In addition an area for action that needs addressing and should be considered to complement the current area of action of *accessible services* is *increasing ACT women's access to gender-sensitive health and wellbeing information* – our recent survey shows that **45.2%** of women surveyed experience significant

barriers in accessing the health and wellbeing information they require in the ACT.

Safe Inclusive Communities

WCHM is satisfied that the current Plan clearly acknowledges that violence against women is unacceptable and a burden on the entire community, however WCHM would also like the ACT Women's Plan to acknowledge that role that men play in addressing violence against women. WCHM suggest that an additional point be made in the Plan that recognises that addressing and ending violence against women in a community responsibility and that men too have a large and important role to play in this.

WCHM would also like to see linkages made between this area of the Plan and the Australian Government's National Plan to End Violence Against Women.

WCHM feel that while the current indicators of success in this part of the Plan are sound, they are not totally sufficient to achieve the Plan's stated goals. The Plan's indicators within this area need to focus also on improvements in the attitudes of men and the community overall.

WCHM would like to see the inclusion of some of the following indicators:

- a) An indicator of the attitudes of ACT men towards violence against women (e.g. ACT men's acceptance/tolerance of violence against women is reduced?)
- b) An indicator of the number of ACT schools/school students receiving education targeted at violence prevention

Conclusion

In conclusion, this submission aimed to highlight some issues from the perspective of the more diverse groups of women of the ACT, and their feedback to WCHM around the themes of health and wellbeing, representation and safe inclusive communities. WCHM looks forward to the development of the new ACT Women's Plan, and contributing to further improving to the status of all women and girls in the ACT