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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this evening

Overall Lifeline would express disappointment with this budget. Principally, this is because it does little or nothing to enhance the community sector. As many other organizations have undoubtedly already pointed out to you today, the community sector, particularly the SAAP sector, experienced significant cuts in the last budget. While we are grateful that there have been no further cuts, we are seeing the impact of cuts to these services from the front line.

Our counsellors take calls on the Canberra Emergency Accommodation Service (CEAS) line and are often unable to offer any hope of crisis accommodation to callers. I would like to highlight that it is families and women who are unable to access crisis accommodation. When we provided a submission to the budget process late last year, we advised government about the 913 people that had called CEAS over a 6 month period for whom there was no appropriate crisis housing referral. This situation has not improved; these people continue to have no place to turn, and no place to sleep

We will be working with the Department of Housing, Disability and Community Services over the next 12 months to enhance the CEAS service so that securing crisis accommodation is simplified for clients. Ensuring that people are supported through their housing crisis by skilled workers with up-to-date knowledge about accommodation availability will not be easy or free, but it will ensure that those on the brink of homelessness have the best possible chance of making the transition to alternative accommodation.

I also want to touch on mental health services. Lifeline Canberra applauds the increase in funding for much needed facilities for people experiencing a severe mental health crisis, however, there is funding little directed to those experiencing mild to moderate or emergent mental health issues.

Our service continues to receive crisis calls from people who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health symptoms and we are unable to refer them anywhere. These people would benefit from short term face to face crisis counselling which could assist them to find strategies to deal with their situation or prevent a moderate episode from escalating into a severe crisis. There are almost no counselling services available in the ACT for these people. Such a service would provide much needed crisis intervention and would also serve a preventative role, potentially reducing the number of people who require more intensive, and expensive, mental health services.

The decision by the Federal Government to provide a Medicare rebate for accessing private psychologists, has demonstrated just how significant demand for mental health services is. Data so far indicates that the new rebate is already significantly over-budget and it is our fear that the government will not be able to sustain it. What then? What will be available for

the many thousands of ACT residents who need counselling? Do we really have to wait for them to develop a severe mental illness or episode before help is offered?

Community Sector viability is more than just a catch cry of the politically active. It comes down to whether we are able to provide services like the Lifeline Canberra 24 hour crisis telephone counselling service to the ACT community. Lifeline, along with other parts of the sector, has experienced the difficulty of attracting and retaining employees. We have recently had difficulty filling two key positions within the organization due to a small number of applicants and competition for suitable staff from other sectors that are able to pay significantly higher wages. Community services require secure recurrent funding to be able to adequately provide services. We have had no increase in funding for service provision for many years.

The impact on sector viability extends beyond our paid staff. Providing the Lifeline service is not possible without our volunteers. We are finding however, that although we subsidize the cost of training to become a telephone counsellor, paying even the subsidized rate is a barrier to an increasing number of potential volunteers.

The issue of attracting volunteers is not unique to Lifeline and other organizations have undoubtedly raised this with you, but we are facing a crisis of volunteering. If we cannot attract, train and retain volunteers then we cannot answer calls from members of the ACT community who are in crisis.

And of course, to train and retain those additional volunteers we will some how need to find and pay more support staff. Volunteers cannot and do not work in a vacuum, they rely upon the support of skilled staff in order to be effective 24 hours a day 7 days a week, year in and year out.

We are disappointed that this budget seems to reflect a lack of government interest in the needs of the community sector. For Lifeline, this has an ongoing impact on our ability to provide and expand the crisis line service. Lifeline has always been a responsive service. We seek to be proactive in ensuring that we are able to respond to the needs of the community and hope that the ACT Government would support us in enhancing our ability to be there for the people in need in our community.