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MEDIA RELEASE: Disability groups flag health priorities ahead of ACT election forum tomorrow

A united front of ACT disability groups is flagging access to health care as a key priority for the 1 in 5 Canberra voters with a disability a day out from an ACT Disability Town Hall event kicking off tomorrow from 12 noon.

ACT Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability, Women with Disabilities ACT, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT and Advocacy for Inclusion have come together to say access to critical acute, primary and preventative health care is a key priority as we approach the October voting period.

They point to data which reveals 1 in 4 people with disability find it difficult to access a GP while 1 in 3 find it challenging to access specialist health services. In addition, Bulk-billing rates in the ACT have long been declining but there have is further deteriorations with only 3.8 per cent of clinics bulk-billing all patients at the end of 2023.

With the ACT taking on new responsibilities for Foundational Supports following the NDIS review the groups call for prompt implementation of the ACT Disability Health Strategy and a focus on other services, programs and upgrades to improve access.

Health will be one of a number of priorities discussed at a virtual ACT Disability Town Hall election event which will include the voices of people with lived experience and be MC'd by ABC Canberra Radio mornings presenter Georgia Stynes.

The forum is expected to feature representatives from the major parties and groupings contesting the coming poll.

Register for the forum here: <https://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/media-alert/>

Quotes, facts and detailed health priorities can be found in the media pack.

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MEDIA PACK: Health, Disability and the ACT election

1. Quotes attributable to disability organisations

“We are calling for the full delivery of the ACT Disability Health Strategy which sees more than half of the funding going directly towards front-facing and on-the-ground delivery of our vital health services.”

“There is a pressing need for continued support for people with long COVID, and improved consideration and better responses to COVID safety. This is critical in health settings such as the University of Canberra Hospital as well as in primary care.”

“We are also advocating for accessible and affordable assistive reproductive technologies, such as IVF, that are available to people with disability.”

Kat Reed, Women with Disabilities
ACT

“There is a strong need for affordable wraparound diagnostic services and clinics here in the ACT. These are particularly important for people managing ongoing diagnostic conditions, chronic illnesses, and for people who are neurodivergent.”

Shannon Kolak, ACT Down Syndrome & Intellectual
Disability

“The ACT has an increasing focus on health access for people with disability and we need resources and capability to engage in this agenda. That includes an additional \$175,000 to the Mental Health Community Coalition ACT to support one full-time equivalent position for research and policy analysis, as well as additional funding for MHCC ACT to contribute to a research initiative aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the PACER program for individuals with co-occurring mental health conditions and disabilities.”

Melanie Wilde, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT

“There are a number of equipment and accessibility upgrades needed within our hospitals. For example, providing accessible and height adjustable beds and slide boards in emergency departments, modern commodes and shower chairs, fully compliant left- and right-hand transfer toilets, and communications boards in every ward. We also need attention to social work, case management and other supports, especially at the rehab hospital”

“Given the decline in Bulk Billing, we would also like to see free or low-cost extended consultations for people with disability, as well as more support for community-based gyms and hydrotherapy. These interventions provide critical health and social benefits for our community and we need to see a recommitment to them in the next Assembly. COVID also continues to be a concern in our community requiring focus and attention”

Craig Wallace, Advocacy for Inclusion

2. The facts

Problem statement

It is the right of people with disability to attain the highest standards of health, without discrimination on the basis of disability. People with disability have higher rates of use of health services including General Practitioners, medical specialists, and hospital emergency departments and services. People with disability are also more likely to face barriers to accessing health services.

The dominance of the medical model of disability is likely contributing to poorer health outcomes and health inequities for people with disability. Diagnostic overshadowing is also a problem. This is when a medical practitioner assumes that a patient's complaint is related to their disability. This is a significant risk when medical practitioners do not have specific disability knowledge and training. It can lead to symptom dismissals, underdiagnoses, and misdiagnoses. This is a complex and emerging concern that requires work to develop training.

Evidence

- Around 1 in 5 Canberrans has a disability while Canberra has an ageing population. The 2018 ABS Social and Community Services Survey found that 19.4% of those in the ACT had disability, up from 16.2% in 2015.
- The Report on Government Services (2024) highlights the need for action and attention to health services for people with disability.
- The ability of many Canberrans to access health services has been declining. People with disability reported poorer access to all types of health services on average compared to other ACT residents.
 - This finding is reflected in the Disability Strategy's Listening Report, with 63 per cent of survey respondents rated finding and using necessary health care services as a big or very big issue.
- The ACT has the second lowest level of access to bulk-billing in any Australian jurisdiction. Average out-of-pocket costs at the 94.9% of clinics that do not bulk bill are 49.01 for a standard, 15-minute consultation.
- Current settings and funding arrangements mean that medical professionals are under financial pressure to keep consultations short. This was a key recommendation from the ACTCOSS Imagining Better report: People with disability highlighted issues with short consultations in managing complex and chronic conditions and showed how bulk billing consultations exacerbated the risk of poor outcomes and diagnostic overshadowing.
- The ACT continues as the worst performing jurisdiction in treating patients on time, in the various categories in the emergency department. In 2021-2022, less than half (48 per cent) of patients were treated on time.
- The ACT also suffers from a shortage of specialists, especially specialist services for children with disability.

3. Our priorities for the next Assembly

In the coming ACT election, we ask candidates to commit to the following actions, decisions, and investments to ensure Canberra's health system is accessible, equitable, and comprehensive. These priorities seek to enhance the health experience of people with disability, ensuring the system remains fit-for-purpose.

- **Full delivery of the ACT Disability Health Strategy** with 60% of funding going towards front facing and on the ground delivery
- **Free/low cost extended consultations** for people with disability
- **Priority hospital kit upgrades**
 - Accessible and height adjustable beds and slide boards in emergency departments
 - Modern commodes and shower chairs
 - Fully compliant left- and right-hand transfer toilets
 - Communications boards in every ward
- **Affordable wraparound diagnostic services and clinics** in the ACT. We seek these for people managing some ongoing diagnostic conditions and chronic illnesses and for people who are neurodivergent
- **Disability liaison officers at all Canberra Hospitals** including the University of Canberra Rehabilitation hospital
- **Social work and Occupational Therapy positions** for long stay patients at the University of Canberra Rehabilitation hospital
- Commit to building a **residential parent-baby mental health unit**, ensuring accessibility for individuals with disabilities
- **Accessible and affordable reproductive technology** to ensure these technologies are available to people with disability
- More support for **community-based gyms and hydrotherapy**
- Social model and diagnostic overshadowing **training for all ACT Health staff**
- **Continued support for people with long COVID** and better responses to COVID safety especially in health settings such as the University of Canberra Hospital as well as primary care
- **Community health access grants** to improve physical, sensory and digital access to primary care settings
- **A Voluntary Assisted Dying support package** to anticipate and prevent unintended impacts of the new scheme, including:
 - Emergency pool of diversionary disability supports for people considering VAD
 - Suicide prevention work targeted towards people with disability
 - Disability training for all Doctors and Nurses involved in VAD prescribing

Election comment authorised by Craig Wallace for Advocacy for Inclusion