



Director and Staff
The Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs
Emailed to: LGBTIQOffice@act.gov.au

Dear Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs,

Re: Meridian's Written Submission for the Capital of Equality Second Action Plan Consultation

Meridian attended a face to face consultation with staff from the Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs regarding the Capital of Equality Second Action Plan and we appreciate the opportunity to also provide written feedback into the Second Action Plan. We acknowledge and sincerely thank the Chief Minister of the ACT, and staff from the Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs, in championing the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and striving for equality for all of us, through the Capital of Equality Strategy and associated Action Plans. We offer the following feedback regarding the Second Action Plan, in a spirit of partnership with the Office, and with the intention of continuing to work constructively together towards achieving greater equality for all LGBTIQ+ people in Canberra and our surrounding regions.

1. What impact does the Capital of Equality Strategy have on your service, services or communities you represent?

Meridian has a long-standing history of providing services to our LGBTIQ+ communities, people impacted by HIV and Sex Workers. We provide care and support to people living with and impacted by HIV and AIDS, as well as education, prevention and health promotion activities and events. One of Meridian's primary population groups is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQ+) communities, and as such we provide current information, support and education on all aspects of health and welfare related issues affecting LGBTIQ+ people. Meridian's Wellbeing Services provides counselling other primary health service to the LGBTIQ+ community with the greatest demand and greatest priority being the trans and gender diverse community seeking affirmative health care. Meridian and our partner organisations across Australia that are federated under AFAO are seeking to set up a national centre of excellence in primary health care for LGBTIQ+ people in each state and territory. Meridian is the organisation in the ACT doing this work and we seek to work with the Office through the Capital of Equality Strategy to development this model.

As the Office is aware, our LGBTIQ+ communities experience disproportionate rates of mental distress, homelessness, alcohol, tobacco and drug use and domestic and family violence, all linked to exposure to discrimination, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, prejudice and stigma based on our identities. Suffering is compounded for members of our communities with intersecting marginalised identities, for example our community members who are living with HIV and who are sex workers. Lateral violence, resulting from the trauma of violence and abuse that is perpetrated against our communities, also constitutes a barrier to LGBTIQ+ living in full alignment with our dignity as human beings.

Cultural-change work must be sustained and grounded in broad and continuing anti-discrimination work, mainstream community education and adequate support for peer-led LGBTIQ+ organisations, so that we can continue to challenge destructive prejudices, and work together to educate the general community about the inherent worthiness and value of human beings inclusive of our human diversity in the expression of our sex, sexual and gender identities.

2. What are your reflections on the First Action Plan and its activities?

The achievement of key tasks in the first action plan, such as banning conversion practices and progressing consultations on reforms to the Discrimination Act 1991, are commendable achievements. We also note that the First Action Plan outlines a commitment to fund community-based organisations to deliver targeted, peer-led services for LGBTIQ+ people and their families and communities. Currently the only funding that covers the spectrum of this commitment is the S&S LGBTIQ+ funding which is a little over \$100K. Meridian has some flexibility with our core funding to provide services and supports to LGBTIQ+ communities, but there is inadequate ACT Government funding for LGBTIQ+ community based, peer-led organisations in general. We believe there is ample community need, and evidence of this need, to justify additional funding for both Meridian and AGA to meet this commitment from the First Action Plan, before we move onto making more commitments in the Second Action Plan. ***Please see attached Submission to ACT Government Budget Consultation 2021-2022***, for more detail regarding the needs of our LGBTIQ+ communities and funding we are requesting from the ACT Government to address these needs.

It is our view that funding small community initiatives is a 'lovely to do' and very important for building community capacity, but more sustained and substantial funding for the ACT's two peer led services – Meridian and AGA – would go a long way towards enabling us to more comprehensively meet the needs of our communities and support inclusion and access for LGBTIQ+ people, their families and communities.

3. What priorities would you like to see reflected in the Second Action Plan?

As discussed above, we would love to see more sustained and substantial funding flow to both peer-led organisations in the ACT: Meridian and AGA. We would also like to see actions that have not yet been addressed in the First Action Plan, carried over into subsequent Action Plans, where appropriate, until they are addressed.

As detailed in Meridian's **ACT Government Budget Submission 2021-2022**, we view our priority funding needs for our LGBTIQ+ communities to be:

1. Increase our capacity to respond to unmet needs in LGBTIQ+ communities for safe, inclusive and identity affirming mental health services and supports. (ACT Health and Mental Health and CSD)
2. **Lead the development of the Online Information Hub.** (CMTEDD Capital of Equality)
3. Deliver CBR Fair Day annually. (Events ACT and annual naming rights sponsorship from the Chief Minister).
4. Maintain and run the CBR Pride Hub. (CMTEDD Capital of Equality)
5. Create a dedicated Housing and Homelessness Officer Position and an Aged Care Officer position to provide advocacy, information and support to LGBTIQ+ people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness. (ACT Housing and Homelessness and Greens commitment)
6. Deliver a community-based, peer-led testing program in the ACT. (ACT Health and Greens commitment)

4. What does inclusive and intersectional representation of marginalised groups in Canberra look like for you? Does the LGBTIQ+ acronym encompass the diversity in a meaningful way, or does it create additional barriers to representation?

LGBTIQ+ community members who serve as part of our Canberra Inclusive Partnership's (CIP) Service User Reference Group (SURG) have told us that they think it is important that the LGBTIQ+ acronym be inclusive of people who identify as asexual. For this reason Meridian endeavours, wherever possible to refer to LGBTIQ+ people. When co-designing our SURG Membership eligibility criteria, with our SURG Members, the Group told us that the following language, rather than strict categories of sexual and gender identities, was preferable:

"Membership is open to people who identify as LGBTIQ+. We acknowledge that as a term, LGBTIQ+ cannot capture the diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences that exist in our communities. We use the plus sign to communicate that LGBTIQ does not capture the full diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences, which include people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, asexual, and pansexual.

In addition to people of diverse identities, the Service User Reference Group encourages membership from people whose intersectional lived experience can often result in additional discrimination, stigma and structural disadvantage. This includes but is not limited to LGBTIQ+ people: who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; who are from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those who have lived experience of seeking asylum; who are people with disability; who use alcohol and other drugs; who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness; who are living with HIV or other chronic illnesses. Membership is also encouraged from people who are family or allies of LGBTIQ+ people."

Meridian aligns with the preferences of our SURG Members in striving to ensure that the language that we choose to identify our communities, is as inclusive, intersectionally aware, respectful and representative as possible.

For more information on terminology, Meridian has drafted a 'discussion paper' <https://meridianact.org.au/resources/exploring-good-practice-use-of-inclusive-group-identity-labels-to-represent-people-of-diverse-sexualities-genders-sex-characteristics-and-relationships/>

This paper presents the most up-to-date research on emerging practices in terminology use, thereby offering an essential resource to organisations wishing to remain in touch with the communities they serve. Due to the lack of primary research into the preferences of people of diverse sexualities, genders, sex characteristics, and relationships, this paper does not offer recommendations but rather aims to foster and inform conversations about what terms are most appropriate when referring to people of diverse sexualities, genders, sex characteristics and relationships.

5. The Second Action Plan will be structured around 3 objectives of the Capital of Equality Strategy.

a. Thinking about the first objective “fostering understanding and awareness so that barriers to equality can be removed”, what kind of actions are important for your communities to have included under this objective?

- ACT Government fund and support Meridian and AGA to continue to provide ongoing LGBTIQ+ awareness training to mainstream community services and ACT Government staff.
- Funding is adequate to ensure that access to LGBTIQ+ community events and services is as inclusive of people with disability as possible.
- Ensuring all LGBTIQ+ people have the choice to access peer-based, LGBTIQ+ specialist ATOD services, information and programs.
- Trans, gender diverse, non binary and intersex knowledge base and confidence needs to be boosted amongst GPs in Canberra: only a handful of GPs in Canberra advertise themselves as Trans health specialists – they get booked up very quickly and do not last long in Canberra – they move on. A broad based knowledge amongst GPs in Canberra would be helpful. Ensure that trans, non-binary, gender diverse and intersex people can nominate the gender of the person who will conduct an invasive procedure.
- Addressing trans people by their correct pronouns is often missed and/or they can be dead-named by medical professionals unless they have gone through the legal framework to change these. This is costly and laborious. There is also a lack of trans or gender diverse terminology awareness in medical paperwork and reception workers in most medical centres. More trans, gender diverse and non binary specific education of our health service providers is required.

b. Thinking about the second objective “undertaking service improvements to deliver more inclusive and accessible services”, what kind of actions are important for your communities to have included under this objective?

- Increase the funding available under the Stronger & supportive LGBTIQ+ Funding Stream.
- Build the capacity of the Service User Reference Group (funded under S&S) to offer practical and experienced undertaking service improvements to existing services.
- Address mental health, alcohol & drug and intimate partner violence as priorities.
- 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.

- ACT Government establish a community-controlled, co-designed, and trauma informed LGBTIQ+ homelessness and housing support service in Canberra.
- The housing and homelessness sectors adopt the ***LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Practice Guide for Homelessness and Sectors in Australia (2020)*** as standards for practice. Support for this change is delivered through comprehensive training on effectively responding to the unique needs of trans and gender diverse Canberrans and all LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness.
- ACT Government investigate and review instances where services are reported to be unable or unwilling to meet the ***LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Practice Guide for Homelessness and Sectors in Australia (2020)*** standards for practice after a set transition period.
- ACT Government increase the crisis, transitional and long-term housing supply in Canberra to tackle LGBTIQ+ homelessness and housing insecurity.
- Advocacy by the ACT Government to the Federal Government to integrate accessible design principles into Australia's National Construction Code (NCC).
- Increased ATOD treatment and harm reduction services that are safe, welcoming and affirming of LGBTIQ+ people's identities by either being delivered by LGBTIQ+ peer based organisations, or by mainstream ATOD services who have been trained to LGBTIQ+ competent – funding for services needs to be long-term and sustainable, particularly with regards to servicing marginalised, stigmatised communities.
- Sustainable funding for LGBTIQ+ youth specific services and programs.
- Strengthened funding for peer based community health promotion campaigns that utilise the skills and knowledge of peer-based community organisations, like Meridian and AGA.
- Ensuring that as many LGBTIQ+ employees in Canberra as possible can confidentially access a trauma-informed, strengths-based, culturally competent, peer-led, Employee Assistance Provider (EAP) program.
- Funding for LGBTIQ+ Domestic and Family Violence specific training for legal/judiciary, mental health, support workers, crisis accommodation workers and police who deal with DFV survivors (ACON provide this in Sydney): Ensuring that all domestic and family violence responders are trained in LGBTIQ+ cultural competency, including an understanding of the impacts of intersecting lived experiences of marginalisation, and being able to recognise unique forms of domestic and family violence in these communities, and support survivors to be safe and recover from trauma, are essential.
- Trans, non-binary and gender diverse people undergoing gender affirming hormone treatment require regular ongoing additional medical interventions (Eg: liver function tests, blood tests for hormone trough levels). These interventions are costly and often out of pocket. Only certain gender affirming hormone treatments are covered under the PBS, limiting options for treatment for some trans, non binary and gender diverse people. More accessible and affordable health care options for our trans, gender diverse and non-binary community members is still required.

c. Thinking about the third objective “continuing reforms to have equal rights reflected in law, data and policies”, what kind of actions are important for your communities to have included under this objective?

- Progress the incomplete actions from the First Action Plan that are yet to be achieved.
- Continued consultation with our LGBTIQ+ communities regarding emerging needs and barriers to equitable service delivery (the CIP SURG are available to be part of this ongoing dialogue with the ACT Government).
- ACT Government fund Meridian to undertake or commission research into the causes, rates, and experiences of Canberra’s homeless LGBTIQ+ population.
- See above re: ACT Government fund and support Meridian and AGA to continue to provide ongoing LGBTIQ+ awareness training to mainstream community services and ACT Government staff.
- ACT Government support Meridian to work with the community and ACT Government agencies to ensure that they implement the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) ***Standards for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables*** as a minimum standard for data collection.
- ACT Government challenge the discriminatory provisions of the revised Religious Discrimination Bill which will be introduced to Federal Parliament this year. The current draft bill will roll back hard-fought protections for LGBTIQ+ people, women, people with disability and people of faith, compromising our access to healthcare, and inclusive workplaces. The conservative religious lobby are pushing for laws that would privilege religious views over the rights and interests of other people in Australia.
- Supporting initiatives for greater relationship building between the Australian Federal Police and our LGBTIQ+ communities.
- Birth certificate laws still require reform to enable greater access to gender-appropriate birth certificates for trans and gender diverse people, particularly young people.
- Unless a trans, non-binary or gender diverse person has legally changed their gender markers with Medicare their results are returned as their assigned sex at birth – often while interacting with service providers (Phlebotomists for example) these gender markers listed on scripts can and often will be arbitrarily changed without consent: For example: one of our colleagues has had “U” for unspecified or unknown listed on their scripts for bloods. This colleague has also had their gender marker changed to “Female and/or Male” by the technician at their own discretion.
- Legislation relating to family and parenting needs to be reviewed to ensure that it doesn’t discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people; ensure female specific provisions in relation to pregnancy, childbirth and leave entitlements are gender inclusive and inclusive of non-biological parents.

- The ACT Government should amend the Domestic Violence Agencies Act 1986 (ACT) to include a representative to raise issues experienced by LGBTIQ+ people in family violence on the family violence advisory council. The ACT Government should consider adding representation and consultation with LGBTIQ+ people to existing and future legislative advisory mechanisms to ensure effective consultation on issues where LGBTIQ+ people are disproportionately affected.
- Need to ensure that access to redress, independent, affirmative peer support and psychological support for people with intersex variations and their families is implemented too.
- Remove outdated and unjustified exemptions from anti-discrimination laws, particularly in education, employment, service delivery and sport. There is also a shortage of homelessness and family violence accommodation for trans women, non-binary and gender-diverse people, as a result of a permanent statutory exemption for services for members of one sex in the ACT Discrimination Act. Update outdated legislation to be more inclusive of human diversity.

We thank you for your consideration of this feedback, and we remain committed to working constructively with the ACT Government towards realising full human rights for all of our LGBTIQ+ citizens.

Yours Sincerely,



Philippa Moss
Chief Executive Officer
7 July 2021