



Women With Disabilities ACT

Submission to the

Inquiry into Raising Children in the ACT

24 April 2024

Women With Disabilities ACT acknowledges and pays respect to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, the traditional custodians of the ACT Region, on whose land our office is located. We pay our respects their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their spiritual, social, historical, and ongoing connection to these lands and the contribution they make to the life of the Australian Capital Territory. Sovereignty was never ceded.

About WWDACT

Women With Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is a systemic advocacy and peer support organisation for women, girls, non-binary and gender diverse people with disability in the ACT region. Established in 1995, WWDACT follows a human rights philosophy, based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of (All Forms Of) Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It works with government and non-government organisations to improve the status and lives of women* with disabilities in the ACT and surrounding region. Our priority areas include violence prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and healthcare.

WWDACT is a Disabled People's Organisation, governed by women, feminine identifying, and non-binary people with disabilities. WWDACT acknowledges the assistance of the ACT Government under the Office for Disability in making it possible to undertake our work.

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Notes on language used

WWDACT uses the term women* throughout this submission to denote women, girls, feminine-identifying, non-binary people, or anyone who has experienced or is currently experiencing gendered oppression.

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Introduction

Women with Disabilities ACT is pleased that the Committee is inquiring into factors affecting parents and children in the ACT, and is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Parents with disabilities in the ACT (in particular women*) have unique experiences, barriers and challenges and are too often left out of policies and programs. We hope our submission will highlight these unique experiences, and we point to policy considerations and actions to address issues faced by parents with disabilities in the ACT.

The right to parent

Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines that all people with disabilities have the right to found a family, to decide on the number and spacing of their children, and to have access to appropriate education and resources to enable them to exercise these rights¹.

Our response to this inquiry is grounded in an understanding of the right to be a parent and raise children. Many people with disabilities in the ACT experience barriers at all stages of their parenting journey, from having reproductive rights violated, to experiencing a lack of community supports and education. The stigma and discrimination experienced by parents with disabilities is a result of ableism, enacted both by individuals and institutions.

Being a parent is an overwhelming task for anyone. People with disabilities have the right to access the support they need to raise children, and the ACT Government as a human rights jurisdiction has an obligation to ensure these supports are available.

Intersectionality

There is extremely limited data and research on the needs of parents with disabilities in the ACT who experience intersecting forms of oppression. Discrimination and barriers to accessing appropriate supports and services compound for parents experiencing intersecting forms of oppression. Our submission is non-exhaustive and does not

¹ [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities | OHCHR](#)

reflect the unique experiences of parents experiencing multiple intersecting forms of oppression. The ACT Government should ensure it is listening to a diverse range of parent voices with lived experience, and take opportunities to meaningfully engage with communities outside of a brief consultation window.

Recommendation: Undertake further research and expand the inquiry through a broader consultation, allowing meaningful engagement from a broader section of the ACT community who have unique experiences of parenting.

Cost of living pressures

Cost of living pressures are being felt strongly by everybody. However, they have a disproportionately large impact on parents with disabilities. The cost of living for people with disabilities is already significantly higher on average; they pay more in areas such as appointments, equipment, support work, and transport². This is compounded by the fact that people with disabilities experience more financial insecurity, often working part-time or facing barriers to accessing employment³. Add to this the cost of raising children, unpaid care work, and further time and energy constraints on parents who wish to work - and this contributes to significant financial insecurity felt by many parents with disabilities.

Parents cannot care for children if their basic needs are not met. Parents with disabilities require adequate income and disability supports to care for their children, and are likely to interact with a host of other systems (e.g. NDIS, disability pension, housing) to ensure their basic needs and fundamental human rights are met. It is imperative that these programs, supports and payments are adequately funded by the government.

Recommendation: Review income and supports available to parents with disabilities to ensure adequate funding is available to meet their needs and their children's needs.

² [The costs of disability in Australia: a hybrid panel-data examination | Health Economics Review | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](#)

³ [People with disability in Australia, Employment - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

Recommendation: Improve communication and interactions between systems such as NDIS, Disability Pension and Housing ACT to ensure that these systems coordinate with each other to reduce burdens on parents and contribute to better outcomes.

Availability of affordable housing suited to the family's needs

Rising costs of living and financial insecurity for parents with disabilities often leads to housing insecurity; Australians with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness, housing dissatisfaction, housing unaffordability and/or poor-quality housing⁴. The median private rental price for a unit or house in Canberra is more than the total Disability Support Pension payment, locking many people with disabilities out of the private rental market. The average wait time for priority public housing is over a year, putting families at risk of housing insecurity. These barriers faced by people with disabilities are compounded for families who are raising children, who have specific housing needs for their families.

WWDACT, along with other Disabled Persons Organisations, has addressed these issues in our [Joint Budget Submission 2024-2025](#). We called for funding for more public housing at the gold standard of accessibility, a dedicated funding stream to support people with an intellectual disability to live independently, and incentives for private owners to build accessible housing.

Recommendation: Fund more public housing at the gold standard of accessibility.

Recommendation: Include a dedicated funding stream in housing budget and policy to support people with an intellectual disability to live independently.

Recommendation: Offer incentives for private owners to build accessible housing.

⁴ [WWDACT, AFI, ACTDSID Joint ACT Budget Submission 2024/25](#)

Social factors, including availability of family and community support networks

All parents need support to raise their children. However, formal, informal and community supports are not often designed with parents with disabilities in mind. This means the specific needs of parents with disabilities are not fully met by the supports available in the ACT.

There are few formal supports available specifically for parents with disabilities. This need is particularly acute for groups such as parents with intellectual disabilities who have no options for formal supports in the ACT who can cater to their needs and support them as new parents⁵. Staff in community organisations are rarely educated on parenting with a disability and can fail to provide appropriate supports, leaving people with disabilities in a support gap. Simply finding appropriate supports can also be a challenge, and in our joint budget submission we have called for a parenting navigator to connect parents with disabilities to the supports they need.⁶

Parents who are already using disability support providers through the NDIS or independently have reported that providers and support workers do not have information about parenting. They often do not provide appropriate support for parents with disabilities in their parenting role, restricting support with household activities or social outings to the parent and not the child.

Parents living in Canberra may also experience barriers to accessing their informal support networks including family and friends. Many parents in Canberra and parents in WWDACT's membership have moved their families to Canberra for work and are separated from their support networks.⁷ Cost of living pressures make it difficult to travel to engage with these informal networks of support, which are so integral for all parents.

We have heard from members about the importance of community supports. These can include parenting groups (such as Majura Women's

⁵ [WWDACT Budget Submission 2024/25](#)

⁶ [WWDACT, AFI, ACTDSID Joint ACT Budget Submission 2024/25](#)

⁷ [WWDACT Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation](#)

Group) which act as social supports, and places of information sharing. Our members have indicated the value of these groups. However, they are not necessarily oriented towards the specific needs of parents with disabilities.

WWDACT ran a parenting support group for 45 parents with disabilities in 2020-2021, funded by the ACT Women's Safety Grant.⁸ Unfortunately, parenting groups pertaining to these specific intersections are rarely provided recurrent funding by the ACT government and are often reliant on 1-3 year project grants. After funding ran out and the group could no longer be facilitated by WWDACT, our project participants struggled to continue these connections.

Awareness of, and engagement with, formal, informal and community supports before becoming a parent can be helpful for parents so they can become confident in accessing supports post-partum and beyond. Many women* have indicated a lack of knowledge about supports available to them, and several reported 'stumbling upon' appropriate supports after being a parent for years or after having their second or third child. This emphasizes the importance of an information navigation service that can help parents with disabilities become aware of available information and supports. It is important that this information and navigation service be accessible and available in different formats including Braille and Easy English.

Recommendation: Fund formal supports for parents with disabilities, in particular parents with an intellectual disability, to expand support available in the ACT.

Recommendation: Fund a parenting navigator to connect parents with disabilities to the supports they need. Ensure information is accessible and available in different formats including Braille and Easy English.

Recommendation: Fund NDIS to enable providers to provide appropriate parenting support to adult users with children where it is needed.

⁸ [WWDACT Parenting Peer Support Group Report 2021](#)

Recommendation: Increase funding to community supports such as Majura Women’s Group to allow them to cater to more parents, including women* with disabilities.

Recommendation: Provide recurrent funding to Disabled People’s Organisations to provide tailored social supports for parents, allowing support groups to extend beyond the lifetime of the short-term grant process.

Availability of health services

WWDACT has made several submissions to ACT Government and Legislative Assembly consultations outlining difficulties in accessing healthcare for women* with disabilities.⁹¹⁰¹¹ In the context of raising children, these barriers are compounded. The cost of accessing additional healthcare appointments and the difficulty of travelling around the city compounds with the cost of accessing childcare to ensure parents can attend these appointments. Many struggle to afford this, and we have heard stories of our members taking children with them to appointments, limiting their ability to speak to healthcare professionals about sensitive topics.

Our members have told us that accessing healthcare and asking for help can lead to fears of encountering the child protection system if concerns about their parenting are raised. We discuss the increased risk of interaction with the child protection system later in this submission.

Perinatal healthcare and mental health

Women* with disabilities in the ACT have reported negative experiences of perinatal healthcare, particularly perinatal mental health care. Although the ACT has one of the highest rates of postnatal depression in Australia¹², we have heard multiple stories from our members that staff in the perinatal healthcare and perinatal mental health care systems receive inadequate training, leading to misdiagnosis and mistreatment. There is a broad lack of understanding of post-partum mental health symptoms – psychosis in particular – that fall outside of depression and

⁹ [WWDACT Submission to the ACT Women's Plan Third Action Plan](#)

¹⁰ [WWDACT ACT Budget Submission 2023](#)

¹¹ [WWDACT Budget Submission 2024/25](#)

¹² [WWDACT Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation](#)

anxiety. This leads to inadequate post-birth support and inappropriate actions being taken without meaningfully involving parents – one of our members was asked to sign a document about her capacity to parent at a time when she could not have made an informed decision.

Non-clinical perinatal mental health support organisations also provide little to no information or awareness for post-partum psychosis.

Our members have reported a lack of support when entering perinatal health care. Health professionals tend to be reactive rather than proactive when a patient presents with additional or complex needs – this means accessibility adjustments are often ad-hoc rather than proactively implemented in consultation with the patient.

Experiences in perinatal health care can be fraught for parents with disabilities due to the stigma around parenting with a disability. They can feel that asking for help is risky and may lead to their being judged as incompetent or inadequate parents.

As part of the Maternity in Focus Action Plan, there has been work towards a dedicated parent and baby mental health unit, as well as a step-up-step-down mental health service that mixes clinical and psychosocial support at varying levels of intensity. However, this work is moving slowly and needs to be prioritised as a matter of urgency.

It has been good to see involvement of parents with disabilities in the Canberra Health Services Maternal Health Reference Group, and we look forward to recommendations from this group being funded and implemented. Additionally, we renew our calls for a disability liaison officer working in healthcare and perinatal healthcare.

Recommendation: Fund childcare options at doctors, hospitals and specialists to allow parents with disabilities to easily and privately access healthcare support.

Recommendation: Provide training to ACT maternal health units about complex perinatal mental health problems, including psychosis.

Recommendation: Continue the full funding and implementation of the ACT Maternity in Focus Action Plan with an emphasis on funding for perinatal mental health services.

Recommendation: Fund a disability liaison officer working at Canberra Health Services in healthcare and perinatal healthcare.

Support and advice for prospective parents with a disability; fertility issues and the accessibility of affordable fertility treatments

Women* with disabilities experience barriers accessing reproductive health and fertility treatments in the ACT, for a number of reasons. The cost of fertility treatments is prohibitive for many prospective parents in the ACT, but particularly for parents with disabilities who experience cost-of-living pressures more strongly and who are more likely to be experiencing financial instability. Although cheaper or subsidized services might be available to some in other jurisdictions, many people with disabilities struggle to travel long distances and the cost of travel may also be prohibitive.

Another barrier to accessing reproductive health services is due to stigma, where fertility health practitioners are unaware of disability and who have not received training. We know that prospective parents with disabilities experience ableism, discrimination and/or coercive genetic counselling. One of our members was forced to sign a legal waiver when she attempted to access fertility services, because her disability was genetic. An assumption that people with disabilities should not have biological children violates human rights, and despite being incredibly problematic is still experienced by prospective parents in the ACT.

Another result of the disability knowledge gap for fertility health practitioners is that women* struggle to obtain information about how pregnancy will interact with their disability – access to information allows women* to make a free and informed choice about their reproductive and fertility health and journey. Fertility health practitioners should be trained in supported decision making.

General information for prospective parents with disabilities is limited in the ACT. This is particularly the case for prospective parents with intellectual disability who may struggle to access appropriate information and support services through their parenting journey.

Reproductive rights for people with disabilities are too often violated, with women* with disabilities more likely to experience forced sterilization or forced abortion. There is lack of appropriate education for people with disabilities about sexual health and reproductive rights, especially resources and services for women* with an intellectual disability.

In our most recent submission to the ACT Budget consultation, we have called for affordable and accessible assisted reproductive technology, a ban on forced sterilisation and abortion in the ACT, as well as a comprehensive support package for parents with disabilities. We have called for full funding of a clinical sexual health service for women* with disabilities, and a sexual health education and information program for women* with disabilities.

Recommendation: Fund subsidised, affordable and accessible assisted reproductive technology (ART) in the ACT.

Recommendation: Fund an inquiry into forced or coerced sterilisation, contraception, and abortion experienced by women* with disabilities in the ACT, to investigate legislative, policy and social change to prevent this form of violence against women* with disabilities.

Recommendation: Provide training and disability-aware guidelines for fertility health clinics, to allow prospective parents with disabilities to access these services without ableism and discrimination.

Recommendation: Fund a comprehensive support package for parents with disabilities as outlined in WWDACT's joint budget submission. The package should include support for parents with intellectual disabilities.

Recommendation: Fund clinical sexual health services for women* with disabilities, and a sexual health education and information program for women* with disabilities, as outlined in the ACT Disability Health Strategy First Action Plan.¹³

¹³ [Disability Health Strategy First Action Plan 2024-2026](#)

Other related issues

Difficulty accessing supports for children with disabilities

We have heard from parents about the difficulties of accessing early intervention and appropriate supports for children with disabilities. The support landscape for parents with disabilities is limited if their child is not eligible for the NDIS. However, even for children on the NDIS, there is a shortage of specialists such as occupational therapists in the ACT. Parents are forced to travel to other jurisdictions or experience long waiting times for their child to get the support they need.

Issues of accessing appropriate supports only compounds when looking at Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and schooling. Access to preschool and day care can be limited if a child has a disability requiring additional support needs. The lack of funding and additional supports is also felt in mainstream public schools where funding for supports is dependent on a diagnosis – for example, children with ADHD or dyslexia are not funded for additional classroom support and may miss out on the support they need. Though all children with disabilities have a right to access mainstream preschool and schools,¹⁴ this right is not realized in the ACT.

Recommendation: Investigate options to increase the number of specialists in the ACT, such as occupational therapists.

Recommendation: Invest in foundational supports for children with disabilities, so they can access early intervention and additional support even if they are not on the NDIS.

Recommendation: Provide funding to schools to allow all children with disabilities to participate in mainstream childcare, pre-school and school settings with adequate support for their safety, wellbeing and learning.

Recommendation: Provide funding for implementation and oversight of the ACT Inclusive Education Strategy.

¹⁴ See Article 24 of the [UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#).

Risk of interaction with child protection services

In our submission to the Changing the Children and Young Person Review¹⁵, WWDACT highlighted that parents with disabilities face an increased likelihood of interaction with child protection services, as a result of ableism, stigma and discrimination. Parents with disabilities are overrepresented as subjects of child protection allegations, are significantly more likely to have children removed from their care, and face discrimination at every stage of the child protection system. Children with disabilities are also at greater risk of entering the child protection system, and being removed from their families to be placed in out of home care.

If appropriate income, parenting and disability supports are available to parents this allows them to have the resources to care for their children and reduces the likelihood of interacting with the child protection system or requiring disruptive intervention. If the child protection system was linked in with parenting and disability supports, and its staff received adequate training to be disability-aware and alert to the need to combat institutional bias and discrimination, this would enable them to form a more wholistic understanding of situations involving parents with disabilities. It could also enable the child protection system to be an avenue for accessing additional resources for a child's disability.

Recommendation: Implement disability awareness training for staff in the child protection system.

Recommendation: Fund individual advocates and disability liaison officers in the child protection system, and ensure that disability-informed advice is available to parents who are in contact with the system.

Recommendation: Consider how increases in funding for income support, disability support and housing can prevent parents from being in contact with child protection in the first place.

Recommendation: Consider how the child protection system can help parents to access resources to care for children with disabilities.

¹⁵ [WWDACT Submission to the Changing the Children and Young People Act](#)

Violence against women* with disabilities

Women* with disabilities experience all kinds of violence at far higher rates than people without disabilities, including intimate partner violence, family violence and domestic violence¹⁶. However, disability discrimination and ableism put parents with disabilities at higher risk of having their children removed and being denied custody of their children in situations of family violence. Perpetrators can manipulate systems such as child protection to achieve their objectives, exploiting institutional biases against parents with disabilities. Parents and children with disabilities may also find it harder to identify and communicate instances of abuse, and signs may be overlooked and dismissed by extended family, friends and organisations due to assumptions about disability.

It is imperative that child protection workers have access to training and knowledge about violence against women* with disabilities, to combat institutional ableism. There must also be a recognition that accessing violence response services or exiting a setting of abuse may be more difficult for people with disabilities who are also parents. There is a need for increased funding assistance and accessible accommodation options for all parents with disabilities who are in a crisis situation.

Recommendation: Fund disability violence awareness training for child protection workers in the ACT.

Recommendation: Increase funding assistance and improve accessible accommodation options for parents with disabilities experiencing crisis.

¹⁶ [Changing the landscape | Our Watch - Our Watch](#)

Additional information

WWDACT has made a number of ACT Government submissions over the past year which include many relevant recommendations. Please consider the recommendations made in our submissions:

[ACT Women's Plan Submission 2023](#)

[Changing the Children and Young Person Act Submission 2024](#)

[Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation 2024](#)

[Joint Budget Submission 2024/25](#)

[WWDACT Budget Submission 2024/25 \(Sexual and Reproductive Health\)](#)

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact WWDACT CEO Kat Reed ceo@wwdact.org.au.

Endorsements

This submission is endorsed by Advocacy for Inclusion and Mental Health Community Coalition ACT.



mental health
community coalition ACT