



**SUBMISSION TO  
ACT GOVERNMENT  
BUDGET CONSULTATION  
2021-2022**

## Overview

**Meridian is an LGBTIQ+ community-controlled, peer-led organisation that provides health and social support services to our community. We have been advocating for, and supporting, our communities for over 30 years. We celebrate diversity, strengthen community, and empower individuals to live their best lives.**

We are proud to be working alongside the ACT Government in creating a safe and inclusive city for all Canberrans. Meridian welcomes the commitments of the ACT Labor and ACT Greens policy platforms for the 10th Legislative Assembly that aim to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans, as outlined in the Parliamentary & Governing Agreement: 10<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly.

**Meridian is calling on the ACT Government to allocate adequate funding in the 2021/22 budget to implement these commitments.** Implementation of the following commitments is essential to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans:

1. **Progressively implementing the Capital of Equality First Action Plan** (ACT Labor commitment 11.1), including:
  - Funding community-based organisations to deliver targeted, peer-led services for LGBTIQ+ people, their families and communities.
  - Develop an LGBTIQ+ information hub to centralise information and discoverability of LGBTIQ+ affirmative services and supports in Canberra.
2. **Continuing to support our LGBTIQ+ events, including SpringOUT and Yes! Fest** (ACT Labor commitment 11.3)
3. **Increase the capacity of Meridian and continue to support CBR Pride Hub** (ACT Greens commitment 20.1)
4. **Fund a dedicated housing and homelessness officer to provide advocacy and support to same sex attracted and gender diverse people** (ACT Greens commitment 20.2)
5. **Roll out community based rapid HIV testing and HIV/BBV prevention efforts** (ACT Greens commitment 20.5)

**The ACT Government can meet the above commitments by funding Meridian to:**

1. Increase our capacity to respond to unmet needs in LGBTIQ+ communities for safe, inclusive and identity affirming mental health services and supports.
2. Lead the development of the Online Information Hub.
3. Deliver CBR Fair Day annually.
4. Maintain and run the CBR Pride Hub.
5. Create a dedicated Housing and Homelessness Officer and a Youth Work Officer position to provide advocacy, information and support to LGBTIQ+ people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.
6. Deliver a community-based, peer-led testing program in the ACT.

These funding requests are informed by the expertise and lived experience of our staff and our insight into the needs of our communities as a peer-led organisation embedded in LGBTIQ+ communities. They are also informed by the lived experience of the Canberra Inclusive Partnership's LGBTIQ+ Service User Reference Group (SURG), preliminary data from research Meridian is leading into the role of LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisations in improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ communities (peer-led services research) and monitoring and evaluation data from our programs and services.

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**A note on terminology:** Meridian uses the initialism LGBTIQA+ to refer to people of diverse genders, sexualities and sex characteristics, including but not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, pansexual, and people who have an intersex variation. We recognise that the initialism does not capture the full diversity of sexualities, bodies, identities, and experiences that exist within our community, however we also recognise the value of the term when exploring collective experiences of stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation, and when advocating for LGBTIQA+ rights and inclusivity. In this document we also use LGBTIQ+ when citing ACT Government documents to align with the Government terminology.

# ACT LABOR GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

## **PROGRESSIVELY IMPLEMENTING THE CAPITAL OF EQUALITY FIRST ACTION PLAN**

This First Action Plan sits under the Capital of Equality Strategy and aims to make Canberra the most LGBTIQ+ welcoming and inclusive city in Australia. It details the actions the ACT Government wants to make by the end of 2021 to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.

This section of the submission provides Meridian's recommendations about how the ACT Government can most effectively and efficiently implement the following commitments in the action plan.

### **ACTION PLAN COMMITMENT: FUNDING COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS TO DELIVER TARGETED, PEER-LED SERVICES FOR LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE, THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.**

As Canberra's only LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisation delivering mental health services, Meridian has unique insight into the experiences and needs of LGBTIQ+ people. The most pressing need for our community is safe, inclusive and identity affirming mental health services. Research consistently shows that peer-led organisations are best equipped to meet this need, however Meridian's mental health services are at capacity. There is an urgent need for more funding to expand the capacity of our service.

In addition to meeting the ACT Governments commitment under the Capacity of Equality First Action Plan, increasing Meridian's funding to deliver mental health services also aligns with the following ACT Government commitments:

- **ACT Labor Health Policy Position Statement<sup>i</sup>**, which commits to delivering *"increased access to psychosocial and peer support by working with Meridian"*.
- **ACT Greens sexual orientation, gender identify and intersex rights platform<sup>ii</sup>** which commits to *"Boosting the capacity of Meridian to expand their reach"*.

### **RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:**

- **Fund Meridian to increase our capacity to respond to unmet needs in LGBTIQ+ communities for safe, inclusive and identity affirming mental health services.**
- **Support implementation of the ACT Greens' commitments (detailed under [ACT Greens Commitments](#)) by funding Meridian to:**
  - Continue to deliver the Canberra Pride Hub.
  - Employ a dedicated housing and homelessness officer to provide advocacy and support to same sex attracted and gender diverse people.
  - Roll out community-based rapid HIV testing and HIV/BBV prevention efforts.

### **IDENTIFIED NEED**

The mental health of LGBTIQ+ people is among the poorest in Australia.<sup>iii</sup> LGBTIQ+ people are twice as likely to be diagnosed and treated for a mental health disorder than the broader population. Transgender and gender diverse people's health and wellbeing is markedly worse; they are nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with or treated for a mental health disorder than lesbian or gay people. LGBTIQ+ people also experience higher rates of suicidality than any other population group in Australia, with 20 per cent of transgender Australians and 15.7 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual Australians reporting suicidal ideation.

The disparity between the mental health of LGBTIQ+ people and the wider community is a direct result of LGBTIQ+ people's exposure to multiple, interconnected, and recurring forms of discrimination, marginalisation, stigma, social exclusion, abuse, and violence. The compounding impact of these experiences is known as minority stress. Minority stress increases the risk of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm, and suicide and has been associated with a range of physical health conditions, including influenza, viral infections, cancer, and hypertension.

Additionally, LGBTIQ+ people experience many barriers to accessing services caused by fears of, or prior experiences of, discrimination, lack of accessible and affordable services, and lack of LGBTIQ+ specialist services.<sup>iv</sup> These barriers are even more pronounced for trans and gender diverse people.<sup>v</sup> As a result, many LGBTIQ+ people delay or do not access the services and support they need<sup>vi</sup>, which leads to late diagnoses and increased incidences of preventable diseases.<sup>vii</sup>

Meridian recently undertook a co-design process with our LGBTIQ+ communities to identify unmet needs and barriers to services, and to design a service model for delivering targeted mental health services to LGBTIQ+ people. The co-design process revealed that there is significant unmet need in LGBTIQ+ communities for safe, inclusive and identify affirming psychological support services. Additionally, Meridian clients have reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated social distancing requirements have negatively impacted their mental health.

## ADDRESSING THE NEED

As noted by the ACT Greens in their Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Rights policy platform, *"disproportionately high rates of mental health concerns, isolation, discrimination and exclusion present us with the need to provide specific and additional supports to these members of our community."*<sup>viii</sup>

Meridian provides essential mental health services to LGBTIQ+ people. This includes psychological therapy, counselling, case management, psycho-social group work and peer-support. Our mental health services are fully accredited to the National Standards for Mental Health Services (NSMHS). These services have been shown to be highly effective at improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, however they are at capacity. As Canberra's only LGBTIQ+ peer-led mental health service, increasing the capacity of Meridian's Wellbeing Service is critical for improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.

In a co-design process with LGBTIQ+ people, Meridian developed the Inclusive Pathways service to respond to unmet needs in the community. This service is partially funded by the Canberra Health Network (CHN), however Meridian requires further funding to ensure the service has the capacity to address the unmet need in our communities. The Inclusive Pathways service model includes the provision of trauma-informed counselling, which was strongly advocated for by the Canberra Inclusive Partnership's (CIP) Service User Reference Group (SURG) that co-designed the model. This trauma-informed counselling service is not in scope for CHN funding. Meridian is requesting that the ACT Government allocate funding to Meridian to enable us to address this gap in services. To effectively address the needs of LGBTIQ+ communities we need to provide service consistency and ensure that people experiencing mental health issues have access to the service when they need it. To achieve this, we need funding security and consistency, so we ask the ACT Government to explore options for providing ongoing funding that is responsive to community need.

## FUNDING REQUEST

**Meridian is requesting \$180,000 annually to fund a 1.5 FTE counselling position.\***

*\*This figure includes salary, on costs, superannuation, supervision, professional development, administration and expenses.*

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

### Domain: Health - being healthy and supported with the right care

#### Indicator: Mental health

Mental health services provided by peer-led organisations such as Meridian are essential for improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, with research showing that LGBTIQ+ specific services are most effective in improving the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ clients.<sup>ix</sup> Preliminary data from Meridian's Inclusive Pathways counselling service shows that 92% of clients have experienced health and wellbeing improvements as a result of using the service, with 85% saying that the improvement was to their mental health. 100% of clients say the program has helped them improve their emotional wellbeing and resilience very much or significantly.

#### Indicator: Access to health services

LGBTIQ+ peer-led services, such as those provided by Meridian, play a crucial role in reducing healthcare inequities. Research consistently shows that peer-led organisations that are embedded in LGBTIQ+ communities are essential to reducing service barriers.<sup>x</sup> Preliminary findings from Meridian's research into the value of peer-led services echoes this research with 55% of respondents having actively avoided or delayed accessing support because they feared stigma, discrimination or abuse (n=238). 79% of survey respondents said they are more likely to access support if a peer-led service is available.

### Domain: Identity and belonging - being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society.

#### Indicator: Sense of belonging and inclusion

Peer-led services have been shown to increase connection to community and a sense of belonging, with 70% of participants in Meridian's peer-led services research saying that peer-led services increase their connection to community always or sometimes. Evaluation of Meridian's Inclusive Pathways service shows that 98% of clients agree or strongly agree that they feel accepted and safe to be themselves when using the service. When asked what outcomes they have experienced relating to increased access to relevant information services and support, 69% said they feel more connected to community.

## ACTION PLAN COMMITMENT: DEVELOP AN LGBTIQ+ INFORMATION HUB TO CENTRALISE INFORMATION AND DISCOVERABILITY OF LGBTIQ+ AFFIRMATIVE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS IN CANBERRA.

### RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- **Fund Meridian to lead the development of the online Information Hub.**

### IDENTIFIED NEED

The Service User Reference Group (SURG) that co-designed Meridian's Inclusive Pathways service identified the need for an Online Information and Intake Hub to centralise information relevant to LGBTIQ+ people and their families and allies, and facilitate access to LGBTIQ+ safe and inclusive services. The reference group highlighted that there is a lack of information available about safe and affirming services which means that LGBTIQ+ people often fear accessing new services. They advocated that the Hub is essential for removing barriers to mental health services for LGBTIQ+ people and reaching people who are not accessing mental health services, including those who

disengaged from the mental health system due to negative experiences. The group proposed an 'Online Information and Intake Hub' to:

- Provide a central location for LGBTIQ+ people and their families and carers to access information and education resources about diverse sexualities, genders, and intersex characteristics as well as mental health disorders. This will include information and links to relevant services, including online support forums.
- Provide information about LGBTIQ+ mental health services, including information about staff, details of the intake process, testimonials from clients, and videos showing people what to expect from their engagement with the service, including physically accessing the building. This is designed to reduce anxieties about accessing a new service, particularly for people with disabilities and their carers.
- Provide all paperwork that the client will be required to complete so they know what to expect and can choose to complete it in advance. This is designed to reduce anxieties and enable people who need support from carers and/or family and friends to complete the paperwork with their assistance.
- Facilitate a self-referral process for people to register to be contacted by the service and provide their preferred contact method.

## ADDRESSING THE NEED

Meridian commenced scoping of the 'Online Information and Intake Hub' as part of the Inclusive Pathways co-design process. However, we identified that the Hub requires a separate co-design process to more widely consult with LGBTIQ+ people and engage health and community services and organisations to ensure the Hub becomes a shared resource for the sector to reach LGBTIQ+ people, their family members and allies. The co-design process would also ensure the Hub was informed by good-practice information Hubs, such as Women with Disabilities Australia's Our Site and ACON's Trans Hub. The co-design process would also scope the project, including developing an implementation plan and a budget.

## FUNDING REQUEST

**Meridian is requesting \$50,000 to undertake a co-design project to design the online information and intake hub.**

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

**Domain: Health - being healthy and supported with the right care**

Indicator: Access to health services

As identified by the Service User Reference Group, an Online Information and Referral Hub is essential for reaching people who are not accessing mental health services, including those who disengaged from the mental health system due to negative experiences. The SURG expressed that because of past experiences of stigma, discrimination and abuse when accessing health services, they often feel anxious about accessing a new service. Research shows that this can lead to LGBTIQ+ people delaying or avoiding accessing mental health services.<sup>xi</sup> The Hub will assist in overcoming this barrier by providing information about services that are safe, inclusive and identity affirming.

## ACT GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT: CONTINUING TO SUPPORT OUR LGBTIQ+ EVENTS, INCLUDING SPRINGOUT AND YES! FEST.

### RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- Provide long-term, sustainable funding to Meridian to deliver CBR Fair Day annually.

### IDENTIFIED NEED

LGBTIQ+ people are significantly more likely to experience social isolation, discrimination, bullying, rejection by family and friends, and violence, than the wider community.<sup>xii</sup> As a result, LGBTIQ+ may avoid participating in public activities, leading to feelings of isolation. LGBTIQ+ people frequently report feeling as though they do not belong and that their communities won't accept their identities, with the *Private lives 3* study revealing that only 30% reported feeling accepted in public.<sup>xiii</sup> LGBTIQ+ people report feeling more accepted at LGBTIQ+ events and venues compared to mainstream events and venues<sup>xiv</sup>, highlighting the importance of LGBTIQ+ community events. Additionally, encouraging connections between LGBTIQ+ people and their allies facilitates the creation of social bonds within the community, which can help to build LGBTIQ+ people's resilience to prejudice and reduce social stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people.<sup>xv</sup>

### ADDRESSING THE NEED

Meridian's CBR Fair Day, which launches SpringOUT every year, is a well-loved event on the Canberra events calendar that has been bringing the community together to celebrate Canberra's Pride Festival and build community cohesion for the last 20 years. Funded by the ACT Health Directorate, CBR Fair Day promotes the creation of safe and supportive communities in which LGBTIQ+ people feel included, affirmed in their gender and sexual identities, and in which they are able to access high-quality and relevant services and information.

While the funding from the ACT Health Directorate has been fundamental in enabling Meridian to deliver CBR Fair Day every year, the event continues to grow in response to community interest and the funding no longer covers the event costs. In recent years the gap in funding has been roughly \$50,000 - \$70,000, which Meridian has had to source from one-off, small grants and fundraising. This impacts the ability to plan in advance and increases administrative costs to deliver the event.

Meridian is seeking medium to long-term funding of three to five years (with agreed indexation) to deliver CBR Fair Day. Ideally this funding would increase over the term of the funding agreement to provide scope for the event to respond to continued growth in participation at the event. Ongoing funding for CBR Fair Day is essential to ensuring that LGBTIQ+ Canberrans have a safe and inclusive community event to celebrate Pride, and the wider community has an opportunity to celebrate diversity within our community.

### FUNDING REQUEST

Meridian is requesting \$70,000 annually to fill the gap in funding for CBR Fair Day.

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

### Domain: Social Connection- being connected with family, friends and community

#### Indicator: Sense of social connection

Events such as CBR Fair Day have been shown to increase community acceptance and belonging.<sup>xvi</sup> Findings from the evaluation of three years of CBR Fair Day (2017-2019) show that 92% of attendees found CBR Fair day to be effective or very effective in strengthening community connection and cohesion.

#### Indicator: Participation in community events and activities

CBR Fair Day attracted 1800 attendees in 2019 alone, showing that it facilitates LGBTIQ+ people and their allies' participation in community events, with many (64%) participants also attending in previous years. Evaluation data found that 94% felt that CBR Fair Day was effective or very effective in providing LGBTIQ+ people and their allies with a fun filled day of quality entertainment, cultural activities and community engagement.

### Domain: Identity and belonging - being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society.

#### Indicator: Belonging and inclusion

As noted above, LGBTIQ+ people frequently report feeling as though they do not belong, but that they feel more accepted at LGBTIQ+ events. 95% of CBR Fair Day attendees report that the event was effective or very effective at providing LGBTIQ+ people with a safe and inclusive space to celebrate Pride. Research shows that this is connected to increased sense of community acceptance and belonging.<sup>xvii</sup>

### Domain: Health - being healthy and supported with the right care

#### Indicator: Mental health

LGBTIQ+ pride events such as CBR Fair Day promote feelings of pride in one's identity and in the community. This can reduce the shame and stigma often internalised by LGBTIQ+ people about their identities,<sup>xviii</sup> and contribute to better self-esteem and improved mental health and wellbeing.<sup>xix</sup> Additionally, community and social connection increases social support for LGBTIQ+ people, and assists in the development of coping mechanisms to social stigma.<sup>xx</sup> These are major protective factors for improved health and wellbeing.<sup>xxi</sup>

#### Indicator: Access to health services

CBR Fair day connects LGBTIQ+ people to information, organisations and services that are relevant and inclusive. 95% of CBR Fair Day attendees said that the event was effective or very effective at connection LGBTIQ+ people to information, services and support. Ensuring LGBTIQ+ people have information about available safe, inclusive and knowledgeable LGBTIQ+ services is key to reducing barriers to services and increasing help-seeking behaviour.<sup>xxii</sup>

# ACT GREENS COMMITMENTS

## COMMITMENT 20.1: INCREASE THE CAPACITY OF MERIDIAN AND CONTINUE TO SUPPORT CBR PRIDE HUB.

### RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- **Fund Meridian to respond to unmet needs in LGBTIQ+ communities for safe, inclusive and identity affirming mental health services** (as detailed under [ACT Labor Commitments](#) above).
- **Fund Meridian to continue to maintain and run the CBR Pride Hub.**

### IDENTIFIED NEED

Many LGBTIQ+ people have experienced discrimination, bullying, micro-aggressions and violence when accessing public spaces and services. As a result, many choose to hide their identities in public spaces or avoid spaces and services where they feel unsafe or not accepted.<sup>xxiii</sup> However, more LGBTIQ+ people feel accepted in LGBTIQ+ spaces than in mainstream spaces.<sup>xxiv</sup> This indicates a need for more safe and inclusive spaces targeted at LGBTIQ+ people, such as Pride Hub Canberra.

### ADDRESSING THE NEED

The Pride Hub Canberra is designed to provide a safe and inclusive meeting space for Canberra's LGBTIQ+ communities, organisations and services. The meeting space features computer access, an audio/visual projector, comfortable furniture, tea and coffee and refreshment facilities, flexible seating arrangements, WIFI access and restroom access.

Currently Pride Hub Canberra is utilised frequently by a wide and diverse range of community members and allies, including yoga groups, the Canberra Inclusive Partnership's Service User Reference Group, the Sex Worker Outreach Program's drop-in peer support service, Meridian's SoBar SMART recovery groups, the LGBTIQ+ Mental Health Practitioner Network, Rainbow Ranters (Toastmasters group), MAGNET, LGBTIQ+ aged care providers, Meridian volunteers, DEIFY and more. As Canberra has few other community spaces specifically for LGBTIQ+ people, ongoing investment in Pride Hub Canberra is essential for ensuring LGBTIQ+ people have access to a safe and inclusive community space.

Pride Hub Canberra also supports non-LGBTIQ+ organisations to reach LGBTIQ+ people in a way that prioritises LGBTIQ+ people's safety. We invite the ACT Government to host the LGBTIQ+ Ministerial Advisory Council, and other relevant government meetings, in Pride Hub Canberra, as a way of further strengthening the relationship between the ACT Government and LGBTIQ+ communities.

### FUNDING REQUEST

**Meridian is requesting \$25,000 annually to continue to maintain and run Pride Hub Canberra.**

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

### Domain: Social connection - being connected with family, friends and community

#### Indicator: Sense of social connection

Evaluation data for Pride Hub Canberra shows that it facilitates social connection, with 54% of Pride Hub's patrons saying it helps them reach and engage LGBTIQ+ people.

### Domain: Identity and belonging - being able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society.

#### Indicator: belonging and inclusion

67% of bookings for CBR Pride Hub are by LGBTIQ+ organisations, showing that Pride Hub Canberra is providing a community space for LGBTIQ+ people. Evaluation data shows that the most common reason people choose Pride Hub Canberra is because it "is a safe space that is supportive of LGBTIQ+ people," with 56% choosing this reason. Research shows that strengthening LGBTIQ+ people's inclusion in social contexts and spaces is key to increasing their sense of belonging.<sup>xxv</sup>

## COMMITMENT 20.2: FUND A DEDICATED HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS OFFICER TO PROVIDE ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT TO SAME SEX ATTRACTED AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE.

### RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- Create a dedicated Housing and Homelessness Officer position and a Youth Worker position to provide advocacy, information and support to LGBTIQ+ people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.
- Review and consider the detailed recommendations provided by Meridian in our LGBTIQ+ Housing Position Paper (attached).

### IDENTIFIED NEED

LGBTIQ+ people experience higher rates of homelessness than the wider population.<sup>xxvi</sup> This is even more pronounced for trans or gender diverse people.<sup>xxvii</sup> This disadvantage is the result of the intersection of both structural and personal factors, including violence, exclusion from the family or caregivers' home, harassment, discrimination, ignorance, disability access issues, trauma, substance use, poverty and health factors.<sup>xxviii</sup> The risk of homelessness is exacerbated for LGBTIQ+ people who experience intersectional disadvantage, such as young and older people, people with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and culturally and linguistically diverse people, including refugees and asylum seekers.

LGBTIQ+ people also experience barriers to homelessness services and securing *suitable* housing, which in turn can contribute to homelessness.<sup>xxix</sup> A lack of services that are safe and accessible for LGBTIQ+ people is one significant barrier. LGBTIQ+ people may feel unsafe or fear discrimination in services and avoid disclosing their identities, which can make it difficult to find suitable housing.<sup>xxx</sup> Additionally, services in the housing sector sometimes offer gender-based modes of service delivery (such as providing emergency housing services specifically for men or for women) which can result in barriers for trans, gender diverse, and non-binary people accessing safe and suitable emergency accommodation.<sup>xxxi</sup> In the Private Lives 3 study, 16% reported experiencing barriers to housing and/or accessing homelessness services because of their sexual orientation and 30% of trans and gender diverse respondents reported having experienced barriers to housing and/or accessing homelessness services because of their gender identity.<sup>xxxii</sup>

## ADDRESSING THE NEED

Meridian recently published an LGBTIQ+ Housing Position Paper to highlight the housing and homelessness services needs of LGBTIQ+ people. The paper highlights the need to remove barriers to safe and sustainable housing and existing housing support services for our LGBTIQ+ community, including through the establishment of safe, sustainable, well-designed, and specialised LGBTIQ+ housing services.

As an LGBTIQ+ peer-led organisation with strong relationships with LGBTIQ+ communities, Meridian understands LGBTIQ+ people's unique experiences of homelessness and the housing and homelessness sector, as well as the responses required to address their needs. We also have a strong record of providing advocacy, information and support on housing and homelessness issues as part of our HIV Case Management service. As a peer-based service, Meridian is well positioned to take a leading role in ensuring LGBTIQ+ people's needs and experiences are addressed in housing and homelessness policy and within the sector more broadly. In recognition of the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on LGBTIQ+ communities, Meridian is increasing our focus on these issues. For example, we have formed a partnership with Havelock Housing Association and now hold the occupancy rights to a one-bedroom unit for LGBTIQ+ people on transitional support and have an agreement in place for another property in the future.

Meridian recommends the ACT Government fund a dedicated housing and homelessness officer to provide systematic advocacy and individual support to LGBTIQ+ people within the housing and homelessness sector. The dedicated Homelessness and Housing Officer will also intervene early to prevent homelessness, including through supporting clients to maintain and strengthen their connection to community, employment, education and healthcare. We also recommend funding an additional 0.5 FTE Youth Worker position to advocate for, inform and support young LGBTIQ+ Canberrans as they navigate housing and care options. For many of our young people they struggle with living in an unsupportive environment where services and supports do not acknowledge their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

## FUNDING REQUEST

**Meridian is requesting \$160,000 to fund a 1 FTE Housing and Homelessness Officer and a .5 FTE Youth Worker. \***

*\*This figure includes salary, on costs, superannuation, supervision, professional development, administration and expenses for a 1.5 FTE.*

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

**Domain: Housing and Home - Having a place to call home**

Indicator: Reducing Homelessness

The dedicated Housing and Homelessness Officer to provide systematic advocacy, information and individual support to LGBTIQ+ people within the housing and homelessness sector to reduce barriers to accessing housing services, thereby reducing the risk of LGBTIQ+ homelessness. They will also provide wrap-around support to reduce the risk of clients experiencing homelessness.

Indicator: Increasing housing suitability

The Housing and Homelessness Officer will provide systematic, and individual advocacy to LGBTIQ+ people to ensure they have access to suitable housing. The Youth Worker will specifically focus on ensuring that younger LGBTIQ+ people have access to suitable accommodation options.

## COMMITMENT 20.5: ROLL OUT COMMUNITY BASED RAPID HIV TESTING AND HIV/BBV PREVENTION EFFORTS.

### RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- **Fund Meridian to deliver a community-based, peer-led testing program in the ACT.**

### IDENTIFIED NEED

Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBM) form a large proportion of people affected by HIV in the ACT, particularly gay men from high-prevalence countries. Many new HIV transmissions among GBM originate from men who were unaware of their positive status.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Increasing testing rates is one of the most effective strategies for reducing HIV transmissions and improving health outcomes because it reduces the time between transmission, diagnosis and treatment. With early and consistent treatment, a person can achieve an undetectable viral load which makes HIV untransmissible, something that plays a key role in the virtual elimination of HIV.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Additionally, when people know their status, they are able to make changes to their sex practices to reduce the risk of onward transmission.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men who have experiences with, or fears of, discomfort and stigma in healthcare environments may avoid testing. Research has found that GBM prefer rapid HIV testing and are more likely to test more frequently if they can access rapid HIV testing. Research has also found that community-based testing is effective at reaching people who have not previously been tested for HIV as well as people from marginalised communities.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Specifically, Asian-born GBM – a key priority population in Canberra – are more likely to engage in community-based HIV testing services.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### ADDRESSING THE NEED

Meridian, Hepatitis ACT, Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT), and other relevant health and community service organisations, including Canberra Sexual Health Centre (CSHC), have a demonstrated track record of collaborating to identify and trial community-based, outreach, health promotion and BBV/STI testing strategies with priority populations. However, we have been unable to comprehensively roll out or scale up these initiatives due to a lack of funding.

Meridian is seeking funding to deliver a community-based, peer-led testing program in the ACT. Meridian will seek to partner with Hepatitis ACT, SHFPACT and CSHC. This funding will enable us to build on our experience and established partnerships to reach at-risk communities who are unlikely to access existing testing mechanisms and programs. The testing program will include a targeted awareness raising campaign; community-based, peer-led rapid HIV testing, including through outreach services; and post-test counselling services, which is well-established best practice in delivering HIV testing.

### FUNDING REQUEST

**Meridian is requesting \$245,000 annually to deliver a community-based, peer-led testing program in the ACT.\***

*\* This figure includes peer-staff resourcing, including training; pathology and clinical oversight costs, RHT kits and counselling staff. A full budget can be provided on request.*

## CONTRIBUTION TO ACT GOVERNMENT WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

### Domain: Health - being healthy and supported with the right care

#### Indicator: Overall health

By funding Meridian to deliver rapid HIV testing in community settings, the ACT Government will contribute to increasing testing frequency and improving access to treatment, leading to a reduction of mortality and morbidity associated with HIV.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Early commencement and adherence to anti-retroviral therapy (ART) helps to suppress viral load and protects the health of people living with HIV.<sup>xxxix</sup>

#### Indicator: Access to Services

LGBTIQA+ people who have experiences with, or fears of, discomfort and stigma in healthcare environments avoid testing. Offering rapid HIV testing in community settings will improve the access of GBM to testing services by providing non-stigmatising, safe and inclusive testing environments in which they are able to speak to peers about their sexual health.<sup>xi</sup> Peer-led testing services can more easily build trust with clients, and so clients feel more comfortable testing with peers, which increases testing rates.<sup>xii</sup> For people who test positive for HIV, Meridian can provide information and support, including connection to Meridian's own suite of counselling and clinical services for people living with HIV. Access to information and support increases the likelihood of treatment uptake and adherence.

<sup>xlii</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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