



# LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 2021 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response

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### Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response

Dear Chair,

The Salvation Army thanks the Legislative Assembly, and the Select Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback on the ACT Government's response to the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak within the Territory.

The Salvation Army, as one of the largest providers of social services in Australia, has strong connections and trusted relationships in the communities we serve. We continued to work throughout the period of the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak in the ACT to support the local community through our many services and programs. The Salvation Army welcomes the opportunity to provide insight into how the ACT Government's actions both prior and during the 2021 outbreak, and subsequent lockdown period, have impacted the community members we serve.

We would like to first acknowledge the ACT Government for its quick response to the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak and its subsequent management to limit the spread of the virus, and implement preventative measures to protect the Canberra community throughout the August - October 2021 lockdown period.

Our local Housing, Doorways emergency relief, and Moneycare financial counselling service staff have been at the front-line of calls for assistance during the recent lockdown and have highlighted some lessons learnt from the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak and some issues for further consideration by the ACT Government as restrictions ease, and we head into the Christmas and New Year period.

Founders **William & Catherine Booth**  
General **Brian Peddle**

*Wherever there is hardship or injustice, Salvos will live, love and fight  
alongside others to transform Australia one life at a time with the love of Jesus*

**salvationarmy.org.au**

## Support

After more than a year of being COVID-free in the ACT and enjoying most social freedoms, many in the Canberra community found the 2021 lockdown extremely difficult. Canberrans who have lost incomes and those with existing vulnerabilities were particularly affected by the rapidly unfolding pandemic.

While some community and social support organisations were forced to close in-person operations, The Salvation Army worked to find practicable solutions to keep our Braddon Corps services operational during lockdown, under strict COVID-19-safe conditions. This allowed the local community to continue to obtain take-away meals, necessities including fresh fruit and vegetables, request a financial support “Salvos Card”, and to access other essential support. The Braddon Corps location close to the Australian National University (**ANU**) also saw a marked increase in visits from international students during this time, as these students were not eligible for Commonwealth government financial support.

While new food relief services were established to help those affected by the lockdown, the role of the Braddon Corps’ services continued. Their purpose, to feed those in need, is coupled with their sustainable and consistent presence in order to journey alongside those most in need, including the elderly, people in recovery and those facing food and housing stress. The Salvation Army has some concern that should new food relief supports disappear, there is a risk that people who have relied upon their services will feel abandoned. Referring community members to appropriate services is vital to keeping people connected to community, and able to access services.

### **Recommendation**

- That the ACT Government work with community sector providers to connect members of the community to services wherever temporary relief organisations cease operations.

Pressure from bills was also a significant burden upon community members accessing our Moneycare and Doorways supports. From our experience, utility providers have been very willing to work with community members and our staff for those in need of assistance to pay their utility bills during the lockdown period. Providers have been willing to accept over-the-phone meter readings, defer issuing utilities notices until toward the end of the lockdown period, and provided concessions where possible. We also thank the ACT Government for continuing to support vulnerable community members, including through the on-off \$250 supplement to the government’s Utility Concession.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Utilities Concessions, ACT Revenue Office ( <https://www.revenue.act.gov.au/community-assistance/utilities-concession>).

## Housing

A number of public and community housing locations experienced greater levels of infection throughout the course of the ACT lockdown. In spite of initial difficulties, The Salvation Army was pleased that the ACT Government relied upon community leaders, including Salvation Army Corps Officers, to support their COVID-19 testing procedures. Our staff and Officers worked with ACT Health to provide care, including provide guidance on the use of personal protective equipment, and ensure that the sick were properly provided with necessities to minimise the scale of the outbreak.

Our staff emphasised the importance of having a familiar Salvation Army face accompany ACT Health officials when engaging with residents in public and community housing complexes. This was important for a number of reasons, including:

- to assure residents that a trusted support person was available, given our experience that people in crisis or situations of heightened stress can often experience cognitive overload which impacts their decision-making and willingness to engage with those unknown to them;
- to help explain information and options about testing, isolation and quarantine procedures to residents, including to those with limited literacy, the elderly and those for whom ACT Health material was not available in their community language; and
- to help ensure that other essential needs could be provided, including culturally appropriate food, medications and other health-related needs and access to phones and computers.

### **Recommendation**

- That the ACT Government continue to work with embedded community organisations in future disasters to help communicate and provide support to community members.

## Transitional care for unwell people

Our Salvation Army Doorways and Housing teams provided insight into instances where COVID- 19 positive community members were moved from the Canberra Hospital to the quarantine facility established at an ANU student residence. In at least one case, a community member was transported to the ANU without a change of clothing and with no blankets, food or toiletries. In another case, an individual did not wish to go to the ANU facility, however an alternative COVID-safe accommodation option, such as the O'Connor Tourist Park, was not made available until 24 September 2021.



In another case, a patient could not return home from the hospital as another family member was awaiting their test results while residing in the family home. This patient had no alternative accommodation, food or a phone to contact family. In these situations, The Salvation Army's staff were able to assist these individuals to ensure that those in need did not 'fall through the cracks'. Non-COVID-positive patients also needed care and support. Clinical staff cannot be expected to carry the load of pastoral and case support that organisations such as The Salvation Army provide every day. Planned and coordinated opportunities to assist with in-patient and discharged patients at their point of need would be welcome should the ACT be forced to declare a lockdown in the future.

### Outreach

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*“When we locked everyone down, we locked everyone out”*

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**- Salvation Army Doorways Regional Manager**

A crucial function of The Salvation Army during the COVID-19 lockdown was to ensure outreach support was available to people struggling with substance addiction, including families and significant others whose lives have been affected. Recovery needs community and peer support, which could not be provided in the usual ways during the lockdown period. Our Corps Officers reported that where supportive environments collapsed, some people in lockdown relapsed into substance misuse. The experience of withdrawal and recovery may differ from person to person and it is important to be aware of the risks that sudden withdrawal or absence of other supports and interventions may cause. In the event of future lockdowns, we urge the ACT Government, especially those working in ACT Health, to undertake or facilitate wellbeing checks in line with the context and needs of individuals.

### **Recommendation**

- That the ACT Government work to ensure that future disasters and health emergencies incorporate wellbeing checks for individuals in high risk settings and assess their wellbeing needs on a case-by-case basis.

## Engagement with the community services sector

COVID-19 has required community organisations to adapt our operations, while remaining connected with local communities. The ongoing, timely consultation between the ACT Government and community services organisations, and between community organisations, has been critical throughout COVID-19 outbreak.

Although information was complex and often had to change on numerous occasions, The Salvation Army deeply appreciated the ACT Government's communication with ourselves, and others within the community services sector, throughout the outbreak. Regular, and informative sessions were hosted online, twice per week at the height of the crisis, and provided critical guidance to our service staff and Corps Officers. By bringing service providers along, keeping the sector informed, and listening to concerns, the government provided confidence to the sector, and this was reflected back to the communities we serve.

Communication channels could be further improved should a future outbreak occur to allow for better two-way, targeted communication, and coordination of community-based organisations according to their areas of expertise and community reach. For example, large numbers of organisations participated in some online meetings, however smaller groupings, for example specific session for organisations which provide emergency relief support, would allow for more streamlined and efficient communication.

As the lockdown continued, communication became less frequent, and on occasions, our services had no prior notification from the ACT Government of public information that was directly relevant to our services and our community members. This raised concerns that community members who did not have online access to updates from the ACT Government, would not receive timely information about health directives or other decisions that would affect them.

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*“We read updates from the ACT Government on Facebook, just like everybody else. What happens if a person is not on Facebook? You just hope they have some kind of family support”*

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**- Salvation Army Doorways Regional Manager**

One suggestion offered to the ACT Government during online meetings conducted during the 2020 outbreak was to establish community hubs in multiple accessible locations, such as town centres. Unfortunately the government did not implement these local centres. These would provide a physical location where people could go for vouchers, access the internet or charge phones if needed, and could be operated in a COVID-safe manner.



Our Salvos Housing staff received notifications from the ACT Housing and Community Services team about free online events for older community members. These sessions provided guidance on 'managing finances during COVID for older Canberrans', information on government concessions, rebates, energy support vouchers, rates assistance and pro bono services. While helpful, these sessions were not accessible to many older community members without phones or computers and for those who lacked digital literacy skills. We consider there is still work to be done in equipping the community sector to adapt and transition to COVID-safe service delivery to meet increasing digital needs.

### Recommendation

- That the ACT Government examine methods to increase the efficiency of community sector communication in scenarios such as disasters and health emergencies.
- That the ACT Government examine the possibility for physical locations in each town centre where emergency relief can be provided in a COVID-safe manner.

### Post 2021 lockdown

All indications are that the ACT COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and lockdown will continue to have an impact on personal finances and mental health for many months, if not years, to come.

The impacts of COVID-19 include higher levels of unemployment with the number of people in the ACT receiving income support while looking for work peaking at 9,500 during the 2021 lockdown and remaining at 33 per cent above the pre-COVID level.<sup>2</sup> The ACT Government's commitment in the 2021-22 Budget to further invest in the creation and protection of local jobs to reach a target of 250,000 jobs in the ACT labour market by 2025 is an important goal.<sup>3</sup> Working with JobActive providers within the region, including The Salvation Army's Employment Plus team, will be critical in achieving this target.

While local businesses have been permitted to re-open with social distancing restrictions, disruption to economic activity will be felt well into 2022. We commend the ACT Government's flexibility, as shown in the decision to bring forward the easing of restrictions in October 2021, in line with New South Wales, as vaccination targets were met.

Our emergency relief and financial counselling services are now bracing for the post lockdown aftershocks as we head toward the Christmas and New Year period. As COVID Disaster Relief Payments cease, and other concessions taper off, we anticipate many of our community

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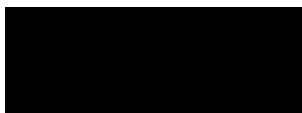
<sup>2</sup> ACTCOSS, Poverty and COVID-19 in the ACT.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Capital Territory, *Parliamentary Debates*, ACT Legislative Assembly, 6 October 2021 2830.

members will struggle to get through the expensive Christmas and January 2022 school holiday period.

We thank you for this opportunity to make a submission and would be happy to elaborate on our experiences with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul Hateley, Major**  
Head of Government Relations  
The Salvation Army Australia

18 November 2021

*The Salvation Army acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters throughout Australia.*

*We pay our respect to Elders and acknowledge their continuing relationship to this land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.*

*We also acknowledge future aspirations of all First Nations peoples. Through respectful relationships we will work for the mutual flourishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians.*

*We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.*

