

LGBTIQA+ Housing Position Paper

This paper was developed by Meridian in consultation with community members and service providers, including the Canberra Inclusive Partnership's Service User Reference Group, YWCA Canberra, ACT Shelter and Havelock Housing. Meridian acknowledges the existing body of work done by national and international researchers into the issue of LGBTIQA+ homelessness, which has informed many of the recommendations within this paper.

We also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land that we work on, the Ngunnawal people, and pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. We honour the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex, queer and asexual activists and advocates whose courage, determination, and strength have helped to make this a more just society. We celebrate the rich diversity of people's bodies, genders, identities, sexualities, and relationships.

Vision

Equal access to affordable, sustainable, and safe housing for people of diverse sexualities, genders, bodies and relationships (broadly known as the LGBTIQA+ community).

This vision will be achieved by working constructively and proactively with government and community-based housing and homeless support services in Canberra to ensure safe, sustainable, and affordable housing is a lived reality for all members of our LGBTIQA+¹ community. Meridian seeks to work with government through the identified service offering noted in the commitments of ACT Labor and ACT Greens and the Parliamentary Agreement 2020.

This paper aims to strengthen advocacy efforts to significantly improve housing outcomes for LGBTIQA+ community members in Canberra. Aligning with Meridian's strategic direction, purpose, and values, the paper contributes to Meridian's Strategic Priority 3: Create a safe community for all people, empowering our communities to strengthen inclusion.

Position summary

Members of LGBTIQA+ communities are at higher risk of becoming homeless compared to the broader community. This risk is exacerbated for LGBTIQA+ people who experience intersectional disadvantage, such as younger and older people, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and culturally and linguistically diverse people, including refugees and asylum seekers. This disadvantage is the result of the intersection of both structural and personal factors, including violence, harassment, discrimination, ignorance, disability access issues, trauma, substance use, poverty, and health factors.

Meridian is committed to removing barriers to safe and sustainable housing and existing housing support services for our LGBTIQA+ community. Meridian is also passionate about the establishment of safe, sustainable, well-designed, and specialised LGBTIQA+ housing services. Government funding for research into the causes, rates, and experiences of LGBTIQA+ homelessness in Canberra is also strongly endorsed by Meridian.

¹ We acknowledge that as a term, LGBTIQA+ is limited. We use the plus sign to communicate that LGBTIQA does not capture the full diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences that exist within our community, which include people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, asexual, and pansexual.

Position statement

Housing and shelter are basic human rights. Meridian is committed to raising awareness and addressing the intersectionality of personal and structural elements that drive higher rates of homelessness and homelessness risk for our LGBTIQ+ communities, and we encourage the development of safe, accessible, and inclusive services.

We challenge barriers to LGBTIQ+ people accessing crisis accommodation and long-term, sustainable, affordable, and safe housing, and we work through education and advocacy to address these barriers.

Recommendations

Service delivery

- 1 ACT Government fund Meridian for a dedicated housing and homelessness officer to provide systemic advocacy and individual supports to LGBTIQ+ people within the housing and homelessness sector.
 - 2 ACT Government consider the establishment of a community-controlled, co-designed, and trauma-informed LGBTIQ+ homelessness and housing support service in Canberra.
 - 3 The housing and homelessness sectors adopt the *LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Practice Guide for Housing and Homelessness Sectors in Australia* (2020) as a standard of practice. Support this change through comprehensive training on effectively responding to the unique needs of trans and gender diverse Canberrans and all LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness.
 - 4 ACT Government investigate and review instances where services are reported to be unable or unwilling to meet the standard of practice after a set transition period.
 - 5 ACT Government fund and support Meridian and A Gender Agenda to provide ongoing LGBTIQ+ awareness training to mainstream services and Community Services Directorate staff working in the areas of housing and homelessness.
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Infrastructure

- 1 ACT Government increase the crisis, transitional, and long-term housing supply in Canberra to tackle LGBTIQ+ homelessness and housing insecurity.
 - 2 Federal Government integrate accessible design principles into Australia's National Construction Code (NCC).
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Research and data

- 1 ACT Government fund Meridian to undertake or commission research into the causes, rates, and experiences of Canberra's homeless LGBTIQ+ population.
- 2 ACT Government support Meridian to work with the housing and homelessness sector to ensure they implement Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Standards for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables* as a minimum standard for data collection (ABS 2020).

Supporting evidence

What does the available data tell us?

An international literature review of LGBTIQ+ homelessness research (Fraser et al. 2019) identified that while LGBTIQ+ people generally comprise 5-10% of the population, they account for an estimated 20-40% of homeless populations. That is, an LGBTIQ+ person is four times more likely to experience homelessness than someone from the general population. LGBTIQ+ young people are particularly at risk, often due to family conflict and violence in the home, and they are more likely to be homeless before the age of 16 than the rest of the population (Lyons et al. 2015).

Research into LGBTIQ+ homelessness has not been extensive in Australia, but the available data is clear: LGBTIQ+ people are overrepresented among homeless Australians.

- In the ABS General Social Survey (2017), lesbian and gay respondents were at least twice as likely as heterosexual respondents to stay in emergency accommodation or sleep rough (Pride Foundation Australia 2020).
- The same ABS research showed that bisexual respondents were at least three times more likely than heterosexual respondents to stay in emergency accommodation or sleep rough (Pride Foundation Australia 2020).
- This research also showed that assault was more likely for lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents than for heterosexual people. This was more so for bisexual respondents, who identified as being more likely to feel unsafe than lesbian, gay, and heterosexual respondents (McNair et al. 2017).
- In a 2016 survey of people with intersex variations in Australia, 6% responded that they were homeless or living precariously (Jones et al. 2016).
- In a survey of 859 trans and gender diverse Australians aged 14 to 25, it was found that 22% had experienced accommodation problems or homelessness. Those who had self-harmed were over four times more likely to have experienced homelessness, and those who had ever attempted suicide were over five times more likely to have experienced accommodation issues, including homelessness (Strauss et al. 2017).
- In Australia's largest national survey of the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, *Private lives 3* (Hill et al. 2020), trans and gender diverse participants reported higher rates of ever experiencing homelessness than cisgender participants. 34.3% (n = 103) of trans men, 33.8% (n = 311) of non-binary participants, and 31.9% (n = 91) of trans women reported ever experiencing homelessness, compared to 19.8% (n = 584) of cisgender women and 16.8% (n = 391) of cisgender men.

Why are LGBTIQ+ people more likely to experience homelessness?

McNair et al. (2017) identified the following factors associated with higher rates of homelessness for LGBTIQ+ people in Australia:

- **Violence and harassment** arising from homophobia, biphobia and/or transphobia, and explicit discrimination. Violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ people encompasses escaping intimate partner violence and violence perpetrated by parents, siblings, children, and extended and chosen family.

The history of discrimination towards queer and trans people from homelessness services, particularly faith-based, was a significant barrier to help-seeking. It became clear in the course of these interviews that if these services which have a reputation for discrimination – and rejecting trans clients in particular – hope to become more inclusive then, despite the efforts of some staff to educate themselves and/or drive organisational change, considerable work will need to be undertaken in order to build trust with the community. (McNair et al. 2017: 26)

- **Ignorance**, including heteronormativity and/or cisgenderism, often manifested as assumptions of heterosexuality and/or misgendering.
- **Personal vulnerability**, including family conflict, childhood sexual assault, younger age of first homeless episode, mental health, and substance use issues. Other factors include poorer general health and financial stress due to medical expenses associated with gender affirmation.

This research also found that these factors were interconnected with vulnerabilities often directly related to experiences of **inequality and trauma**:

There was a common feeling that while the pathways to homelessness were very similar amongst all clients – including family violence, mental health issues, substance abuse and financial stress – they were made more complex for LGBTQ clients by the impact of discrimination and/or family rejection; and that these intersecting influences were seen to lead to a cycle of recurrent homelessness that was worse for LGBTQ people than cisgendered heterosexual people. (McNair et al. 2017: 24-25)

What other factors increase the risk of homelessness?

People who experience marginalisation and discrimination as a result of their identity or experience are at an even higher risk of experiencing homelessness. This includes younger and older people, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and refugees and asylum seekers. Their increased risk is a result of structural disadvantage and inequality. Sexism and gender inequality are also intersecting factors that negatively impact LGBTIQ+ people in relation to homelessness, particularly through the gender pay gap, domestic/family violence, and the feminisation of poverty into older age (Australian Human Rights Commission 2019; Equality Rights Alliance 2020).

People with disability, including psychosocial disability

Research shows that the physical and mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people is worse than that of the general population, with LGBTIQ+ people being more likely to have a mental health condition or physical disability. More than a third (38.5%; n = 2629) of participants in the Private Lives 3 survey (Hill et al. 2020) reported a disability or long-term health condition. Disabilities or impairments can affect access to housing, employment, and education (Women with Disabilities ACT 2017; Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby and Transgender Victoria 2020).

A number of disability rights advocates, including Women with Disabilities Australia; The ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS); and the ACT Disability Reference Group have called for minimum accessibility standards to be included in the NCC (Women with Disabilities ACT 2020). This would significantly improve the accessibility of dwellings for LGBTIQ+ people with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ elders.

LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants

Housing stress and risks of homelessness are also increased for LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum and refugees in Australia (Australia's Forcibly Displaced People Network 2020). Lack of income support, racial discrimination, and insufficient affordable housing are all barriers to sustainable accommodation for LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers and refugees, and these issues were highlighted in Australia's Forcibly Displaced People Network's (2020) submission to the Parliament of Australia. This submission identified that many LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum and refugees have been persecuted for their sexual and gender identities not only by state agents, but also by their communities and families. These

individuals are consequently less likely to engage the homelessness support service system in Australia for fear of discrimination and fear of their confidentiality being breached within their communities.

Access to income support and Medicare benefits, better data collection, increased affordable housing, and adequate funding for LGBTIQ+ specialised homelessness services, as well as ongoing training and professional development for mainstream homelessness service staff, are all recommended by Australia's Forcibly Displaced People Network (2020).

LGBTIQ+ migrant and religious minority group members are also thought to be at increased risk of homelessness. Religious minority members may be less likely to approach mainstream faith-based services because of their sexuality or gender identification. For international students, fear of visa cancellation and/or fear of reprisals from family and sponsors can inhibit help-seeking behaviours. Further data collection and analysis are required to fully understand the risks to LGBTIQ+ people from multicultural and multi-faith groups (National LGBTI Health Alliance 2020).

LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Research is also required to gain a better understanding of the experiences and prevalence of LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness. It is well established that our First Nations people generally experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness and incarceration than people who do not identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. It is also understood that our First Nations LGBTIQ+ people experience multiple structural, institutional, and interpersonal forms of discrimination based on race, gender, colonisation, and LGBTIQ+ status and are a high-risk group for suicide (Dudgeon et al. 2016).

Older LGBTIQ+ people

There are also significant research gaps in the experiences of older LGBTIQ+ Australians and homelessness (Housing for the Aged Action Group 2020). What is known is that more LGBTIQ+ elders have experienced homelessness than non-LGBTIQ+ elders. The risk of homelessness is increased for LGBTIQ+ elders due to lower numbers owning their own homes, higher numbers living in informal housing arrangements, significant numbers living with disabilities and in carer roles, and the fact that they are seven times more likely to live alone than the general older population (Housing for the Aged Action Group 2020).

Although older LGBTI people are at greater risk of homelessness, they do not recognise that they are at risk and 60% of LGBTI people do not know where to go for help and information about their housing options. There are a lack of affordable housing options for older LGBTI people, a lack of LGBTI friendly homelessness services and a lack of appropriate community education and housing options to prevent older LGBTI people becoming homeless. (Housing for the Aged Action Group 2020: 4)

Taking a strengths-based approach

While it is important to understand the factors contributing to the disproportionate levels of homelessness among LGBTIQ+ people, it is just as important to focus on the resilience of LGBTIQ+ people. Fraser et al. (2019) identify that focusing primarily on negative aspects of LGBTIQ+ homelessness leads to a limited understanding of the issue and undermines the resourcefulness of LGBTIQ+ people in working to meet their basic survival needs. Such a deficit-focus leads to risk-reduction strategies rather than more empowering strengths-based models.

LGBTIQ+ people are often brave and resourceful in their engagement in behaviours that enable them to maintain their identity and to meet their survival needs. For example, this bravery can be seen when LGBTIQ+ people leave family and/or foster care situations in order to look after their physical and mental wellbeing. In viewing the survival strategies of LGBTIQ+ people as bravery and a lack of timidity, we are able to move from a purely deficit-focused view to one that acknowledges their resiliency. Further research is needed to continue to expand upon this strengths-based understanding of LGBTIQ+ homelessness. (Fraser et al. 2019: 9)

Inclusive service provision

It is important to understand that despite the immense resilience of LGBTIQ+ people, not all homelessness and housing services are safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ people. The position of the auspicing organisation on LGBTIQ+ issues, or known views of housing service staff and management, can affect the perception of safety when approaching a service. Interacting with a non-inclusive service can cause anxiety about disclosing sexual orientation or gender identity, result in stigmatisation, and lead to the involuntary separation of couples in order to access services. The gendered nature of many homelessness services, which is known to sometimes co-occur with discriminatory trans-exclusionary ideology, is a significant barrier to trans, gender diverse, and non-binary people accessing safe emergency accommodation.

Fraser et al. (2019) highlight the need for service providers to be aware of intersectionality-related factors that LGBTIQ+ homeless people face and to work toward addressing these factors. According to their research, four main changes that housing service providers should implement are private showering facilities, low-occupancy limits, housing programs that are prevented from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender expression, and specific LGBTIQ+ non-discrimination and sensitivity training for all staff.

Hill et al. (2020) recommend that organisations providing homelessness support and in receipt of public funding be required to take steps to ensure LGBTIQ+-inclusive practice. They suggest that such organisations undertake organisational cultural safety training and work in partnership with community-controlled LGBTIQ+ health organisations.

Call for further research

While Meridian currently partners with Havelock Housing Association to provide some emergency accommodation for the sex and gender diverse community in Canberra, and we are aware of other services in Canberra that are working diligently to 'ensure more inclusive, client-centric practices, focused on ensuring all vulnerable people can access housing support' (YWCA Canberra 2020: para.4), much more research and work needs to be done to sustainably address the barriers to housing accessibility for Canberra's LGBTIQ+ community.

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