



MYTHS

**20 years of ACT
Council of Social
Service work on
poverty**



www.actcoss.org.au

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and their ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes community-based service providers in the social welfare area, community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Contact details

Phone: 02 6202 7200
Address: Weston Community Hub, 1/6 Gritten St, Weston ACT 2611
Email: actcoss@actcoss.org.au
Web: actcoss.org.au

November 2019

ISBN 978-1-876632-76-2 (printed version)
ISBN 978-1-876632-77-9 (PDF version)
ISBN 978-1-876632-78-6 (text only Word docx version)

© Copyright ACT Council of Social Service Incorporated
This publication is copyright, apart from use by those agencies for which it has been produced. Non-profit associations and groups have permission to reproduce parts of this publication as long as the original meaning is retained and proper credit is given to the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS). All other individuals and agencies seeking to reproduce material from this publication should obtain the permission of the CEO of ACTCOSS.

Publication of this document has been supported by:



Contents

Introduction	4
Preface	5
1999 - 2003	6
Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	8
2004 - 2007	9
Narrabundah Long Stay Caravan Park	11
2008 - 2012	12
Climate Change and Poverty	14
2014 - Now	15
Raise the Rate	17
Conclusion	18

20 years of ACT Council of Social Service work on poverty

This publication marks the 20th anniversary of data collection by the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) on poverty in Canberra.

It comes at a time when our national and local focus on poverty is drawn into sharp relief, and we work to highlight the failure of the income support system to keep pace with changing costs of living, the labour market and the economy.

Looking back, ACTCOSS's advocacy has shifted from the need to create a basic understanding that people in Canberra experience financial hardship, to understanding poverty through the lenses of social exclusion and entrenched disadvantage. The enduring picture is that poverty is isolating. It is linked to stigma and misconceptions of Canberra as a place of universal privilege.

Our poverty work has consistently focused on food security and housing affordability. Transport and impacts of climate change have emerged as drivers of financial hardship over the past decades, and growth in the number of people who are described as "working poor" has been visible over the past nine years. More recently, we have come to better understand the impacts of trauma on risks of poverty.

ACTCOSS's advocacy has involved thousands of conversations with public officials, Members of the Legislative Assembly, Ministers, and community allies and champions. Media coverage of our research and advocacy messages has been crucial to achieving change, but effective advocacy also occurs outside the public gaze.

A commitment to the social and economic components of human rights has guided our framing of the elimination of poverty by government and the market. Our understanding of poverty in terms of discrimination, exclusion and stigma reflects this human rights-based approach.

This retrospective is a tribute to the Presidents, governing

body members, Executive Directors, staff, members and academic partners who committed to change the narrative on poverty over two decades. We have been frustrated about needing to prove what we already knew about life in Canberra. But we have been sustained by our shared commitment to improving the lives of people constrained by poverty.

This report shows how ACTCOSS has spoken up about the uncomfortable reality of people sleeping rough in our extreme climate; families juggling impossible choices with household budgets that don't cover essential needs; older women finding themselves in precarious housing and homelessness after a lifetime of unpaid care work; and young people, people with disabilities, refugees and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Canberrans facing poverty traps constructed from exclusion, discrimination and a fraying safety net.

Our focus has lasted multiple election cycles, changes in policy fashions and dozens of different ministers and public officials. We have embraced the role of leading the ACT community sector's work on understanding the causes, consequences and prevention of poverty.

We have come far in shaping the conversation, asserting the primacy of lived experience testimony and shattering assumptions about who experiences hardship. We have seen progress on policies, investments, the practices of government and the private sector and interventions to support low-income households with the costs of living in Canberra. We are starkly aware of the ongoing need to work on eliminating poverty. We hope this retrospective affirms the valuable work that has been done and ignites in all of us a passion to continue to lead positive social change, building on a legacy which all ACTCOSS Members can be proud of.

Susan Helyar

Chief Executive Officer
November 2019



Susan Helyar

"We, as staff of ACTCOSS, see ourselves as stewards of a social justice agenda for the people of the ACT. Whoever is in the staff team, or our governing body, we retain that stewardship role, take it seriously, and our members and the community expect us to do that."

Susan Helyar

ACTCOSS's history shows we have been working to shatter the prevailing myth of Canberra as a uniformly affluent city. Early on, there was a need to expose the true extent of poverty in Canberra.

ACTCOSS was a strong advocate for self-government as the way to get leaders that might better understand the true nature of life in Canberra.

"ACTCOSS has always been passionate about having a debate and conversation about poverty in the ACT, particularly as our community often appears to be well resourced and middle income, of course we know through our work that this is not the case."

Cathi Moore (President 1997-2000), 2019

1975

ACTCOSS sits on the secretariat of ACT Shelter.

Late 70s

ACTCOSS supports establishment of the Tenants' Advice Service.

June 1983

ACTCOSS's Self-Government Task Force established to look at the welfare argument for self-government.

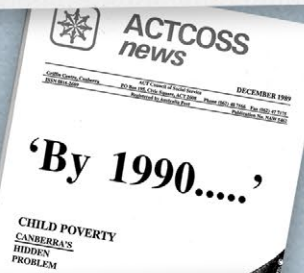
"The pure image of Canberra as a non-segregated city of egalitarianism and fairness, of affluence and opportunity for all, is essentially a myth... Whilst the Federal Government holds to the erroneous image of the Territory as universally affluent, it is not likely to commit additional resources to funding the non-government sector, the services required to redress the injustices of those disadvantaged in our community."

1985, ACTCOSS News

For ACTCOSS, self-government would connect decision makers to our community. It provided an opportunity for direct advocacy on persistent poverty and inequality. ACTCOSS had already made some significant achievements on poverty and inequality, but advocacy for funding solutions and services for people experiencing poverty was constrained by federal control.

1983

ACTCOSS participated in the picket line at Havelock House.



1986

ACTCOSS's 'Let Them Eat Cake':

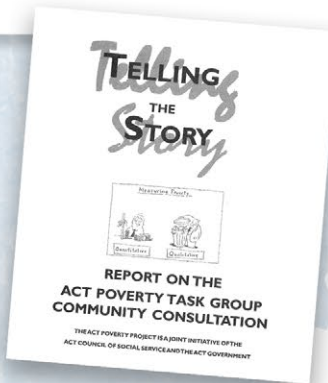
"There are no electoral representatives who have a legislative, political or fiscal base with which to make decisions in the best interests of the people in the ACT."

ACTCOSS could now advocate for policy changes the ACT Government could introduce to affect poverty and inequality. In 1993, ACTCOSS and Geoff Quayle Research prepared a report on the options available to the ACT Government: concessions; emergency relief; and health, education and social welfare services.

1989

ACT Legislative Assembly established. Within two weeks, we heard the first mention of poverty in the Assembly: Chief Minister Follett, 25 May 1989:

"An expression that has had some currency is the feminisation of poverty, meaning that if people are poor they are much more likely to be women, and that goes without saying... Our objective is to make the choice of whether women participate in the paid work force a real option, and to ensure that all women are properly respected and are indeed equal partners in social and economic terms in the workplace, the home and the community. I commend that philosophy to all in this Assembly."



"ACTCOSS has a long and proud record of being a strong voice for the powerless and vulnerable in our community... There is still much work to do, and ACTCOSS has amply demonstrated its ability to make valuable contributions through partnerships with governments of all political persuasions, provided there is a strong commitment to addressing the root causes of poverty in all its guises."

Ed Wensing (Committee Member 1997-1999), 2019

1999-2000

"There is an assumption that everyone in Canberra is well off and there is an expectation in Canberra that there are good services, everyone has a decent income and if you're not ok, on a really low income or experiencing disadvantage then you'll leave. In the sector we knew that wasn't true. In the sector we were seeing something quite different to that every single day and so we needed some objective research done."

Dan Stubbs (Director 2000-2003), 2019

In 1999, ACTCOSS started a joint initiative with the ACT Government, the Poverty Task Group. Rebecca Vassarotti was the Project Officer. This began a concerted effort to quantify the very real existence of poverty in Canberra and highlight its lived experience.

"It was a significant moment, when [the ACT] first acknowledged that there was disadvantage and we needed a collective response to deal with it."

Rebecca Vassarotti (Poverty Task Group Project Officer), 2019



Rebecca Vassarotti

The reports were equally a policy process and a community empowerment project in how they engaged Canberrans to illustrate the issue of poverty.

Poverty Task Group Report, 'Telling the Story': "The Task Group demonstrated a commitment to the principle of engagement, where processes are designed to ensure that people are provided with the 'opportunities, knowledge and skills to increase their capacity to determine their own future, and to participate in and affect the life of their community'."

"Poverty means feeling bad about yourself because you can't provide for your children."

'Telling the Story', Focus Group Participant

There were major quantitative findings:

- Poverty is an issue in the ACT. About 8.5% of ACT residents – 25,500 people – are in poverty
- The characteristics of poor Canberrans differ from those of poor Australians generally. Poor Canberrans are more likely to: receive government cash benefits; live in public housing; be part of sole parent or single person household; and be out of the labour force.

But also, its qualitative findings shattered the public discourse on life in the national capital, and we built a picture of a different Canberra. ACTCOSS surveyed 98 individuals and 14 organisations, meeting with 140 people through meetings, focus groups and interviews.

"Every day we see the effects of poverty: respiratory illness, scabies - all the effects of the issue of overcrowding."

'Telling the Story', Focus Group Participant

The Canberra Times

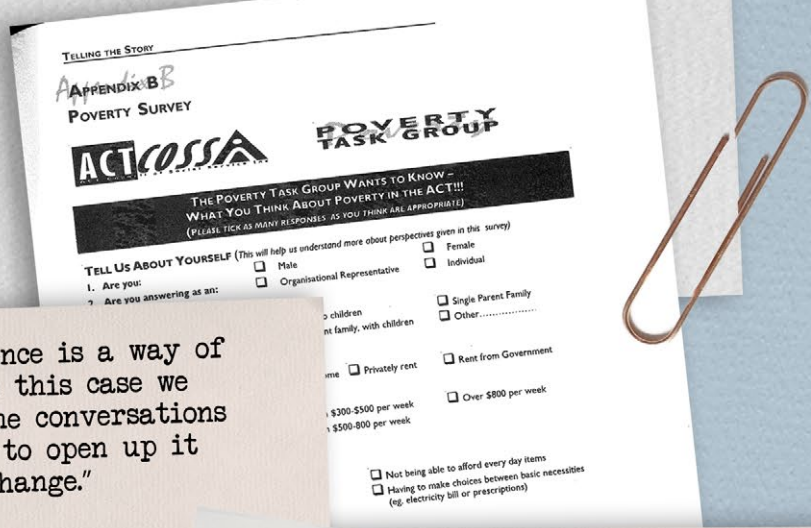
TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

POVERTY DOES EXIST IN THE LUCKY CITY

"CANBERRA: well-heeled one day, affluent the next. At least that's the image in the minds of most Australians and probably most Canberrans... If poverty is relative, then the plight of the poor in an otherwise affluent city is perhaps more sharply felt than it might be elsewhere. Poverty exists in Canberra, and last week the ACT Poverty Task Force issued a report, Telling the Story, a qualitative study of the experience of some of those who do not share in Canberra's abundance."

The Canberra Times, 2000

003



"I often feel this endless collection of evidence is a way of putting off good policy and programs but in this case we needed to use this to create space to have the conversations with policy and decision makers to get them to open up it before we could get to even forcing policy change."

Dan Stubbs (Director 2000-2003), 2019

2000: In response to the Poverty Task Group reports, Gary Humphries, then Chief Minister, stated the recommendations would be considered in the next Budget.

"[The project] set an important framework for the recognition of the issue of poverty and disadvantage in Canberra. Government received the final report with recommendations and provided a comprehensive plan to respond to these. Long standing mechanisms such as the Joint Community Government Reference Group were established as part of a joint commitment to working on this issue."

Rebecca Vassarotti (Poverty Task Group Project Officer), 2019

"I assume that Ms Carnell and Mr Humphries remember the poverty project that is in place in the ACT. We have a document which tells the story... The hidden nature of poverty in the ACT is one of the key features which came out of the poverty task group. Poverty is being hidden... When asked to respond to whether or not poverty was an issue in the ACT, respondents of the survey overwhelmingly agreed that it was a major issue, with 90 per cent indicating that poverty was a big issue in the ACT."

Ms Tucker, Hansard, 29 June 2000

2001: ACTCOSS Forum, 'Spotlight on Poverty': "The ACT Poverty Project advocated that issues relating to poverty be kept in the public spotlight... [it] highlighted the importance of creating and maintaining a strong public awareness of the issues relating to poverty in the ACT."

2001: The ACT Government issues a response to the Poverty Task Group report:

"The government will work in partnership with the community sector to address the issues raised in the task group's report... we will establish a joint government/community reference group to inform and oversight the implementation of the government's response. Ongoing research, monitoring and reporting on issues relating to poverty, based on the findings of the task group's research, will provide important information... well into the future."

Mr Smyth, on behalf of the Chief Minister, Legislative Assembly, 13 June 2001

2001: Poverty and social capital is a theme of the ACT Budget. It includes commitments to a homeless night shelter; improving disability housing and transport access; and funding to address the digital divide.

ACTCOSS's Budget response: "This is only the beginning in addressing the unmet need in the community with regards to these pressing issues."

2003: The new Stanhope Government begins work on an Economic White Paper. ACTCOSS urges them to use social indicators, and to undertake extensive data collection on unemployment and labour market disadvantage in the ACT.


CANBERRA PLAN: WHAT PLAN? SAYS ACTCOSS

"There are elements of the Social Plan goals and benchmarks in the Canberra Plan document, but overall it does not tackle the important issues, such as how conflicts between social, economic and spatial goals will be resolved."

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



"Of all the issues acknowledged as a basis for quitting at the time. We are of banging on Ara Creswell



ACT Churches' Council

SPOTLIGHT ON POVERTY FORUM
(Hosted by ACTCOSS & ACT Churches' Council)

"Add Your Wealth of Knowledge to the Alleviation of Poverty"
Your opportunity to influence how we meet the issue of poverty in the ACT.

CHAIR
Bishop Pat Power

Wednesday 24 April 2002
3:00 pm - 6:00 pm
Riley Hall, Pilgrim House
69 Northbourne Ave
Canberra City ACT

AGENDA

- Mr Bill Wood MLA (Minister for Urban Services and the Arts): ACT Government's recent response to poverty and goals for future work to reduce poverty in the ACT.
- Mr Donald Stubbs (ACTCOSS Director): ACT community/welfare agencies' response to poverty in the ACT since the release of the ACT Poverty Report.
- Poverty Alleviation Projects/Services: Showcasing.
- Where to from here? Broad-based discussion on opportunities awaiting the Community and Government sectors to alleviate the causes and effects of poverty in the ACT.

Registrations are essential as there are a limited number of places available. Please RSVP by Monday 22 April by email, flona@actcooss.org.au or fax, 6247 7175. For further details contact Fiona Price on 6248 7566 ext 233.

To No: (02) 6247 7175
To: ACTCOSS
Attn: Fiona Price
Date:

No. of pages: One
Name(s): _____
Organization: _____
Phone: _____
Fax: _____
Email: _____

Do you have any special requirements? _____

ACTCOSS 2004-05 Annual Report: "In principle human rights apply to all of us equally, yet the community sector fears that some of these basic rights are not being upheld for the most disadvantaged people that we work with."

In 2004, the ACT was the first jurisdiction in Australia to develop a Human Rights Act. ACTCOSS strongly supported this work, but when the Government released its draft Act in 2003, ACTCOSS was disappointed to see that it did not include economic, social or cultural rights. The Act came after several years of ACTCOSS's work on poverty, highlighting the social exclusion and mounting issues that arise from economic disadvantage.


2006: ACTCOSS launches the Housing is a Human Right Campaign with ACT Shelter, explicitly asserting housing as a human right, despite its exclusion from the Human Rights Act.

ACT Human Rights Commission report, 2014, 'Look Who's Talking': "As previous Reviews of the HR Act have shown, providing for the express recognition of rights is beneficial for a number of reasons, not least for its ability to improve legislative, policy and decision-making processes."

2011: Joint ACTCOSS, Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA), Advocacy for Inclusion, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT, ACT Mental Health Consumer Network, CARE Financial Counselling, and People with Disabilities ACT submission 'Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights - a good idea for the ACT?' recommends the inclusion of economic, social and cultural rights in the Act.

Spotlight On Poverty Forum

A joint initiative of ACTCOSS and the ACT Churches' Council



The Spotlight on Poverty forum has been organised in response to the work and key findings of the ACT Poverty Project. The ACT Poverty Project, implemented during 1999 and 2000, was a joint initiative of ACTCOSS and the ACT Government, and supported by the ACT Churches' Councils. The primary aim of this project was to inquire into, assess and report on the level, nature and impact of poverty in the ACT.

Research conducted by the ACT Poverty Project highlighted many important issues regarding poverty including the need for greater collaboration and information sharing between community agencies that offer services that seek to alleviate the effects of poverty. Alongside a number of recommendations, the ACT Poverty Project advocated that issues relating to poverty be kept in the public spotlight.

By April 2002 it will be just over one year since the release of the ACT Government's Response to the final reports of the ACT Poverty Task Group - a timely point to stop and reflect, to look back at the year that has been, and look forward to plan how we can work together to alleviate the effects of poverty in our community.

In accordance with the ACT Poverty Report findings, ACTCOSS and the ACT Churches' Council encourages you to attend the Spotlight on Poverty Forum. The forum is aimed at raising awareness and maintaining a public focus on issues relating to poverty in the ACT. The forum will discuss the ACT Government's and the ACT Community Sector's responses to poverty, showcase a number of community and government poverty alleviation projects/services, and discuss opportunities awaiting the Community and Government sectors to alleviate the causes and effects of poverty in the ACT.

Poverty means a variety of things to different people. Poverty is all encompassing and affects all parts of people's lives. Poverty means that individuals and households:

- experience a lack of personal safety and wellbeing;
- are unable to access resources; face inequity in accessing resources; and
- are unable to participate in their community. (ACT Poverty Task Group, Sharing the Benefits, p.24)

Download the ACT Poverty Task Group's reports at www.actcooss.org.au or contact the ACTCOSS office on ph 6248 7566 ext 221 to obtain copies.

"We used the [poverty reports' impact] as a basis for advocating for a social plan. It sat alongside other plans around infrastructure and other issues, and we used it as a basis to remind people why we need a bill of rights in the ACT."

Dan Stubbs (Director 2000-2003), 2019

The Canberra Times
TO SERVE THE
DROP IN
COULD
MANY
WITHOUT
PRESENT

"The high cost of Belconnen has risen in the market, turning to Un... Team leader... was just getting... have already... of juggling fo... anything at al... pushed over th

2004-2007

"We had gotten traction"

issues, the poverty work was being as really important, and it was the a bit of support which was exciting e had gotten traction. It takes years e about something to get the traction."

ell (Director 2004-2008), 2019

ACTCOSS was busy following the work of the Poverty Task Group and the efforts to build an accurate picture of poverty in Canberra.

Now there was a precedent for recognising poverty in the ACT; it had been documented and the media and Assembly had recognised it in the public dialogue. The Poverty Task Group had put forth a language for Canberra's poverty that would be used to push for reform in a host of areas. ACTCOSS focused on its asks.

2004: ACTCOSS and Consumer Law Centre of the ACT Submission to the ACT Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission Draft Decision on Investigation into Prices for Electricity Distribution Services in the ACT.

The Canberra Times TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

GAP GROWS BETWEEN ACT RICH AND POOR

"Canberrans may well be earning and spending more than their state and territory counterparts, but the latest figures on household incomes have also exposed a growing gap between the ACT's rich and poor"

The Canberra Times, 13 August 2005

berra Times HE NATIONAL CITY

N DONATIONS LEAVE CANBERRANS UT FOOD OR NTS

ost of petrol and rent in as been blamed for a huge number of needy families iting Care Kippax for help. Gordon Ramsay said life ng a lot tougher. 'People who been struggling in terms od, rent and electricity - l that increases - are being ne financial edge.'"

berra Times, 22 December 2005

2004: Forum, 'Who Gets to Go to Jail?' ACTCOSS and the Corrections Coalition host a forum discussing that people often go to jail for poverty-related reasons.

2004: Community Food Forum established.

2004: ACTCOSS delivers training for community organisations on fuel poverty, to increase awareness of utilities costs in consumer advocacy. This was at the time of the transition away from government owned utilities.

2006: Narrabundah Long Stay Caravan Park project.

2006: The Heart of the Community Campaign.

2006: Housing is a Human Right Campaign with ACT Shelter.

Housing and homelessness became significant poverty issues for ACTCOSS. In 2004, the ACT Government released its homelessness strategy, 'Breaking the Cycle'. It committed to a focus on a range of over represented and over-disadvantaged groups who experience homelessness. It strived for: integrated and effective service responses; client-focused services; appropriate housing options; and quality of service.

In ACTCOSS's Budget Submission to the 2006-07 ACT Budget, ACTCOSS asked the ACT Government to: meet its commitment to increased spending on public housing; deliver an integrated plan for housing and homelessness; and fund the implementation of 'Breaking the Cycle: the ACT Homelessness Strategy'.

But the 2006-07 Budget cut funding for homelessness services. \$1.4 million was cut from the operational costs of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). The ACT Government said this cut was made because it had been overmatching the Commonwealth contribution to SAAP. They said money wouldn't be cut from beds, and access to shelter wouldn't be impacted.

ACTCOSS and the media told a different story.

ACTCOSS 2006-07 BUDGET SNAPSHOT

"Homelessness services already turn away half the people who seek assistance. Cutting their funds by \$1m each year will further stress this sector and actually reduce options for homeless people"



"We had really gotten traction with the data, but the cuts came about surprisingly... homelessness funding would impact every other aspect of service delivery in the ACT... the picture of poverty was beginning to be understood, but that all services must be integrated and that if one part of the system fails, it has a flow on effect everywhere, that's the bit that the Government failed to understand. They didn't understand that if you pull out a piece of the puzzle, the entire thing will fall over... it got to a point not long after that where those services could no longer provide things like food. The impact was massive upon all the emergency service providers"

Ara Creswell (Director 2004-2008), 2019

The Canberra Times TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

ACTCOSS URGES GOVT TO SPEND SURPLUS ON HOMELESS

"ACT Council of Social Service director Ara Creswell said families had been sleeping rough as the affordable housing crisis overwhelmed homelessness services, which were already stretched. As winter arrived and sleeping outdoors became more difficult, some women in severe housing stress were returning to unsafe domestic situations because they had nowhere else to go"

The Canberra Times, 18 June 2007

ACTCOSS
The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for the non-profit, non-commercial, people living with disadvantage and low income in the Australian Capital Territory. ACTCOSS's major work areas focus on policy and advocacy and social development.

Through our policy and advocacy work, ACTCOSS promotes equitable social policy and empowers people living with poverty and disadvantage in the ACT to understand their own, and to advocate for a well-resourced and sustainable community sector.

Sector Development offers a range of services and support services to all ACT community sector organisations, including one-on-one consultation, training, development projects, network facilitation, a website tool kit and a small business library.

SCP
Social Law Community Projects Ltd is a Canberra-based not-for-profit organisation which undertakes community legal projects addressing social issues, including Rental Assistance and Family Assistance Law, Assistance Schemes, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 and Veterans' Entitlements Law in consultation with Advocates' Office in Sydney. Other current projects include Legal Clinics at Belconnen and Latham Park in Canberra. ACTCOSS is a significant partner in the delivery of the ACT Legal Aid service, providing the ACT Legal Aid All Australia publication, and the monthly Family Law Update. SCP's involvement in the campaign to save the Northbush Temperance Park site was the starting point for this book Our Park Our Community.

Supported by the ACT Government



Narrabundah Long Stay Caravan Park

"It was the project that should never have happened."

Ara Creswell (Director 2004-2008), 2019

May 2006: Residents of the Narrabundah Long Stay Park are handed eviction notices by new owners.

May 2006: The Narrabundah Long Stay Park Residents and Friends Action Group is formed, coordinated by the ACT Disability Aged Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS).

The Canberra Times
TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

ACTCOSS CRITICISES CARAVAN PARK EVICTION

"Ara Creswell, from ACTCOSS, says it is unfair. 'Those people believed that they had some kind of security for their future and now it looks like they don't... We're talking about people who really don't have the wealth and don't have the capacity to find other accommodation easily,' she said. Residents say they will fight the eviction."

The Canberra Times, 11 May 2006

June 2006: Residents and supporters march from the Legislative Assembly building through the Canberra Centre. Unions ACT Secretary, Peter Malone, and ACTCOSS Director, Ara Creswell, address the gathering in support of residents.

August 2006: The ACT Government agrees to acquire the park to prevent eviction of the residents.

2007: ACTCOSS and Softlaw Community Projects release 'Our Park, Our Community', a book of stories from the Narrabundah Long Stay Park



"The decision to sell the Park to a developer meant that the 200 residents were threatened with the loss of their community [and] their homes... In many ways it was a 'David and Goliath' struggle: a group of ordinary people taking on the might of the ACT Government and a well-heeled developer."

Bishop Pat Power (Poverty Task Group Chair), 2004

June 2006: Residents refuse an offer of 15-month delayed eviction.

The Canberra Times
TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

OFFER OF DELAYED EVICTION TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

"Residents' spokeswoman Pam Ashton said ... the offer to extend the lease would do little to ease the concerns of residents, many of whom had nowhere else to go."

The Canberra Times, 1 June 2006

"It was incredibly important, to make [the tenants] the face, and make it about real Canberrans who were going to be in a situation that should never have happened. It wasn't built into any strategy anywhere, it just happened. The board and staff were involved, and we worked out quickly that we needed to be vocal. If the advocacy doesn't come first, at some point you'll fail"

Ara Creswell (Director 2004-2008), 2019



2008-2012

"When we talked about poverty, in some ways it seemed so remote when the numbers showed how well so many Canberrans were doing... Working with NATSEM we were able to get the data and build a broader picture of what it meant to be without in a community that was predicated on being well-off. We also wanted to draw attention to the bigger picture of poverty - and public services not meeting the needs of those who needed them the most."

Roslyn Dundas
(Director 2009-2012), 2019



The Canberra Times
TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

GETTING AROUND TRANSPORT HITCHES

"There is an established link between lack of transport and unemployment, education drop-out and missing health appointments. The ACT Human Rights Act states 'everyone has the right to move freely within the ACT'. However, this right is not a reality for many in the ACT community, in particular those experiencing disadvantage, living on low incomes or with disabilities... debates have failed to recognise older people, those with disabilities, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and families on low incomes. These are the people most likely to experience social exclusion through lack of access to transport."

Roslyn Dundas (Director 2009-2012), 2009

A decade on from the work to get poverty on the map, ACTCOSS began honing its understanding of poverty. We began using new terms: disadvantage, and social inclusion and exclusion.

June 2011: ACTCOSS releases a factsheet on 'social inclusion': "The concept of social inclusion... broadens our understanding of disadvantage in the community beyond the single dimension of poverty to cover other factors - including process or systemic issues which impact on disadvantage, the denial of rights, and the lack of opportunity for participation in the various areas of modern life."

The development of this nuanced understanding continued.

2012: ACTCOSS releases 'You, Me, Everybody - Understanding Social Inclusion in the ACT and Australia': "Social exclusion is not related solely to fiscal poverty... the characteristics of social exclusion relate to people being unable to do what they seek to do... While income and resources have a significant influence on people's lives, poverty in life leading to social exclusion should be viewed in terms of 'poor living', rather than lack of or low income... [this] leads to a broader significance policy-wise, and encourages government to focus on programs and services which, traditionally, were not seen as significant in relation to an individual's social inclusion".

"More recently, the biggest issue to gain traction has been the focus on and application of social determinants of health, which were rising during this time. [The government] wasn't doing that as they are now, and a broader knowledge of the things that create disadvantage wasn't apparent all those years ago."

Chris Redmond President 2009-2011, 2019

This made way for a new work on specific services in Canberra that need to consider the needs of Canberrans experiencing disadvantage, not just the well-off majority.

It also set up a framework for a greater depth of data analysis to illustrate the issue. With this understanding of factors relating to poverty and disadvantage, ACTCOSS set out to chart a finely trained analysis of the experience of disadvantage in Canberra. In the Poverty Task Group reports, ACTCOSS had noted a need for a deeper data story about the ACT. ACTCOSS started developing this, building an ongoing partnership with The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to produce a series of reports that drew a more sophisticated picture of life in Canberra, continuing to question the myth of the affluent city.

2007: 'Characteristics of Low-Income ACT Households' (NATSEM and ACTCOSS): ACTCOSS finds its feet with data. This report dives into specific areas of Canberra, building upon the hidden poverty noted in the Poverty Task Group reports.

2009: 'Low income household expenditure' (NATSEM and ACTCOSS): This report discusses the struggles of living in an expensive city like Canberra. More than just charting income, it shows that the high costs of necessities like food, health care and education heighten disadvantage in Canberra. The proportion of income required to purchase the necessities is significant. "A buoyant local economy creates high living costs".

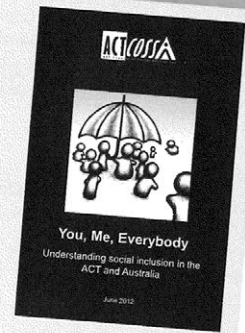
2010: 'Submission on the ACT Taxation Review': Empowered by the data built with NATSEM, ACTCOSS makes targeted recommendations in the areas of concessions, and land, payroll and gaming tax: "The ACT Government should use the mechanisms at its disposal to reduce levels of financial stress in the community."

2010: Submission to the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Board: 'Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage in the ACT': This report notes the importance of addressing economic and social causes of disadvantage. It illustrates the cycles of disadvantage experienced by population groups in the ACT: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; refugees; women; mental health consumers; young people; and people who experience intergenerational disadvantage.

You, Me, Everybody – Understanding Social Inclusion in Australia and the ACT

The terms 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' are relatively new to the public policy discourse in Australia. While the concepts are hard to define, they can bring a deeper level of understanding of the causes of disadvantage as more than poverty, and thus guide government policies in addressing these other factors.

You can find out more about social inclusion in the ACT by downloading the report *You, Me, Everybody* from our website: www.actcoss.org.au



Update • Issue 61 • Spring 2012

2011: The ACT Government develops a Targeted Assistance Strategy to address the growing need for people not eligible for concessions – the working poor – to access assistance from the ACT Government.

2012: 'ACT Cost of Living Report': This report highlights the financial stress associated with the cost of housing; utilities; food; transport; and health. It notes Canberra's "unequal spread of wealth". ACTCOSS continues to provide cost of living reports.

The Canberra Times

TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

POVERTY HITS TEN PERCENT OF ACT HOUSEHOLDS

"About 10 per cent of Canberran households are living in poverty as incomes fail to match rising costs of living in the nation's capital, a new report claims. The Cost of Living Report, compiled by the ACT Council of Social Service, found that the price of essentials such as utility services and food had increased beyond the means of some low- or fixed-income families in Canberra over the past five years."

8 October 2012

2012: ACT Government releases 'Detecting Disadvantage in the ACT', a report on the comparative analysis of the SEIFI and SEIFA indexes of relative socio-economic disadvantage in the ACT. Using the SEIFI, which describes the characteristics of individuals within a community, reflected the importance of uncovering the data on hidden poverty in the ACT: "This work will be a major contribution towards ensuring that adequate and effective services are provided to ACT residents by supporting the use of current, accurate, and meaningful data."

2013: 'Disadvantage in the ACT': "Canberra is a rich area, and most Canberrans are doing well... This means that those who cannot afford school uniforms for their children, or holidays, or new computers and iPads see themselves and their children suffer greater exclusion."

"There had been an historical attitude that there was no poverty in this prosperous town... The community sector knew that wasn't the reality... Without ACTCOSS's commitment to this work and its focus on poverty, the false notion of us all being privileged Canberrans would have continued to add further disadvantage to our fellow community members."

Di Lucas
(President 2000-2002), 2019

Climate Change and Poverty

Annual Report 2008-09: "The social, environmental and economic impacts of climate change are likely to impact disproportionately on low income households. The mechanisms and means adopted to reduce greenhouse gas emissions must be equitable and not result in further disadvantage to vulnerable people already feeling the effects of the financial crisis."

ACTCOSS's work on climate change has consistently noted that people experiencing poverty and disadvantage:

- Will experience the effects of climate change soonest, and most severely
- Must have their income and capacity for adaptation considered in climate change plans.

Advocacy on utilities and cost of living moved the organisation in this direction, but also the work on emergency management following the devastating 2003 fires.

2006: ACTCOSS Emergency Management Planning project: "It is a sad truth that those experiencing disadvantage generally experience greater disadvantage in an emergency."

"When we look back, we see asks in early ACTCOSS work that demonstrate a more ambitious expectation of Government. Is it that our expectations have become more specific and pragmatic, aligned with what the government has authority and appetite to deliver?"

Susan Helyar (Director 2013-2019), 2019

2010: Position Statement on Equity and Climate Change: "people who are most vulnerable to the effects of Climate Change also have fewer resources to deal with the challenges. There is a risk the cost of adaptation may move people who are presently just managing to a point of struggle."

2011: Factsheet on Equity and Climate Change. ACTCOSS continues to note that the ACT Government's actions on energy and climate change must be inclusive. But the response has progressed, as has ACT Government's recognition of the issue.

ACT Climate Change Strategy: "Government is also committed to a just transition to net zero emissions that supports low income households and the most vulnerable in our community and will work with industry to re-train affected workers and pursue opportunities for new, zero emissions industries."



The sector response now calls for a just transition. ACTCOSS actively suggests growth of the second-hand electric vehicle market and extending energy efficiency schemes to renters. We want leadership on climate change that makes green energy accessible.

ACT BUDGET NEEDS TO INVEST IN IMPROVED ENERGY EFFICIENCY TO PROTECT LOW AND MIDDLE INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

"This is the last day of a record breaking hot summer. Extremely cold weather is only a few months away. Now is the time for the ACT Government to take further action to reduce human induced climate change, mitigate the impacts of a more unstable and changing climate, and set up a just transition to a low emission future."

ACTCOSS media release, February 2019

2014 - NOW

"ACTCOSS does significant data work through the cost of living reports because our members value it. It provides quantitative analysis that helps them make sense of what they're seeing in growth and complexity of service demand. The Cost of Living reports dovetail the work of our members and the capacity of ACTCOSS to grow an evidence base for government and the private sector. We are well placed to do this work because the sector has specialised knowledge and a deep and continuing contact with people living with these challenges, every day."

Susan Helyar (Director 2013-19), 2019

The proliferation of ACTCOSS's data work in partnership with NATSEM in the preceding five years set ACTCOSS up to deliver a new level of detail when telling the poverty story. The ACT Government recognising the importance of looking into the data on the ACT differently, to highlight the 'hidden disadvantage' obscured by higher-than-average incomes, was a success.

"The poverty task force looked broadly at the issues... We now see poverty as something which is much more complex, and the complexity is around its interconnection with other areas of disadvantage."

Jenny Kitchin (President 2011-2015), 2019

Beyond building and growing the evidence base, ACTCOSS's cost of living reports investigated issues impacting disadvantage in the ACT. These reports provided clear evidence of the growth of financial hardship for people in work – especially those in low paid industries such as aged, disability and childcare, community services, hospitality and retail. This matched growing evidence from ACTCOSS members providing emergency relief services that demand was increasingly coming from people in employment.

The data story moves quickly, and the data used in the 2012 and 2013 NATSEM reports was becoming less relevant.

2015: 'ACT Cost of Living Report' and 'Analysis of the Changes of in the Cost of Housing in the ACT'.

2016: 'ACT Cost of Living Report, Transport'.

2017: 'Hidden Disadvantage in the ACT', commissioned by ACTCOSS, Anglicare NSW/ACT, Belconnen Community Service, Marymead, St Vincent de Paul Canberra/Goulburn, Woden Community Service, Uniting Care Kippax and YWCA Canberra.

2017: Chief Minister Barr quotes the 'Hidden Disadvantage in the ACT' findings at the Annual Hands Across Canberra lunch, adopting ACTCOSS's key message that looking at averages doesn't show the real picture of life in the capital.

2017: 'ACT Cost of Living Report' and 'ACT Cost of Living Report: Telecommunications'.

2018: 'ACT Cost of Living Report' and analysis of food security (released in 2019).

These reports presented a deeper analysis of the costs of essential items, leading to advocacy focusing not only on the ACT and Federal Governments. Reports now acknowledged the role of the private sector's role in responding to poverty – including in the provision of hardship arrangements in the delivery of essential services, improving access to credit and affordable housing.

2018: ACTCOSS and Australian Red Cross ACT produce a video series, 'Together Creating Pathways out of Poverty' for ACT Anti-Poverty Week, in which people told us what had created a pathway out of poverty for them and business people shared how they had built poverty alleviation into the fabric of their operations.

"The poverty reports gave us objective data, which continue to be updated... but one gap in our data framework is that it's hard to get satisfactory data on preventative expenditure... There's a budget cost to intervening early but we don't have the demonstrated savings..."

Peter Sutherland (Treasurer 1997-2001), 2019

Affordable housing continued to be a significant focus for advocacy by ACTCOSS.

The Canberra Times

TO SERVE THE NATIONAL CITY

SALT AND PEPPER PUBLIC HOUSING APPROACH MASKING DISADVANTAGE IN CANBERRA: REPORT

Many households are unable to keep a roof over their head, food on the table, heat their home, and keep a car on the road, as well as buy medicine when it is needed. The dynamic of having high average incomes that mask smaller pockets of poverty has been well-examined, but it seems the current approaches to disadvantage in Canberra have not actually addressed the problem. While the council has repeatedly called for a \$100 million fund to provide more affordable housing, a call the government has to date, ignored.

The Canberra Times, 17 October 2017

October 2018: The ACT Government announces an ACT Housing Strategy including \$100 million for renovations to improve quality and suitability of at least 1200 existing properties and to build at least 200 new public housing dwellings over five years.

2018: Chief Minister Barr announces the need for wellbeing indicators, to balance the economic indicators that inform government understanding of community prosperity and shape policy and investment.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING WIN FOR CANBERRA'

ACTCOSS welcomes the strategy which delivers on key expectations for significant investment, a focus on public housing, land supply measures and targets and work on renter protections.

ACTCOSS media release, 28 October 2018

On the ACT wellbeing indicators: "By any of the standard economic metrics, Canberra is doing very well... These indicators matter because a strong economy is fundamental to delivering a decent quality of life for Canberrans... But they're not the only things that matter. Canberra is more than an economy - it's a community where we aim for everyone to share in the benefits of a good life."

Chief Minister Andrew Barr, 3 May 2019

2019: ACTCOSS report, 'Food security, food assistance and the affordability of healthy food in Canberra' identifies systemic barriers to people in Canberra, featuring interviews with food assistance providers, suppliers and clients, and financial counsellors.

"In the ACT, here in the national capital, it is estimated that there are 8,000 kids living below the poverty line... We have the worst rental stress in the country... there is not one property, not one single property in the entire city, that is available for rent that is affordable... There are 27,000 people living in poverty... Is it any wonder that when you do not have any houses that are affordable, when you squeeze renters for all their worth, we have such a high rate of homelessness in the national capital?"

Alistair Coe (Leader of the ACT Opposition) Legislative Assembly, 6 June 2019

Raise the Rate

2017: A report from UNSW Social Policy Research Centre finds that Newstart and other allowances fall short of the most basic standard of living by between \$47 and \$126 a week. ACOSS launches the 'Raise the Rate' campaign, calling on the Government to raise the rate of Newstart and other allowances by \$75 a week.



"There are however some reasons why the impact [of poverty] is even greater now than in 1999. Housing affordability has become an increasingly concerning issue, and the ACT has seen high rates of homelessness and increasing numbers of people sleeping rough. The decline in the rate of income support such as Newstart over the last 25 years has made it virtually impossible to live a life of dignity when receiving these payments."

Rebecca Vassarotti
(Poverty Task Group Project Officer), 2019

"Quite a bit of work is determined by Federal Government mechanisms. As a territory there are things like Newstart where we have no control. What can we do as a local government? Or as a local community provider?"

Jenny Kitchin
(President 2011-2015), 2019

May 2018: ACTCOSS holds a briefing for MLAs and staff on the Raise the Rate campaign. One participant, a young woman on Newstart said: "I lived on Newstart in private rental... it was 50% of my income. I couldn't really tell my friends that I was struggling, so they would invite me to dinner and I would not eat for a few days so that I could afford to go out and actually maintain that social contact. Heating? Forget about it."

June 2018: In his ACT Budget speech, Chief Minister Andrew Barr calls on the Government to raise the rate: "At just \$273 a week — some \$400 less than the national minimum wage — the current rate of Newstart is too low to help people get back on their feet when they end up out of work... Instead, it simply traps them in disadvantage."

ACTCOSS Submission to the Commonwealth Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 1999: "The current system, based on historical developments has resulted in a mechanism which does not meet the needs of people in a modern and changing economy. The inability of the system to effectively respond to casual employment, changing family situations and technology interaction with the modern workplace means that many people are constrained in the opportunities available."

"When we see someone doing it tough, I think we are shifting from asking how they have failed to asking, how have we failed to correct the bad luck they have had?"

Robin Brown
(President 2003-2007), 2019

 **Rachel Stephen-Smith**
@RachelSS_MLA

Thank you to @ACTCOSS for today's insightful briefing on #RaisetheRate at @ACT_Assembly - especially to those who shared stories of lived experience and of what community services see every day in #Canberra

11:06 PM - 3 May 2018



Conclusion

"The clearest impact I have seen is that the ACT community today doesn't just know that poverty exists. We care that it does. And we want things changed for the better... [now] we have a Canberra community who understands that gross inequality is bad for everyone. ACTCOSS has played a key role in that change in public culture."

Simon Rosenberg (Board member 2009 - 2016), 2019

Looking back at twenty years of ACTCOSS's efforts to put poverty at the centre of public debate and political decision-making, several phases emerge.

We started with shifting the narrative from discussing 'poverty' in broad terms, to talking about 'disadvantage' in a way that identifies a range of intersecting issues that we must respond to, to achieve an inclusive city for all. Next, we moved to build a stronger quantitative evidence base for our social justice advocacy. And then we deepened our analysis, so it captured quantitative data across several domains. Added to this, we strengthened our collection and use of testimonies of people with direct experience of poverty. We highlighted both the public policy responses we wanted to see as well as the strength, tenacity and agency people bring to overcoming difficult circumstances.

As the public, media and Legislative Assembly recognition of poverty has progressed, ACTCOSS work has become more finely grained and targeted.

Alongside the changing definitions that uncover the multitude of issues that coalesce to create disadvantage, exclusion and stigma, ACTCOSS's cost of living work has charted the influence of changes in specific costs of essential goods and services in our city. As we look over the horizon to 2020, the need for analysis and advocacy on poverty is not going away.

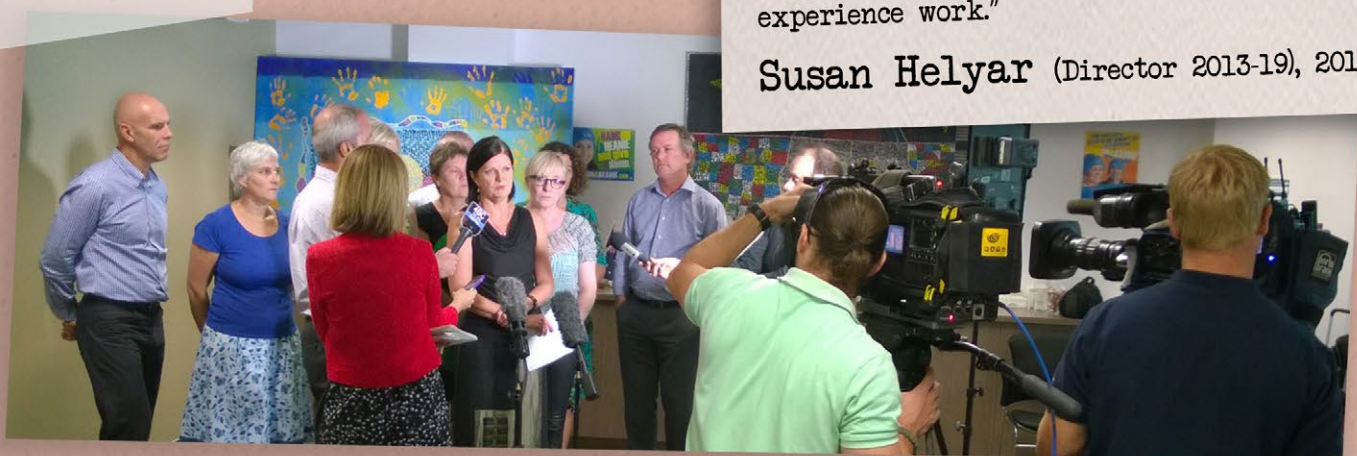
Housing continues to be a major cause of financial hardship. As advocacy on utilities and energy costs have become a

focus, ACTCOSS has extended our recommendations to the private sector. These will be increasingly important as ACTCOSS continues to advocate on the impact of climate change on people experiencing disadvantage. We have a growing awareness of the impact of exposure to violence and trauma as a risk factor for poverty. We are getting a sharper picture of the impact of insecure work and the high cost of post-school education on the growth of financial insecurity and wider experience of poverty. Food insecurity and hunger have always been an issue at the centre of ACTCOSS advocacy on poverty, but they are impacting on more households than ever before.

ACTCOSS's data analysis has matured on the issues and costs that influence disadvantage in the ACT. But there is a need to further develop our work on understanding the people who experience disadvantage. A more sophisticated intersectional analysis should be a priority for future poverty data analysis. We will also build on national work including work being done by ACOSS with the University of NSW.

"ACTCOSS has largely worked with existing data, which has limited our capacity to do a proper intersectional analysis. We have made some progress, for example our advocacy on a repeat of the SEIFI data led to it being produced again, which was a success. In the absence of that, it's hard to do the intersectional analysis. We know that there are groups in the ACT who are consistently overrepresented in the bottom 20%. This is also a natural expansion of our lived experience work."

Susan Helyar (Director 2013-19), 2019



"Mainly it was about exposing a whole lot of things that we knew to the broader ACT community. Things like it's expensive to live in Canberra so if you're on a low income you are doing it hard and possibly harder than a lot of other jurisdictions. People in Canberra know that at some level but don't think about how hard it would be if you're not earning a public service wage."

Dan Stubbs (Director 2000-2003), 2019

"A social justice agenda requires governments to focus on economic disadvantage, whatever the cause. From the earliest days of ACT self-government, disadvantage - and the resultant poverty in sections of our community - drove many initiatives for my government. A particular concern of mine was the susceptibility of women to poverty, so many programs (in education, training, employment, affordable childcare and housing, safety from violence) aimed to promote economic as well as social equality for women.

I congratulate ACTCOSS on your many years of advocacy on poverty. Progress has been made, but there is much still to do. Keep up your good work - your voice is vital to achieve better outcomes for the disadvantaged in our community".

Rosemary Follett

(First Chief Minister of the ACT, 1989 and 1991 - 1995), 2019

"Some of the things that might be obvious to us but need to be said like no one chooses poverty. Poverty happens to you and we heard story after story about what happens to you if some external thing like a health issue happens to you. And then they become isolated because they might be in a relationship that breaks up or existing networks break down because of a whole range of things to do with their life going badly so they become poor, isolated... We have to remind people that no one chooses this, no one chooses poverty. Things happen to you to make this happen."

Dan Stubbs

(Director 2000-2003), 2019

"Canberra is a community that ensures those facing social, health and economic challenges do not fall behind, and ACTCOSS has been a very strong advocate for our community since I've been in the Assembly.

One of the benefits of living in the ACT is our high levels of employment and higher than average income levels. However, we must recognise that there are people in our community that are experiencing poverty. The work of organisations represented by ACTCOSS has led to a more refined and true discussion about how the Government and the community sector can work together to better identify and support Canberrans experiencing poverty.

The ACT Government continues to recognise the role of peak bodies like ACTCOSS to provide systemic advocacy on behalf of the community sector, ensuring that Canberrans who are struggling can have a strong voice in our community".

Andrew Barr MLA Chief Minister, October 2019

"The annual Cost of Living reports reminds us of the importance of remaining vigilant and dedicated to assisting disadvantaged Canberrans. With almost 37,000 people, including 8,000 children, living in poverty there is much more to be done. I congratulate and thank all in the sector who work for a fairer and more just city."

Alistair Coe MLA

Leader of the Opposition, October 2019

"Since joining the Assembly in 2008, I have held a number of both cross bench and ministerial portfolios focused on people who are disadvantaged, vulnerable and living in poverty. ACTCOSS's analysis and advocacy on poverty has always been reliable, useful and informative. ACTCOSS's analysis provides both the big picture moral argument and the granular detail of issues in a way that both helps raise community awareness of poverty issues, and lays out to government and Assembly members the imperative to act and the pathway to do it. There is no doubt that ACTCOSS's work on poverty has shaped public debate in the ACT, and driven action to address it."

Shane Rattenbury MLA

ACT Greens Leader, October 2019

