



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS  
Mr Michael Petterson MLA (Chair), Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA (Deputy Chair)  
Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

### Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

**Submission Number: 27**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 23 June 2020**

# Submission

## Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

Marathon Health, as the lead agency of headspace Canberra, welcomes Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in ACT and thanks the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs' for the invitation to provide a submission. Improving the mental health and wellbeing of young people is the core focus of headspace Canberra and we believe this provides us with direct exposure to and experience of the mental health challenges facing young people in the ACT.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the broader youth sector services in the ACT, as well as young people themselves. We particularly thank our Consortium partners, Directions Health, Catholic Care, Matchworks, Woden Community Services, Barnardos, Marymead, the University of Canberra, ACT Health Services, who are invaluable in partnering with us to support the headspace model.

We also acknowledge the work of the Office of Mental Health and Wellbeing and the Review of Children and Young People in the ACT Report. This work is pivotal to the improvement of youth mental health and wellbeing. We feel that the report reflects the core of issues raised by young people locally and we look forward to supporting where possible the projects identified, including the development of a youth service navigation portal.

### Background

headspace Canberra was established in 2010 and provides free or low-cost services to young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health challenges. Services at headspace centre around four core streams; mental health, physical health, education and vocation support and alcohol and other drug support.

headspace Canberra is operated by Marathon Health, as lead agency under the headspace Model Integrity Framework and is supported by funding from the ACT PHN through the Australia Governments PHN program.

In 2018-19 financial year, headspace Canberra provided 5,795 occasions of services to 1,507 young people from across the ACT, of which:

- 3.1% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 14.% are young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- 31% identify as LGBTIQ.

headspace Canberra employs a team of core staff utilising Federal and ACT Government funding to deliver the headspace and OneSpace models. To expand service capacity and create a connected service for young people, headspace Canberra engages a number of in-kind partners, who offer their professional services on site and partnership with headspace staff. Services include drug and alcohol counselling, sexual health testing and employment services. headspace aims to break down silos, integrate services and draw on the local knowledge and expertise of our Consortium and service delivery partners to deliver youth-focused services across the four service streams.

In addition, headspace Canberra engage a number of Private Allied Health Practitioners, including psychologists and social workers, who see young people with a mental health care plan, utilising the Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS). We work actively to create a strong workforce pipeline and clinical supports for headspace Canberra. For example, we actively work with local higher education providers to support student placements, including Community Services and Youth Work students, psychology interns and Occupational Therapy and Social Work Students. Many of these students go on to employment in headspace Canberra.

We have an active Youth Reference Group who passionately volunteer their time to provide advice and guidance regarding all aspects of headspace services. The Community Engagement Officer works alongside the Youth Reference Group and Youth Ambassadors to promote the service, and to develop and deliver initiatives that reduce the stigma of mental health and to increase community awareness of mental health and support pathways.

## Mental health challenges and needs of young people in the ACT

At headspace, there is no “wrong door” with referrals pathways including self-referral, a referral from family, a support person or their General Practitioner. Most referrals present primarily due to (as identified by the young person based on data from the past 12 months):

- “Feeling sad and depressed” - 36.1%
- “Feeling anxious” - 31%
- “Stress” - 5.9%.

Of the young people that present to headspace Canberra, 62.6% report that this is their first instance of help-seeking for their mental health concerns. Consequently, 71% of young people who access headspace Canberra access Mental Health Support and 26% engaged in Assessment and Engagement.

At headspace, there is no “wrong door” – we strive to match our services to the needs of the young people looking for them. Some young people require more intensive therapy and over a longer period. headspace is sometimes criticised for not delivering solutions for young people with complex, ongoing or high needs – however the model has limitations in reaching the “missing middle”. We recognise that there are service gaps for young people where headspace (and early intervention) intersect with moderate to high needs. Our staff often find that for young people who fall outside of the headspace model of early intervention for young people experiencing mild to moderate mental health concerns, finding and accessing an appropriate service that can meet the young persons needs is difficult. Services that work with moderate to high care services experience lengthy waitlists or have specific entry criteria that the young person may not meet. In these situations, headspace staff will continue to have contact with the young person until an appropriate service or support is found. Going forward, **we need to ensure we do not overlook these people in the middle who need and deserve a supported pathway.**

The vocational status of young people aged 15 to 25 years who are or have accessed headspace Canberra in the past 12 months shows 31% were not undertaking any study and 41% were not engaged in employment. The increased need for vocational support due to mental health concerns is a national trend, with 26% of young people in headspace centres nationally unemployed or disengaged from education. Data shows those coming into headspace have a greater likelihood of being completely disengaged and requiring significant support to re-engage with the workplace or education.

With the impacts of COVID-19, we expect to see the unprecedented demand for integrated mental health and vocational support programs over the coming months. Currently headspace Canberra rely on in-kind services such as MatchWorks to provide vocational support to local young people. We believe that there is a great **need for greater investment in evidence-based programs embedded within headspace** such as the national Individual Placement and Support program that focuses on the individual needs of young people with mental illness who are seeking to enter, or remain in, education and/or employment.

## Ready access to mental health support and services by young people

Each year headspace Canberra receives more than 2,000 referrals for local young people seeking support and **over the past decade headspace Canberra has tracked a 200% increase in referrals for support.** headspace Canberra has a “no wrong door”, client-centred approach and all referrals are processed within two business days. Young people are offered a phone or in-person intake, where their needs are assessed and

they are matched with a service stream that best meets their needs. If the young person's needs would be best met by an alternative service, headspace staff work to connect the young person and their supports with that service.

Due to demand, young people and their supports often experience significant wait times to commence or access headspace Canberra services. Typically, the 10-session model, where young people access a Private Practitioner for support, operate at or beyond capacity. Other service streams, such as group work or the 1-3 session strength-based, solution focussed model experience greater throughput and thus have reduced wait times for access.

headspace Canberra staff work as best as they can to ensure that wait times are reasonable, and continue to connect with young people whilst they await support and if headspace services are at capacity we work with the young person to support them access another service or supports. This recognises that **early intervention and support is key to success when young people present with mental health concerns**. Lengthy waitlists are considered counterproductive to both the young person and the service and so the service continues to implement strategies, working within its resources to reduce wait-times.

headspace Canberra has been working proactively with Capital Health Network and headspace National to manage the demand for services. We **welcome the recent announcement of additional funding by the Australian Government to manage demand at headspace Canberra**. Whilst the details of this have not yet been released, we are pleased that this additional funding aims to increase headspace Canberra's capacity and reduce wait times for young people.

We also welcome the recent announcement of the addition of headspace Canberra South, which will undoubtedly provide a much needed and valuable service to young people, their family, friends and community in the south of Canberra. headspace Canberra notes however, that whilst the new centre will increase provision and accessibility in that region, it is unlikely to impact the demand on headspace Canberra. Our data shows that **less than 5% of current young people accessing headspace Canberra reside within the southern Canberra catchment**. The trend of increased demand, as gauged by referrals to headspace Canberra is likely to continue with population growth and shows that demand within the age demographic will expand significantly in the North Canberra region.

## Conclusion

The headspace model is highly successful in our experience. Outcomes data for headspace nationally shows that the mental health of more than 62% of young people improves as a result of headspace involvement. This increases to 68% if they attend five or six sessions. Awareness of the model is high, with more than three-quarters of young Australians recognising the organisation's brand and satisfaction ratings range 87% for centre-based supports.

The **key to the success of headspace centres is that they are embedded in its local community**. This is not a cookie cutter model that can be simply rolled out. We have a local consortium of community stakeholders and a youth reference group associated to direct and guide our operations locally. They are an integral part of service and program design to ensure we are genuinely connected to each community and delivering services that are responsive and flexible enough to meet the specific needs that community. Our dedicated Youth Reference Group, who passionately volunteer their time to provide advice and guidance regarding all aspects of headspace services, are also integral to the success of headspace Canberra.

We believe more focus must be on meeting the demand for **early intervention support**, meeting the needs of the **'missing middle'** and embedding programs and services that support young people with mental illness to **reengage with education and/or employment**.

We acknowledge the need for low to no cost services within the ACT and would welcome a review into the increase of MBS to support more young people to access low to no costs services.

headspace Canberra provide low to no cost services to young people who access a Private Allied Health Practitioner within the headspace service. Where a service is bulk billed, the provider claims only the relevant percentage of the MBS fee from Medicare Australia for the service, thus making the service free to the patient. If cost is not prohibitive the young person may pay a small co-payment. The MBS items for allied mental health providers to lead or contribute to care mental health are collectively referred to as the **Better Access to Mental Health Services items**. In order to continue to provide low to no cost services to young people, headspace Canberra would welcome a review of these items. An increase or indexation of these items would contribute to sustaining a private practice workforce and the ability to operate at low or no cost, in turn increasing access for young people to mental health services.

Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this important Inquiry. Effective investment in early intervention is crucial in the area of mental health. We hope this Inquiry will play a key role in improving mental health outcomes in the future for children and young people across the ACT.

Yours sincerely

Pip Northam  
Headspace Canberra, Centre Manager