

2019

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Therapeutic Responses to Children and Young People with
Complex High-Level Needs, including Substance Use Disorders**

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Children, Youth and Families**

The ACT Government is committed to providing effective therapeutic responses to children and young people with complex, high-level needs, including substance use disorders. Our focus is ensuring that young people at risk in our community have access to best-practice, evidence-based services and support.

This statement responds to Mrs Kikkert's motion of 31 July 2019 asking the ACT Government consult with experts about whether a compulsory, therapeutic drug treatment for young people with complex substance use disorders should be implemented in the ACT and that consideration should be given to whether the model of therapeutic care based on Magistrate Bowles' research and recommendations is appropriate for the ACT.

Magistrate Bowles proposes some young people with complex histories of trauma, abuse, neglect and mental illness, who have tried voluntary options without success, may need intensive inpatient treatment in a secure facility to end their addiction and connect them with health services and education.

As a human rights jurisdiction, the ACT Government's position is that compulsory therapeutic drug treatment models are not appropriate for young people in the ACT. Detaining a child or young person should be a measure of last resort.

Compulsory residential treatment options also risk separating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people with complex issues from their families.

The ACT Government knows that culture and connection to country play a vital role in healing, and this must be taken into account in assessing any proposal that risks institutionalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who are already over-represented in statutory systems.

Therapeutic services system

In the ACT, we take a trauma-informed approach to services and provision of a range of therapeutic responses to support children and young people with complex high-level needs, including substance use disorders. Support is currently provided through both mainstream and statutory services in a range of systems including health, education, community supports, out of home care and youth justice.

Our primary focus in supporting young people with complex substance use disorders should be early support through accessible, holistic and trauma-informed services. This will provide better long-term outcomes than compulsory detention.

We also recognise the importance of healing approaches in supporting recovery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Such approaches support connections to culture, strengthen positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities and restore family and community relationships – helping to address individual, collective and intergenerational trauma. A compulsory detention environment risks undermining these approaches.

Importantly, the Community Services Directorate is leading a piece of policy work that will establish a definition and delivery framework of what constitutes Therapeutic care. This policy will then be used to monitor congruence to the framework for providers who endeavour to be recognised as providing high quality therapeutic care. This work will help map the current service system against the framework to highlight to providers areas for further development or enhancement to achieve the highest level of therapeutic care service provision. This work responds to the Domestic Violence Prevention Council Report on the impact of domestic and family violence on children and young people.

Drug and alcohol health services

The ACT Government has invested substantially in drug and alcohol treatment programs in the ACT, including in programs to support young people with complex substance use disorders.

Programs provided, or funded, by Canberra Health Services and the Health Directorate include residential rehabilitation, withdrawal services, counselling, crisis intervention, advocacy, information and education, and support for carers, families and friends.

Severe alcohol and drug problems affecting young people are often influenced by complex underlying biological, social and psychological factors. Alcohol and drug dependence is not regarded as a condition that can necessarily be 'fixed' by short-term treatment, such as compulsory detention.

Alcohol and other drug dependence is regarded as a chronic and relapsing condition. The management of drug dependence can be prolonged, like the management of mental illness or a condition like diabetes.

Mental health support

Mental health issues are often found alongside substance use disorders in young people. The ACT Government provides targeted supports for children and young people with mental health issues, ranging from acute care to community supports.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services comprise:

- northside and southside community teams that provide assessment and treatment for children and young people under 18 years who are experiencing moderate to severe mental health difficulties;

- Childhood Early Intervention, which focuses on early identification and treatment of primary school children who are at high risk of developing a mental illness and provides group work interventions; and
- the Cottage Adolescent Day Program, which is offered to young people aged between 12 and 17 years who are experiencing moderate to severe mental health issues.

All ACT public schools have access to a school psychologist. 76.6 full time equivalent school psychologists across ACT public schools currently support students to engage in their learning. They will be joined by an additional five full time equivalent psychologists in 2020, in line with ACT Labor's 2016 election commitment to hire an additional 20 school psychologists over this term of government.

Safe and Connected Youth project

The Safe and Connected Youth project demonstrates the ACT Government's commitment to children and young people.

The Community Services Directorate committed \$480,000 in 2019-20 to address an identified gap in services for children and young people aged 8 to 15 years who are at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness due to family breakdown.

To date, the project has expanded counselling services through the Conflict Resolution Service; delivered outreach and family work services through Northside Community Service and Woden Community Service; and trialled respite services delivered by Marymead to prevent family breakdown.

Early results from the project are promising, with a number of young people receiving services and being supported to remain safely at home.

Out of home care services

Children and young people in out of home care often have an extensive trauma history. The Government established multiple service responses under *A Step Up for Our Kids* - the ACT's out of home care strategy - to support and respond to children who have experienced significant trauma as a result of abuse and neglect. These include:

- Melaleuca Place, the ACT's Trauma Recovery Centre for children aged 12 years and under;
- ACT Together, specifically the Australian Childhood Foundation who provide specialist trauma informed guidance to staff and carers;
- therapeutic assessors who provide therapeutic assessments to care plans for children and young people in care; and
- therapeutic care teams to provide children who require intensive support with 24-hour care and support.

Strategies employed to reduce serious complex behaviours, including substance use disorders, can include 24-hour support in a residential setting, individually tailored behavioural support plans, mental health assessments and increased supervision.

Youth Justice

The ACT Government is focused on ensuring we have a therapeutic youth justice system that meets the needs of young people.

As part of this ongoing commitment, we are working to improve transition support for young people who have been sentenced to or remanded in Bimberi. This means providing young people with tailored case plans that recognise the importance of recovery from trauma, consider a disability assessment and strengthen life skills. In addition, the ACT Government is employing a full-time Principal Practitioner at the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre to strengthen trauma-informed therapeutic treatment

and case management support for young people with complex and challenging presentations.

Future focus

The ACT Government already has a range of services in place to provide a therapeutic response to children and young people with high-level needs. However, we recognise that there is room for improvement in responding to young people with very complex and intersecting needs, to avoid the requirement for a crisis or institutional response.

Some of the areas in which we are progressing new services or a better understanding of the services required include: therapeutic models of care, adolescent mental health, support for young people who have been affected by domestic and family violence, and our early support initiative.

Therapeutic model of care

A therapeutic approach acknowledges the substantial impact of trauma on the development of children and young people and enables services and supports to address underlying issues.

Work is underway with the ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner to identify and explore possible models of therapeutic care for young people with complex high-level needs, including substance use disorders.

The ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner and the Children and Young People Oversight Agencies Group have worked together to explore the features of a service model that can respond to the needs of children and young people in the ACT who require very intensive, specialised therapeutic care.

The ACT Government anticipates that key components of this service model for children and young people who have complex high-level needs, and pose an immediate and significant risk of harm to themselves or others, will be presented to the Government next year.

This work will explore whether existing legislation and frameworks can enable best practice therapeutic care for children, young people and their families in the ACT. For example, the *Senior Practitioner Act 2018* may offer possible options to further support the safety and wellbeing of young people who are subject to restrictive practices in response to behaviours of concern. The ACT Government will continue to work closely with the ACT Human Rights Commission to develop options that support the delivery of therapeutic care for children and young people with complex needs.

Adolescent Mental Health Unit

Funding for a new Adolescent Mental Health Unit and day service at Canberra Hospital was announced as part of the 2019-20 ACT Budget. These services will provide acute mental health treatment for young people with a moderate to severe mental illness or disorder.

The proposed model of care for these services will include a structured inpatient service aimed at stabilising risk, with assertive follow up in the community. A day service will provide a therapeutic program for the continued recovery of young people who have been discharged from hospital or would benefit from a step-down service. The current Adolescent Mobile Outreach Service will also be expanded, as part of the 2019-20 Budget initiative that is funding the Adolescent Mental Health Unit and, more broadly, the expansion of the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children. All treatment and supports will be guided by best practice therapeutic approaches.

The Adolescent Mental Health Unit and day service are part of the expansion of the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children. Major elements of this project will be delivered in a staged approach over the coming years through to 2021-22.

Listening and learning project

Children who have experienced or been exposed to domestic or family violence often suffer significant trauma.

In April 2018, the Domestic Violence Prevention Council recommended that children and young people should be directly consulted about domestic and family violence services and responses. This work is underway. The Children and Young People Commissioner and the Family Safety Hub are working together to design and deliver a ‘listening and learning’ project.

This project acknowledges that children and young people are service users in their own right. By listening to, and understanding children’s and young people’s experiences, this project will help us improve the ACT service system’s capacity to respond to children and young people’s needs. What we learn will be shared across the government and community sector.

Early Support

Evidence-based research tells us that the most effective responses for young people with complex needs should occur as early as possible in the life of an issue.

Through the 2019-20 ACT Budget, the Government is investing in early support approaches to improve lives for individuals and the communities through building resilience, keeping people well for longer, and reducing avoidable use of acute and crisis services.

In addition to this investment, this Government is committed to the *Early Support by Design* initiative, a 10-year roadmap to fundamentally change the

DNA of the ACT human services system across Justice, Education, Health and Community Services and their funded services. It recognises that by changing the nature of the service system, we change people's lives.

Over time, this will ensure all parts of the system can respond earlier, shifting investment from crisis-driven responses, where service impacts are less effective in changing life trajectories, to early support. This shift aims to improve long-term life outcomes, support self-determination and enhance intergenerational wellbeing. A key pillar of this will be supporting children and young people in the context of their families.

The best response to complex substance use disorders is to prevent the problem arising, through improving social factors that deter from drug use. Substance use disorders are complex, requiring treatment that is trauma-informed and holistic, responding early before crisis intervention is needed.

The ACT Government will continue to work across government and with our community partners to support young people in the ACT who face complex challenges, including substance use disorders. On behalf of the ACT Government, we thank the youth workers, social workers, psychologists and other health workers who support these vulnerable young people, and commend them for their professionalism and commitment.