



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY
Ms Nicole Lawder MLA (Chair), Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Deputy Chair),
Mr Johnathan Davis MLA

Submission Coversheet

Inquiry into ACT Budget 2020–21

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**ACT Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality and ACT
Standing Committee on Public Accounts**

INQUIRY INTO ACT BUDGET 2020–21

SUBMISSION

Meridian is Canberra's leading LGBTIQ and HIV+ community organisation. Formerly the AIDS Action Council, Meridian was established in 1983 in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and has a strong and proud history of working with and representing diverse groups of people. This includes gay and bisexual and other men who have sex with men, lesbian and queer women, transgender and gender diverse people, people with disability, sex workers, people who use drugs, and people in custodial settings. Over this time, we have adapted to community need to ensure we are dynamic, intersectional, and progressive with our approach to tackling complex social health issues such as HIV/AIDS and the health and wellbeing of sexuality, sex and gender diverse people. Our vision is to build strong, connected and supportive communities that are free of new HIV transmission, marginalisation, discrimination and stigma. We create opportunities for our communities to live their healthiest lives and be their true selves.

Firstly, I would like to recommend that the ACT Standing Committee on Economic and Gender and Economic Equality are open to gender equity beyond the binary of men and women? Meridian are strong and constant advocates for gender equity for all. This is not just cisgender women but also trans and non-binary people on the basis that if gender equity is not intersectional and encompasses only the interests of cisgender women, the most disadvantaged will be left behind. Meridian works to protect the most vulnerable and center them in our advocacy because this is what will break down barriers that impact us all.

Meridian would like to submit the following brief comments on the 2021-2021 budget:

- We greatly welcome the mental health and housing and homelessness commitments in the 2020-21 budget.
- We welcome the commitments to infrastructure, light rail and climate change. However notably missing is additional money to implement the commitments in the Parliamentary and Governing Agreements to increase social and affordable housing.
- The community sector in general is concerned about the lack of ongoing funding for many of its services. We seek more investment in community-based early support services for mental health.
- At Meridian we are struggling to meet demand especially currently with COVID. We received some COVID support but this is all now coming to an end.
- We feel there is little spending in the budget directly targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups including people with disability and LGBTIQ+ community.



Top key priorities for the ACT Budget

Over many years Meridian has formally lodged written submissions during the ACT government budget consultation process. For this mini budget released in February 2021, we did not lodge a submission. We have only two top key priorities and these have always been and will continue to be as follows:

1. Counselling and mental health support for the LGBTIQ+ community

There is conclusive evidence that LGBTI people experience higher levels of depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide compared to the general population because of stigma, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion.

Meridian's service for counselling known as Westlund Counselling offers competent and professional counselling to people who are living with and impacted by HIV and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans/gender diverse communities, including people who are intersex or identify as genderqueer, non binary or gender-questioning. The service continues to be at capacity and there is an unqualified need for additional funding in this space.

Our key priority for the ACT budget is for the establishment of one FTE position for a mental health social worker or equivalent to add significant value to the peer led services we currently deliver. The addition of a mental health social worker to our professional and qualified team will bridge a current service and skills gap to address complex community mental health presentations, intersectional psychosocial issues and targeted community specific stressors. A mental health social worker who is safely engaged with our communities will help to resolve presenting psychological and mental health issues in combination with addressing structural, social and other environmental problems such as the impact of minority stress, isolation and discrimination.

2. Outreach HIV and STI testing

We seek the opportunity to increase the availability, access and awareness of BBV/STI prevention strategies using existing networks, outreach capability and peer based strategies. This would include the introduction of peer-led Rapid HIV testing in the ACT, the ACT being the only jurisdiction in Australia that does not offer peer-based Rapid HIV testing.

We again propose the introduction of a peer led outreach program specifically aimed at increasing testing and awareness of testing. While we acknowledge that this requires a relatively modest investment of funds, there is significant evidence that this will deliver significant economic, health and social benefits.

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Meridian acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Meridian (formerly AIDS Action Council) is a community-based and peer-led organisation. For over 35 years we have been working with diverse people and communities to improve their health and wellbeing.