

# Equity and inclusion for older Canberrans

## 2024 ACT Election Platform

Canberrans of all ages should be valued and able to reach their full potential, yet some older residents face barriers to social participation, difficulties accessing services, and ageism. Older Canberrans' wellbeing and rights need to be supported by age-friendly policies, services and infrastructure, with a particular focus on the older Canberrans most vulnerable to exclusion.

To ensure an inclusive and equitable city for older Canberrans, ACTCOSS calls on the incoming government to:

- increase social and affordable housing that meets the needs of older Canberrans
- invest in timely and affordable health and wellbeing services
- expand access to reliable and affordable transport for older Canberrans
- support equitable access to information and services, and bridge the divide for older Canberrans who are digitally excluded
- ensure inclusive and age-friendly public spaces, buildings and infrastructure
- strengthen access to legal assistance and supports for older people engaged with the justice system
- develop and fund a Mature Jobs Strategy
- invest in flexible models of respite for care recipients and their carers
- develop a fully resourced plan to prevent and respond to elder abuse
- support the expansion of community-led services for older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT.

Older Canberrans encompass a multiplicity of life experiences and circumstances, yet their diverse needs are not always reflected in government policy, services and infrastructure.

Older Canberrans have the highest rates of volunteering and caring in Australia, yet many face barriers to social participation, including transport inequities, difficulties accessing affordable healthcare, social isolation, and challenges navigating underfunded services.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Cost-of-living pressures and housing unaffordability pose challenges for some older Canberrans, particularly those on fixed incomes with few assets. Among older residents, there are differences in health status, financial security,

housing circumstances, and social connections. Experiences of ageism can also intersect with and compound other inequities and experiences of discrimination related to gender, Aboriginality, ethnicity, disability and sexuality.

Canberrans over the age of 65 comprise 14% of the Territory's population and are growing at a faster rate than younger cohorts, with the number aged over 65 expected to double by 2060.<sup>4,5</sup>

The ACT needs a proactive and equity-driven approach to support the immediate and long-term needs of this growing demographic, ensuring all older Canberrans can live with dignity and security – regardless of their background or circumstances.



# Policy priorities

## Increase access to secure and affordable housing that meets the diverse needs of older Canberrans

Insecure or marginal housing affects all generations. However, for older people with scarce resources, the risks can be compounded by limited income-earning ability, increasing frailty, illness, caring responsibilities, the need for in-home support, and age-based discrimination. These factors make it even harder to meet rising housing costs and age in place with dignity and security.

While the proportion of older Canberrans who own their home is higher than that for younger age cohorts, the proportion renting or retiring with a mortgage has been steadily increasing over the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> The picture is particularly grim for low-income renters in the private market. According to the Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot, there were no affordable rentals for single people or couples receiving the Age Pension in March 2024.<sup>7</sup> The ACT also has the highest rate (40.4%) of rental stress among households receiving the Age Pension, with the average weekly unit rent accounting for 81% of the full Age Pension for a single person in the ACT.<sup>8,9</sup>

Older women are the fastest growing cohort experiencing homelessness, with the number aged over 55 accessing homelessness services in the ACT increasing by 50% between 2013 and 2023.<sup>10</sup> This increase reflects the cumulative impact of financial disadvantage, as well as gendered caring responsibilities limiting career and income potential and superannuation.

In addition to more age-responsive social housing and homelessness services, there is an urgent need to expand and diversify the supply of affordable, age-appropriate housing options for older Canberrans. People shouldn't be pushed prematurely into residential aged care simply because the cost, quality or suitability of housing prevents them ageing at home.

Making more homes universally accessible will allow people to stay in their homes longer as they age. Additional options to facilitate ageing in place include shared equity, partial ownership and land-lease models that provide long-term tenure and lower up-front housing costs; working in partnership with not-for-profit organisations to develop innovative tenure models; and facilitating shared-living and intergenerational housing options.

Homesharing is a potential option to support ageing in place, and involves a home provider, often an older adult, sharing a spare room in their home with another person in exchange for money and/or service provision. This may be an affordable option for older people seeking help with everyday activities and companionship, however it requires supportive vetting, regulatory and legal arrangements to ensure the safety and security of older people and protection from elder abuse.

- Increase investment in social and affordable housing that meets the needs of older Canberrans on lower incomes, including appropriate housing for older women.
- Increase the accessibility of housing by ensuring all new residential properties meet or exceed the Universal Design standards agreed in the National Construction Code; develop minimum accessibility standards and accompanying incentives to support modifications of existing rental stock; and increase the supply of access-ready and age-appropriate public and community housing at the Universal Design Gold Level.
- Consider piloting a homeshare program for older people, accompanied by appropriate regulatory and legal arrangements.

## Increase investment in timely and affordable health and wellbeing services and supports for older Canberrans

Equitable, timely, and high-quality healthcare and social supports are vital for Canberrans' wellbeing and independence as they age. Yet too many older Canberrans struggle to access affordable and timely healthcare in the community, often ending up in hospital unnecessarily.

A comprehensive analysis of the health needs of Canberrans found older residents face significant gaps and lengthy wait times for community-based services, difficulties navigating complex services systems, and delayed diagnosis and care.<sup>11</sup> These issues are compounded by high out-of-pocket costs for basic healthcare, contributing to a vicious cycle where poverty, poor health outcomes and higher healthcare costs are mutually reinforcing.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

Disparities in health outcomes for older Canberrans are particularly pronounced in relation to dental care.<sup>11</sup> Many older Canberrans experience pain and discomfort, the onset of secondary health conditions and poor nutrition because they do not have access to affordable dental care. While some can access free or low-cost public dental services, wait times are often more than two years.

Severe service gaps also exist for older Canberrans with mental health issues, with “the availability, capacity, balance of care and diversity of services for this age group [...] lower than that for children and adolescents, and for the general adult population”, and with mental health services in the ACT skewed toward hospital and outpatient care and characterised by a “lack of social support services, such as those which provide individual support to engage with the community or support to access community services.”<sup>11,15</sup>

Social prescribing provides a model for better supporting the mental health and wellbeing of older Canberrans, while at the same time breaking down siloed service systems by connecting healthcare with community sector services and supports.<sup>16</sup> It involves healthcare services referring people to non-clinical, community-based services and activities to support health and wellbeing.

It is critical that the range of services that support health and wellbeing are responsive to the diversity of backgrounds and needs among older Canberrans, including the provision of culturally safe and responsive ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans, and centring community-led approaches and the vital role of community-controlled services.\*

- Support older people to manage their health and stay well by improving the accessibility, timeliness and quality of healthcare, through expanded community-based preventive health services, chronic disease management and timely early intervention, and by implementing a specialised emergency department care pathway for older people.
- Increase funding for public dental services, accompanied by strategies to grow the public dental workforce, to ensure older Canberrans have timely access to free and low-cost dental care.
- Implement a trial of a social prescribing, underpinned by a memorandum of understanding to support cross-agency collaboration and coordination between the ACT Community Services Directorate, ACT Health, Capital Health Network and community sector services.
- Increase investment in mental health and wellbeing services for older Canberrans and their carers, including specialist community-based mental health services that are coordinated with other health and social services, and fund the commitments set out in the ACT Government's [Re-envisioning Older Persons Mental Health and Wellbeing in the ACT Strategy 2022-2026](#).

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\* During consultations to inform this platform, a group of Aboriginal Elder women suggested a dedicated Elders waiting room be funded at the Winnunga Nimmityjah Health Centre to help minimise their exposure to potentially harmful infections and ensure a safer environment for them while they wait for medical care.

## **Expand access to a range of safe, reliable and affordable transport options for older Canberrans**

Accessible, reliable and affordable transport is essential for older residents to maintain their independence and wellbeing, participate in community life, and access essential services.<sup>17</sup> Efforts to support older people's mobility must encompass a range of transport options and make equity a primary consideration. Key to this is accessible and affordable public transport with more frequent bus services, in addition to accessible bus stops linked to safe, well-lit and connected pedestrian pathways. Non-digital ticketing alternatives should continue to be available in order to avoid exclusion, with no financial penalty for those purchasing a ticket outside of an app.

Community transport is another vital element of an accessible and inclusive transport system for older Canberrans, yet the availability of this service does not meet current community demand. Community transport provides a door-to-door service, offering trips for medical appointments, shopping, social events, and other vital activities for people who are socially isolated, face barriers to using public transport, and/or have disability or other complex needs. Further long-term investment in community transport is needed to meet demand and support the sustainability of providers, enabling them to renew vehicle stock and plan across multi-year timeframes.

Increasing the hours and coverage of the ACT's Flexible Bus Service would further improve the accessibility and reliability of transport options to older Canberrans, particularly those with mobility or other restrictions that prevent them accessing public transport. Currently, the Flexibus operates on Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 12pm, and 1pm to 1.30pm, and does not operate on weekends, public holidays or public service shutdown periods.

- Increase investment in community transport to meet demand across the ACT.
- Increase the hours and service areas of the Flexibus service.
- Invest in increasing the frequency and reliability of public transport, particularly in underserved areas and for routes that connect to key facilities such as health and community services and shopping centres, and with attention given to improving weekend and off-peak services.
- Ensure information about transport options and ticketing or booking services are offered in a range of accessible, user-friendly formats, and maintain alternative methods for booking services and accessing transport information for those who prefer not to use digital tools.

## **Provide equitable access to information and services, and bridge the divide for older Canberrans who are digitally excluded**

Access to information in a variety of formats is key to assisting older Canberrans to stay connected, informed and empowered to navigate services systems and supports. This includes the provision of face-to-face communications and engagement (including culturally appropriate materials and engagement) as alternatives to online systems. While many older people have embraced digital technology, others face challenges using digital communication tools, or prefer non-digital communication methods.

Older Canberrans must not be required to engage with digital technology in order to access essential information and services, yet call waiting times for government services (such as Access Canberra) are typically more than 30 minutes, and many simple procedures are no longer able to be undertaken at Access Canberra shopfronts. COTA ACT currently provides face-to-face support at their Hughes office on the southside of Canberra, but a northside service location is needed where seniors can access support to navigate online services and gain opportunities to empower and

upskill to help themselves in future. The reinstatement of age-friendly resources at Access Canberra shopfronts, and training to frontline staff to enhance their understanding of older Canberrans and carers needs, would also improve equitable access to information and government services.

- Establish a northside Seniors Hub to provide face-to-face access to information, services and support for older Canberrans.
- Ensure Access Canberra shopfronts and Libraries ACT staff are adequately resourced and supported to assist older Canberrans to apply for a Seniors Card, navigate public transport, and use online ACT Government information platforms.
- Prevent digital exclusion and support older Canberrans to remain connected and informed by maintaining non-digital alternatives for information on and access to all ACT government and government-funded services; reinstating paper-based and non-electronic payment methods for older Canberrans at Access Canberra service centers; and improving access to easy-to-understand information in a variety of formats and community languages.
- Support and enhance digital literacy programs for seniors to promote inclusivity and access.
- Provide training to frontline staff to improve understanding of older Canberrans and carers needs in the context of service delivery.

## **Ensure inclusive and age-friendly public spaces, buildings and infrastructure**

Canberra should aspire to be an age-friendly city, where public spaces, buildings, and infrastructure are designed to be inclusive, accessible, and welcoming for people of all ages and abilities.<sup>18</sup> To achieve this, ACTCOSS believes social planning must be centred in urban planning, development and urban infrastructure processes and decisions. All too often, urban planning processes and outcomes completely miss those most affected by planning decisions – including older Canberrans – leaving them least engaged in creating our city. Social planning involves assessing and addressing social, economic and environmental needs and issues in urban planning, policies, and development in order to build healthier, more equitable and vibrant communities.

To ensure a social planning lens is systemically applied and prioritised in urban planning and development processes, a dedicated and fully resourced social planning unit should be established within the ACT Government. To date, there have been several ACT Government inquiries and reviews focusing on the planning system, programs to support age-friendly suburbs and streets, and planning and infrastructure factors that contribute to social isolation. Establishing a social planning unit will enable these various elements and activity areas to be more effectively coordinated with the next Age-Friendly City Plan for Canberra, ensuring planning and decision-making processes contribute to social inclusion, accessibility, and quality of life for all ages.

Renewed efforts are also required to improve poorly maintained and inaccessible streets and infrastructure in the ACT.<sup>19</sup> To ensure age-friendly and inclusive public spaces, ongoing attention needs to be given to ample public seating, accessible public toilets, well-maintained pavements, well-lit streets, signage that is clear and visible, particularly for bus stops, and streets that feel safe for pedestrians and other road users.

- Establish a dedicated social planning unit to ensure built environments and infrastructure are designed to be accessible and inclusive, ensuring that planning and development processes systemically incorporate social inclusion and equity considerations, are consistent with the ACT's Age-Friendly City Plan, and informed by with the diverse needs and perspectives of Canberrans of all ages and abilities.

- Fund a rolling program of auditing and retrofitting existing public spaces, urban infrastructure and community facilities in the ACT to ensure they are age-friendly and disability accessible.
- Mandate and enforce requirements that all new public buildings, transport hubs and shopping centres adhere to universal design principles and age-friendly design standards.
- Accelerate programs to repair or replace cracked, uneven and narrow footpaths and trip hazard sites across the ACT.

## **Improve equity and strengthen human rights for older Canberrans in relation to legal services and the justice system**

Poor access to legal assistance means many older Canberrans do not receive equality before the law.<sup>20</sup> The recent *Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership* identified older people as one of the population groups with the highest level of unmet legal need. The ACT Government's own submission to this review identified older people as one of four cohorts experiencing particularly high and complex legal needs in the ACT.<sup>21</sup> Unequal access to legal services drives poverty and disadvantage for Canberrans unable to enforce their legal rights in family, criminal, social security, financial, housing, employment law and other matters.

Additional funding for legal assistance services that serve older Canberrans facing legal disadvantage is needed to support a multi-disciplinary approach that combines casework with outreach services, advocacy through in-house social workers, and the delivery of specialist community legal education programs.

Ageism remains pervasive across many domains of life within Australia, and research has established that ageism is deeply implicated in the marginalisation of older people from general human rights inclusion and protection. More work needs to be undertaken within the ACT to combat ageism and ensure existing anti-discrimination and human rights laws designed to protect the human rights of older Canberrans are being realised in practice.

Greater attention also needs to be given to addressing the specific needs of older Canberrans engaged with the criminal justice system. The population of older prisoners in Australia is growing faster than the population of younger prisoners, with the median age of prisoners in the ACT increasing at higher rate compared to any other jurisdiction.<sup>22</sup> Despite this, the lack of age-responsive service provision in the ACT's prison is making it increasingly difficult for older people to live and function with dignity in correctional settings.<sup>23</sup> In the 2019 Healthy Prisons Review of the ACT's Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), the ACT Inspector of Correctional Services recommended that ACT Correctional Services "develop a policy approach that articulates and responds to the needs of older detainees."<sup>24</sup> In the 2022 review of the AMC, the Inspector of Correctional Services noted the ongoing failure to act on this recommendation and emphasised the "need for universal design and an accessible environment is becoming more pressing with an ageing population and increasing intake of older detainees."<sup>24</sup>

- Improve access to justice for older people by expanding specialist legal assistance services for older people.
- Develop, appropriately resource, and implement a strategy and related policies to respond to the age-related needs of older prisoners, with a focus on improving healthcare, rehabilitative services, age-appropriate living conditions and post-release supports for older prisoners.

## **Develop a fully resourced plan to prevent and respond to elder abuse, encompassing law reform, expanded access to specialist services, training for frontline workers, and strengthened interagency collaboration and coordination**

All Canberrans should enjoy a life of dignity and safety as they age. But approximately one in six older Australians report they have experienced some form of abuse in the previous 12 months, with most of those harmed not seeking help or advice.<sup>25</sup> To prevent and respond to elder abuse, the ACT Government should adopt a coordinated and multifaceted approach that includes legal, social, educational and health measures. In addition to increasing funding to specialist financial counselling and legal assistance services, a spectrum of services should be funded to respond holistically and in a coordinated way to attend to the legal, health, mental health, housing and financial needs of those affected by elder abuse. To avoid a fragmented approach, considerations should be given to establishing a dedicated Elder Abuse Prevention and Response Unit within the ACT Government, tasked with coordinating efforts across health, social services, legal, financial counselling, housing, aged care, disability services, and law enforcement sectors.

It is also crucial responses to elder abuse take into account the diverse backgrounds and needs of older Canberrans. A recent review of state and territory responses to elder abuse found a gap in the ACT regarding the provision of elder abuse supports and program with an intersectional focus, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultural and linguistically diverse Canberrans.<sup>26</sup> Frontline workers who are in direct contact with older people should also be trained to identify and respond to the signs of elder abuse.

- Develop an elder abuse prevention strategy, supported by a dedicated Elder Abuse Prevention and Response Unit established within the ACT Government and tasked with coordinating efforts across sectors.
- Review and reform ACT guardianship and power of attorney laws to strengthen safeguarding provisions and better protect against elder abuse.
- Expand access to specialised services to prevent and respond to elder abuse, including financial and legal assistance, and ensuring a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach that addresses the health, mental health, legal and housing dimensions of elder abuse.
- Provide training on elder abuse identification and response for frontline workers who regularly engage with older adults.

## **Develop a Mature Age Jobs Strategy**

As Canberra's population ages, it is essential older adults who need or want to continue working have the opportunity to do so without facing ageism. Even if they wish to continue working, many older workers report barriers to employment and discrimination, with an estimated one in five older Australians reporting experiences of age discrimination.<sup>27</sup> The barriers to employment are heightened for some groups of older people, including women who are more likely to experience both ageism and caring responsibilities. This in turn contributes to increased financial insecurity as people age. A comprehensive approach is needed to overcome ageism in the workplace and ensure older Canberrans have the opportunity to work, should they choose to do so. This could include a focus on eliminating age discrimination, removing discriminatory legal provisions, support for retraining and career transitions, and encouraging flexible working conditions.

Laws that embed discrimination in the workplace also need to be reviewed, including Workers' Compensation laws which restrict workers' compensation payments and insurance cover to workers aged over 65 years.

- Develop a Mature Age Job Strategy aimed at supporting older Canberrans who want or need to work to remain or re-enter the workforce, with a focus on overcoming age discrimination and ensuring that mature workers can fully contribute to the ACT economy.
- Review provisions in the *Workers Compensation Act 1951 (ACT)* which prevent workers aged over 65 years from accessing workers' compensation payments and insurance cover.

## **Boost investment in flexible models of respite for care recipients and their carers to improve the health and quality of life for carers and the people for whom they care**

Greater access to respite services is essential to improve the health and quality of life for carers and the people for whom they care. Nearly half of primary carers in the ACT are aged over 55.<sup>28</sup> When asking Canberra's carers about barriers to social inclusion, access to respite care is always raised as the main barrier.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, access to respite is often identified by carers as what they need most to improve their wellbeing.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, Canberra's carers are the least likely in the country to access respite care, demonstrating the need to increase access to respite care in the ACT.<sup>29</sup> CarersACT further report many older carers have had a negative experience with traditional respite in the ACT, which has seen little change, flexibility, or innovation in its delivery over the years.

- Increase the availability and suitability of respite for care recipients and their carers by working in partnership with the community sector to implement flexible models of respite.

## **Support the expansion of Aboriginal community-controlled services and community-led approaches that respond holistically to the needs of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT**

Culturally safe and responsive services are needed to meet the unique and often complex needs of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT. The Aboriginal community-controlled sector is ideally positioned to provide tailored aged care and to promote connection between aged care, health and social services. Despite this, there is a noticeable gap in the provision of community-controlled and culturally safe services for the growing number of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT.

While the Commonwealth Government provides funding for services delivering the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program across Australia, there are no community-controlled services funded under this program in the ACT or surrounding region. Nor are there any community-controlled care finder services. A recent analysis by the Capital Health Network identified a number of barriers and gaps in relation to culturally safe aged care and navigation services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older peoples in the ACT. Existing aged care services were frequently experienced as culturally unsafe and unresponsive and poorly integrated with other social and health services.<sup>30</sup> Concerns regarding the lack of holistic, community-controlled in-home care, coupled with difficulties accessing and navigating services, were also raised during recent ACTCOSS consultations with older Aboriginal elder women.



- Engage with Aboriginal community-controlled services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people to support the expansion of Aboriginal community-controlled services and community-led approaches that respond holistically to the needs of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT.

*Authorised by Dr Devin Bowles on behalf of the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS)*

# End Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> ABS, [General Social Survey, 2020: Summary Results, Australia](#). ABS, 2021, accessed 17 September 2024.
- <sup>3</sup> ACT Government. [ACT Wellbeing data portal: levels of volunteering \(Online\)](#), 2024, accessed 16 September 2024.
- <sup>4</sup> ABS, [Population Projections, Australia](#), ABS, 2022, accessed 23 September 2024
- <sup>5</sup> ACT Government, [Older Canberrans - ACT Wellbeing Framework \(online\)](#), 2024, accessed 29 July 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> W Stone, M Reynolds, P Veeroja, E Power, F Perugia, A James, [Ageing in a housing crisis: older people's insecurity and homelessness in Australia](#), Swinburne University of Technology, 2023.
- <sup>7</sup> Anglicare Australia, [2024: Rental Affordability Snapshot](#), 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Housing assistance in Australia 2024, Financial assistance: Supplementary data tables: Commonwealth Rent Assistance \(CRA\)](#).
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- <sup>11</sup> Capital Health Network, [2021-2024 Needs Assessment](#), 2022.
- <sup>12</sup> National Seniors Australia, [Older People's Experiences of Healthcare Affordability and Accessibility](#), National Seniors Australia, 2023.
- <sup>13</sup> MM Islam, L Yen, JM Valderas, IS McRae, Out-of-pocket expenditure by Australian seniors with chronic disease: the effect of specific diseases and morbidity clusters, *BMC public health*, 2014 Dec 14:1-8.
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- <sup>18</sup> E Ravazzoli, GP Torricelli, Urban mobility and public space. A challenge for the sustainable livable city of the future, *The Journal of Public Space*, 2017,2(2):37-50.
- <sup>19</sup> King, R, ['For some Canberra is the ideal place to live, but others say more needs to be done to improve basic services and facilities'](#), *ABC News Online*, 9 September 2024, accessed 27 September 2024.
- <sup>20</sup> S Sage-Jacobson, Access to justice for older people in Australia, *Law in Context*, 2022, 33(2): 142–159.
- <sup>21</sup> W Mundy, [Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership: Final Report](#). Attorney-General's Department, Commonwealth of Australia, 2024.
- <sup>22</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Health and ageing of Australia's prisoners 2018](#), 2020.
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- <sup>27</sup> AIHW, [Older Australians](#), 2024, accessed 30 September.
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- <sup>30</sup> Capital Health Network, [CHN care finder supplementary needs assessment](#), 2024.