

Mental Health

Providing Effective Support for
Mental Health.

Canberra**liberals**

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Providing Effective Support for Mental Health

The Canberra Liberals will provide a decent standard of care for all of those who seek assistance with a mental health issue. Our top priorities are to

- **double the after-hours crisis staffing;**
- **increase staffing recruitment and retention;**
- **construct a specialist inpatient facility to support young people at Calvary Hospital;**
- **educate all students in ACT colleges about mental illness and strategies for resilience; and**
- **provide greater awareness among police and other emergency workers to help them recognise and sensitively deal with mental illness.**

The incidence of mental health illnesses is surprisingly high. According to a national survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost one in five Australian adults will experience a mental disorder at some time in their life.

Mental health problems affect the perceptions and behaviour of sufferers. Mental illness can damage relationships, lead to job loss and even impact on a person's ability to communicate or fully care for themselves. There are numerous types of mental illnesses including neurotic disorders, depression, bipolar disorders and schizophrenia. Some conditions can be aggravated by use of alcohol, drugs, or other psychoactive substances.

The Council of Australian Governments agreed in February 2006 to support major reform of Australia's mental health services. The reforms include early intervention and prevention strategies, improving access to services for those in need, and efforts to remove the stigma attached to mental illness through increasing community awareness and understanding.

The Canberra Liberals endorse this approach to responding to people who have mental health issues. Our community must have a model of service that allows early intervention and treatment in the community by the community. The commitment of a person to specialist mental health treatment facilities must be an option, but it should be a last resort.

The Stanhope Government Legacy

On coming to office in 2001, the Stanhope Government decided to make Mental Health ACT a discreet unit and, as a result, apportioned to that Unit certain administrative costs that had previously been recorded against other cost centres. This initially gave the impression that a significant increase in funding had been provided for dealing with mental health in the ACT. In reality, however, it was simply an administrative ploy.

The Stanhope Government, to their credit, subsequently apportioned extra funding to mental health. In 2001, mental health services received funding of around \$30.4 million and, in 2002, funding was of the order of \$35 million. Mental health services were funded at \$64.5 million in the 2008-09 budget – representing 7.2 per cent of the health budget.

The Stanhope Government has made much of the increases in funding for mental health since it has come to government. However the problem for those who suffer from mental illness, and for those who look after those people, is that the Government seems intent on operating in a 'crisis mode'. This approach is based on the premise that the Government can only look after you if you are really in need of help.

The Stanhope Government has been dragging its heels when it comes to providing enough beds for mental health inpatient cases. The ACT Government's own *Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2003-08* makes the following observation.

"[T]he current number of acute mental health inpatient beds is insufficient to meet the assessed needs of the ACT population. It is estimated that 81 beds are required. The current number of public and private acute mental health inpatient beds in the ACT is 70, of which only 64 have been available at times during the last year."

In the face of several studies which indicated the need for a new mental health unit at Canberra hospital, Labor has been playing delaying games.

- A report in 2003 on the Canberra Hospital Psychiatry Unit indicated that the needs of many patients were not met by the current design and recommended that the government consider "major reconstruction" of the facility (Review of the Design and Operation of the Psychiatry Services Unit, p. 24).
- In 2005 the Stanhope Government finally conceded it needed to build a new 65 bed Mental Health Precinct at Canberra Hospital (Corbell Media Release, 20/10/2005)
- Then in October 2007 the government indicated it was seeking tenders for a significantly downsized 40 bed unit, despite the Stanhope Government's earlier promise of a 65 bed facility (ABC online 18/10/2007).
- But after years of dithering the new unit is still not built.

The Stanhope Government is now claiming that it will have some of the much promised new mental health beds built by 2011 – that is, after the next election.

After three years of delay without any sod turned, there are serious doubts over the ability of this government to deliver their much promised mental health precinct.

Appropriate Care for Young People

Ideally, the community would like to keep all people who suffer from mental health issues out of mental health facilities. Unfortunately, there will be situations from time to time where the best treatment will only be able to be delivered in a specialist psychiatric services unit. This is a reality that cannot be avoided.

As a consequence, a mental health precinct needs to be established in the most effective location and the most conducive location to the restoration of full health. The Stanhope Government is finally at the point of delivering a specialist psychiatric services facility on the site of the Canberra Hospital.

A Canberra Liberal Government will construct a 20 bed inpatient mental health facility for young people on the campus of the Calvary Hospital. The unit will include a secure sub-division for the safety and care of the youngest clients and will incorporate allied health services to support the transition of patients to community care. The Stanhope Government has only provided funding for the forward design of this unit and has failed to fund actual construction in its 2008 budget. This government promised a 20 bed youth unit in 2005, but has now turned its back on that commitment.

The benefits of this precinct being on the Calvary campus include it being located in bushland – with the therapeutic value that this environment will provide to people who are recovering from mental health issues.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Capital – 20 bed Young Person's Unit	0	1500	6315	4000

Effective 24 After-Hours Support

It is quite clear that the current services offered by Mental Health ACT do not give Canberra an effective 24 hour a day, seven-day week, mental health service. This is unsatisfactory in the capital city of Australia.

An imperative in Canberra's community is to have the capacity to have fully trained specialists available to respond to mental health issues at any time. With the additional resources, the Canberra Liberals will ensure that the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (or CATT) has a more effective capacity to operate on a 24 hour, 7 day a week basis.

The current arrangement consists of a single nurse or psychologist between 11pm and 7am, covering the 1-800 phone number, plus assessment at the two hospital emergency departments (Canberra Hospital and Calvary). A second staff member is on-call to cover the second emergency department if needed. This arrangement, with only one staff member on duty at any one time, does not amount to a “team”.

A Canberra Liberal Government will increase funding to the Mental Health Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team, to ensure that there are two staff on duty at all times, plus a further two staff on-call at all times.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Expansion of the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team	61	245	252	260

In 2007-08, around 15% of mental health clients admitted to hospital waited more than eight hours from the time of commencement of treatment, to transfer to a ward. We do not think this is an acceptable standard of performance. Only the Canberra Liberals have a plan to improve over-night staffing levels to allow a reduction in the number of cases where distressed clients are forced to wait unacceptable times before getting appropriate treatment.

Community Education

Canberra already leads Australia in the education of young people about mental health. The non-profit organisation Mental Illness Education ACT is one provider of this kind of educational service. The organisation recruits people who have suffered mental illness and their carers, to run education sessions that help to improve understanding and reduce stigma.

The Canberra Liberals recognise the importance of reducing the stigma and being aware of the signs of the onset of any mental illness. If anyone appears to be experiencing mental health issues, we need to know the best way to approach these issues at the earliest possible point, before a mental health illness has become more serious.

As a community, we must continue to work hard to demystify mental illness, so that people who need help for a mental health issue are given that help at the earliest possible time.

A Canberra Liberal Government will provide improved support through the mental health education program, to ensure that all Year 11 and 12 students receive training in the development of strategies to enhance resilience to mental illness before they graduate from the ACT school system.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Mental Health Awareness Education for all ACT Year 11 and 12 students	41	83	85	88

Workforce Issues

As a community, we are indebted to those who work in the mental health field, for their commitment and their efforts.

One of the major dilemmas facing the mental health sector is the availability of sufficient numbers of qualified and trained staff. These staff are predominantly located in specialist mental health agencies.

Staff in other front-line organisations, such as the police, para-medics and even teachers, also require training in dealing with people with mental health issues. For instance, during 2007-08, ACT Policing responded to 528 cases involving a person with mental health issues.

A Canberra Liberal Government will provide increased funding to support police and other emergency workers in recognising mental illness, understanding the ACT mental health system and dealing appropriately with distressed individuals.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Additional Mental Health Training for Workers in Front-Line Roles	23	55	57	58

A Canberra Liberal Government will conduct an urgent review of staffing across the mental health sector. This review will establish those workforce categories in which there are – or are likely to be – shortages of appropriate skills. Strategies then will be developed to support retention and recruitment.

These recruitment and retention strategies will include bonded scholarships for those who chose to train for mental health work and scholarships or other financial incentives for those who return to the profession.

We will increase staffing numbers across the mental health sector to better deal with current and future demand.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Review of workforce and to identify areas for increased Community Provision and to consider funding adequacy.		200	100	
Five Bonded Study Scholarships		40	80	160
Sign-up Incentives for Returning Staff		60	60	60
Staffing Increase		240	494	764

Community Sector Funding

The approach of the Canberra Liberals to the provision of services in the community to people with mental health issues will be in line with world's best practice. As an integral component of our early intervention approach, we will identify areas where we can expand community-based programs.

A Canberra Liberal Government will seek to increase the share of mental health services delivered through the community sector. This will enable the effective treatment of people with mental health issues in the community by the community and, ideally, will mean that these people will not have to be admitted to specialist facilities of any kind.

We will review the needs of the mental health workforce and the level of community service provision, with a view to identifying areas where services can be opened to increased provision by the community sector. This review will be conducted in close cooperation with community providers, including community housing providers. The review will provide a basis for an updated assessment of total funding needs for mental health in the next eight years.

Over time we will aim to increase the proportion of funds for community programs towards 30 per cent of total mental health funding.

Suicide Prevention

The issue of suicide continues to plague our society. Current research suggests that one in 20 Australians will consider suicide as an option to resolve their problems. Each suicide intimately affects immediate family and close friends – the impact of a suicide can cause untold distress and suffering. There are also financial costs that arise from suicides. It has been estimated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), that the annual cost of suicides to Australia was almost \$3 billion in 2007.

A Canberra Liberal Government will invest \$200,000 in the development of a new suicide prevention strategy that will help identify specific at-risk groups and update the latest practices in areas such as prevention, counselling and awareness. The strategy will also provide a basis for designing future policy.

Priorities in the strategy will include building resilience in at-risk individuals, engaging them in supporting networks, de-stigmatising mental illness and giving people at risk a sense of purpose. We will also assess the adequacy of ongoing care and support for families and individuals who have suffered from loss.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Suicide Prevention Strategy		200		

The Future – Priority on prevention

The objective of the Canberra Liberals with respect to mental health matters is broadly twofold. First, the greatest possible focus will be put on education and community programs to prevent the incidence of mental health illnesses and to provide early treatment for people who appear to be experiencing mental health issues. There is no doubt that, in many instances, early treatment leads to a more favourable outcome and causes a much lower cost to the public health budget.

Research reported by the AIHW shows that around 11 per cent of visits to a General Practitioner (GP) involved the management of a psychological problem. Depression was the fourth most commonly managed problem in general practice (at 3.6 cases per 100 visits) and the second most frequently managed chronic problem, accounting for 7 per cent of total chronic problems. As well, over 80 per cent of contacts with GPs involving a diagnosis of depression were repeat attendances.

These figures highlight the important role that GPs play – as the key early point of contact – in dealing with people who are experiencing mental health issues and who seek appropriate advice and treatment.

Interestingly, again according to the AIHW, although mental health patients constituted 4.4 per cent of all hospitalisations, mental health-related hospitalisations accounted for more than 12 per cent of total patient days.

As a consequence, the second focus of a Canberra Liberal Government will be to provide the best standard of facilities and staff for situations where people have to be admitted to receive specialist treatment and services. These facilities need to be located in an appropriate setting that is most suitable for both treatment and recuperation from mental health issues.