



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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**SELECT COMMITTEE ON COST OF LIVING PRESSURES IN THE ACT**  
Mr Johnathan Davis MLA (Chair), Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Deputy Chair)  
Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

### Inquiry into Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT

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## Inquiry into the Cost of Living Pressure in the ACT

We really appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT. We thank the committee for extending their deadline for our submission.

### Who We Are

We represent a number of grassroots organisations that provide fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, non-perishable foods, toiletries and period and incontinence products through the Inner North pantries (Ainslie, Braddon and O'Connor) and two pantries we regularly partner with: Pam's Pantry and Dignity & Desire Women & Children's Pantry, which specialise in toys and craft and meeting community need around children and families. Our street pantries were established several years ago in response to community need, to help neighbours experiencing financial difficulty. The three Inner North Pantries can be accessed anonymously and are run and managed through the local community. The Ainslie pantry is founded through, and remains closely connected to, the Buy Nothing Ainslie group. Our community pantries are intentionally not registered as charities and operate independently.

### Inner North Pantries

We are secular, non-judgemental community and street pantries. We are accessible to, and inclusive of, everyone. We offer privacy, dignity and respect to help our local communities. We offer a vital service to neighbours who may struggle to access support for food for a multitude of reasons: including the barrier of shame, being ineligible for Foodbank assistance, feeling monitored or judged accessing services, being uncomfortable visiting supermarkets because of anxiety, and prohibitive fuel cost and limited public transport options to get to government-funded Foodbanks. We know that we reach members of the community that might not otherwise engage with other community services or organisations for various reasons (location, convenience, transportation barriers, religious connections, shame, negative former experiences of engaging with services for example). We are unable to quantify the numbers that access the pantries, but know we have high turnover of items.

The Inner North Pantries model community supporting community, and building connection to help our disadvantaged neighbours overcome isolation. Our pantries were founded by and for the community; loved, cared and managed for by the community.

### Pam's Pantry & Dignity & Desire Women's & Children's Pantry

Both Ngunnawal-based pantries have been running for several years and have seen an increase in those that are in need of help. They are seeing more people who have been previously supporting and donating to the pantry, now in need themselves. They are often approached to help families escaping domestic violence and to support grandparents that are trying to care for their grandchildren. These two pantries have been a source of constant support to the Inner North Pantries, sharing toiletry packs, fresh fruit and vegetables, nappies, and pet food. They often deliver supplies to us to ease the burden of travel on the Inner North pantry team. We could not keep our pantries as well-supplied as we do without their assistance. They have developed great partnerships with ARC, Roundabout Canberra and Canberra City Care, which benefits all of our pantries.

Dignity & Desire Women & Children's pantry is seeing up to 25 people a day.

## Street Pantry Experience

We are seeing intersecting poverty affect our pantry users: food and period poverty; people not able to cover medical costs, pet costs, their transportation costs. There are an increasing number of people living precariously from fortnight to fortnight. Many are one pay packet away from falling into homelessness. Their life is consumed by cost of living decisions. As one person connected with our Ainslie Pantry describes it:

*“Daily questions I face include: do I get new socks, or a bottle of milk for tea and porridge? Socks will have to wait. Next fortnight comes; do I get the socks or my cats med? I need new underwear, I’ll have to wait, electricity bill is due...but no rego. Though a pension discount is often \$150 for 3 month, let alone the petrol to run it and lord knows how safe my car is as I can’t even afford a service, so no knickers or milk, it’s rego that’s needed*

*I can’t access and pursue things of interest, example, I am (was) a very good musician, I can’t afford to get to band groups, I can’t support my hobbies. I can’t garden; the outlay cost, but soil and pots is too much a fortnight. I can’t grow my own veggies; veggie price is madness as it is. I can’t do activities like a movie or a dinner date unless the other person pays, so I am without anything fun.”*

We know we have visitors across a broad spectrum of need and that that need is increasing. We know that we have many that visit that are just surviving. We know that the cost of food to keep our pantries supplied has gone up. We are seeing people that fall between the gaps in services; one user is ‘not disabled enough’ for NDIS support, but rejected from services as they have a disability pension.

Food banks are not a solution for some people:

*“Most food banks are very hard to access, walking to them is hard enough, but then how to walk home a load of groceries is even harder. Fine if you are fit and able, but when the majority of items from a Food bank are white rice, white pasta, overly sugared preservative foods, and the lowest nutritional value you can buy, are all you can access, it takes a long term impact on health.”*

*“Food banks are hard to access there is judgement and the dignity it erodes, and the shame it creates, is so hard to manage.”*

We are a small part of the solution for a growing problem. We are seeing more people in need, people that are one pay packet away from homelessness, people who are making choices about travelling because they haven't got petrol, who may be deciding between whether their pay packet goes towards food or period products.

Quality of donations can be an issue; food that comes to Pam’s Pantry for distributing to the Inner North Pantries is often not fit for consuming. From recent deliveries - out of 20 crates, only 8 could be passed onto pantry visitors. This has meant that pantry volunteers are then responsible for managing the food waste. We try to arrange for spoilt food to be responsibly managed by kind-hearted volunteers baking cakes and banana bread with produce, and passing on to our community with chickens, and ultimately to home or community composting. This overwhelms and overloads volunteers and passes on an expense that should be covered by those generating the food waste. Food amounts are always varying and quality control very erratic. As community pantries we are reliant on good quality produce. We want donations to show care for those in need, we do not want to have out-of-date, opened, cleared-

out-pantry, otherwise spoilt food offerings. If we would not pass onto our friends, we do not pass onto the pantries.

## Support We Receive

We are so lucky to be supported by, and to collaborate between, all Inner North pantries, sharing donations between us. The Ainslie pantry originated from and has been embraced and nurtured by the Buy Nothing Ainslie group.

We are generously supported in time, care and donations by Pam's Pantry and Dignity & Desire Women's & Children's pantry who share fresh fruit and veg and bread on a weekly bases. Pam's Pantry passes on pet food from ARC and nappies and toiletry packs. Both pantries provide us with gifts for dates of celebration. We have bread donated from The Ainslie Bakehouse. We have donations from Share the Dignity, which run out between Dignity drives. We also find that we do not receive sustainable period items that we request. We run an online shop for Ainslie, hold fundraisers, and our team is constantly innovating on ways to raise money to secure regular funding. We've hit over 20,000 returned cans from can and bottle donations, through the ACT Government's container deposit scheme.

## Access to Period Products Especially Sustainable Period Products

We hear much anecdotal evidence of people who have to make choices between feeding their children and paying utilities, or dignified period management. We know of school students that are missing school, up to a week because they cannot afford period products and are managing with unsuitable alternatives like face washers or toilet paper.

Reusable items can be more empowering for those using them, and are definitely more cost effective in the medium and long-term, as well as being better environmentally. This aligns strongly with the ACT government's progressive leadership on waste reduction and sustainability.

A great initiative in Canvey Island in the UK is offering free sustainable period products at Foodbanks, alongside training and education on how to use and care for sustainable items:

<https://www.essex.gov.uk/news/canvey-island-joins-sustainable-period-movement>

It would be ground-breaking for period pants, cups and reusable pads to be offered to all those interested at primary/high school level. Offering sustainable options gives students control and is more empowering than needing to access single use items regularly. In the long term it is cheaper to fund sustainable products as they last longer and there is significantly less waste to landfill.

## What the Cost of Living Crisis Looks Like

*"I'm currently homeless, the two minute noodles were a lifesaver."*

*"When the term cost of living is used, I think more of, what will it cost me to live? What do I have to do to live and meet my basic needs, of food, shelter and clothing? Cost of living has meant I have not seen a dentist in over 12 years."*

*"My income from Centrelink is my only income, a disability support pension that is currently \$936 a fortnight. By the time rent is taken, bills are paid, meds are collected, I literally have nothing left for food. I have a cat - he is my world. He has meds and vet bills that are epic and though the vets are brilliant at trying their best to help, the amount of times I have had to*

*seriously contemplate having him euthanized because I can't pay his vet bill is utterly painful to explain. Friends have paid his bills for me because they know his value is not a pet he is my family. My only family. He is my only reason to live and the amount of times I wanted to die and he is all that has kept me here because he needs me, is beyond count."*

*"I often have to weigh up a 1.5 hour bus trip twice a day to get to class for 4 hours to avoid the cost of uni parking; and a uni parking pass, the cost of parking there is astounding and there is no support on that front to get assistance or a reduction on cost. I miss so many classes because I can't pay rego on my car, I can't catch a bus on days I am not good around people because I have hard day from PTSD."*

*"I'm just looking for some tampons and pads to get me through the sodding weekend because pay is Tuesday and there are no pantries near me open until Monday. And I'm at uni Monday and well of course the UC don't supply support items in an easy to access mode."*

### Our Key Challenges:

- Meeting the increasing demand, which continually outstrips supply
- Inconsistent assistance from organisations that we are referred to for assistance
- Food shop costs have increased, providing fewer items for our dollar
- Pressures on volunteers to collect donations and to manage pantries
- As non-registered pantries we cannot access food from many sources - Food bank, Oz Harvest - and it is hard to apply for grants or awards. We are not in a position to register as charities and fill the space in communities that is neighbours supporting each other.
- Food donations that are not fit to consume; supermarket food waste problem becomes our problem
- Team of hardworking volunteers - managing in between busy lives

### Ways to Help Street Pantries & Ease Cost of Living Crisis:

- Raise the living wage
- Address systemic issues: homelessness, affordable housing, job insecurity
- Regular donations to street pantries - food/money
- Donations of food coming up to use before dates (and removing best before date labelling) – would also assist with reducing food waste
- Supermarkets to pay for more people to manage their food waste and distribution to make sure it is properly sorted and checked before coming to the pantries so that it is good quality. This is a burden that should not be transferred to unpaid volunteers. Supermarkets should be composting the food that cannot be consumed.
- Food drives at school/work/events
- Buy from the Ainslie Community Pantry Online Shop
- Donate container deposit redeemables – personal/workplace/community organisation/event
- Subsidise and donate sustainable period products
- Provide Who Gives A Crap subscription for the pantries
- Fuel Voucher Cards
- Food banks open on weekends and in accessible locations

Amy Jowers Blain, Ainslie Community Pantry  
Kate Waterford, Braddon Community Pantry  
Christina Schwarz, O'Connor Community Pantry  
Lee, Dignity and Desire Women and Children's Pantry  
Pam Zielke, Pam's Pantry

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