

# 2026/2027 ACT BUDGET SUBMISSION

March 2026

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tuggeranong Community Arts Association is seeking increased funding for its Messengers Program to expand service delivery to Canberra's Northside.

Messengers is a specialist mental health youth service that sits within the broader context of the community sector. We fully support and endorse the recommendations made by ACTCOSS and the Youth Coalition of the ACT, in particular:

- Provide \$20m per year uplift in the community sector commencing 2027–2028 financial year
- Reform the ACT community sector indexation to reflect actual cost pressures.

To complement these sector-wide reforms, we recommend targeted investment in the Messengers Program, supported through a whole-of-government approach to young people's wellbeing:

- That the ACT Government establish a sustainable, cross-portfolio funding commitment for the Messengers program, with a directive to secure contributions from ACT Health given the program's demonstrable role in reducing pressure on clinical and acute services and supporting whole-of-government mental health reform.
- That the ACT Government commit funds for the expansion of Messengers to Gungahlin/Northside as a strategic, evidence-based initiative that aligns with ACT Government priorities (youth mental health, early intervention, service equity).

Supported by



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Tuggeranong Community Arts Association is a not-for profit incorporated association registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. ABN: 66461861538

*Tuggeranong Community Arts Association acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land where we gather, work and create, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people.*

*We respect that this is Country upon which language, arts and culture has been shared and practised for time immemorial.*

## ABOUT US

Tuggeranong Community Arts Association (TCAA) has been a cornerstone of the Tuggeranong region's cultural life for over 30 years, delivering inclusive, accessible, and diverse artistic programs that connect people and celebrate creativity.

Operating the Tuggeranong Arts Centre (TAC), TCAA offers free exhibitions across three gallery spaces, a vibrant live performance program, community engagement initiatives, and a wide range of workshops and classes. These programs span multiple artforms, including dance, visual arts, theatre, music, and outreach, and are designed to foster participation, inclusion, and artistic excellence.

The Messengers Program based at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre is an arts-based support program for young people who are experiencing mental health challenges and other issues that interfere with their capacity to engage at school, home and in their community. At risk young people aged 9-25 (groups for age ranges: 9-13, 14-18 and 18-25 years) are offered a therapeutic arts-based approach that builds resilience, improves mental and social wellbeing and young people's acceptance of their diversity.

Demand for Messengers continues to grow, with young people presenting predominantly with anxiety, depression, and social isolation, alongside very high rates of ADHD, ASD and co-occurring AuADHD. The cohort remains highly diverse and vulnerable, with strong representation from LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse young people, and wellbeing scores averaging 41 on the Warwick-Edinburgh scale—well below the population average of 51. Overall, the program is supporting participants with complex mental health needs and significant psychosocial vulnerability.

## RISING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Recent evidence highlights a significant rise in mental health needs across the ACT, with increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders placing growing pressure on the system.

A two-year- report from the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network found that Canberra's mental health system is 'fragmented and expensive', with long wait times, rising costs, and ineffective care causing people especially those experiencing socio-economic hardship to fall through the cracks. This report highlights that those struggling economically, including low -income young people, those experiencing housing instability, and young people with psychosocial disability, are most likely to be excluded due to upfront costs and lack of accessible pathways.<sup>1</sup>

The ACT Audit Office (2024) also reported that Canberra Health Services is experiencing a significant increase in demand for mental health services for young people, particularly those aged 12–18 with moderate to severe mental illness. However, no corresponding expansion of services has occurred, and performance is not being adequately monitored.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews, D. (2025) *ACCESS DENIED: A consumer-led study into barriers to accessing mental health services in the ACT*. ACT Mental Health Consumer Network Inc. Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> ACT Auditor-General. (2024). *Planning and delivery of services for young people with moderate to severe mental illness: Performance Audit Report No. 4*. Canberra: ACT Auditor-General's Office.

Service providers, as noted in the *Missing Middle Mental Health Report*<sup>3</sup> have pointed to critical gaps in care, including the lack of specialist programs for young people affected by trauma and for those with co-occurring conditions such as ASD or ADHD alongside mental health concerns. They further emphasise that many children and young people require more intensive, frequent, and tailored interventions than periodic clinical sessions can provide, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated and accessible services to meet rising demand. Neurodivergent young people require tailored support but face inconsistent service delivery, as highlighted in youth policy recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

The Youth Coalition's *2025–26 Budget Response* also identifies multiple critical gaps noting that there is inadequate provision for 18–25-year-olds, a group that often falls between youth and adult systems and that CAMHS Northside services are under resourced- despite surging demand<sup>5</sup>

Current funding levels are insufficient to meet the growing needs of communities, particularly vulnerable populations. The *Counting the Costs* review identifies chronic cost pressures across ACT community services, concluding that current funding levels do not meet the real costs of delivering services, particularly in early intervention and prevention.<sup>6</sup> The ACT Government's own response acknowledges that while over \$200 million is provided across 140 organisations, this broad allocation falls short of covering rising operational costs, meaning youth mental health services struggle to maintain adequate accessibility and workforce capacity.<sup>7</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION:

**That the ACT Government establish a sustainable, cross-portfolio funding commitment for the Messengers program, with a directive to secure contributions from ACT Health given the program's demonstrable role in reducing pressure on clinical and acute services and supporting whole-of-government mental health reform.**

## SUCCESS OF MESSENGERS

The effectiveness of the Messengers Program is underpinned by its delivery model, which combines specialist staff with extensive experience, a trauma-informed framework, and a consistently safe and supportive environment outside the school setting. Alongside this, the program maintains regular, constructive communication with parents and carers to identify emerging challenges, respond to changing support needs, and address any barriers to participation—providing families with ongoing guidance as they navigate support across school, community, and home.

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<sup>3</sup> Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing. (2022, August). *Final Report: Understanding the 'Missing Middle': Children and young people with moderate to severe mental health concerns who experience difficulties accessing services*. Canberra: ACT Government.

<sup>4</sup> Legislative Assembly for the ACT. (2023, September 14). *Neurodiversity in the ACT: Assembly Resolution of 14 September 2023 Government-Response Statement*. Canberra: ACT Government.

<sup>5</sup> Youth Coalition of the ACT (Barry, E., & Watts, H.). (2025). *Response to the ACT Budget 2025–2045: What's in it for young people?*. Canberra: Youth Coalition of the ACT.

<sup>6</sup> Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021). *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

<sup>7</sup> ACT Government. (2023). *ACT Government response to the Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector report*. Canberra: ACT Government.

While outreach sessions delivered in schools provide valuable short-term engagement, it is the sustained, centre-based program at Tuggeranong Arts Centre that facilitates meaningful behavioural, social, and emotional change. Young people are able to attend regularly, build trust in staff, and develop confidence within a stable peer group over time, leading to increased social connection, improved emotional regulation, and long-term engagement. These outcomes are reflected in exceptionally high retention and completion rates, as well as consistently positive feedback from participants, families, and referring agencies, who describe the program as one of the few spaces where young people feel genuinely safe, understood, and able to benefit from sustained therapeutic support.

## EXPANSION TO NORTHSIDE

The proposal is to establish a satellite Messengers Program in Gungahlin for young people aged 9–25 who are experiencing mild to moderate mental ill health, social isolation, or disengagement. This would replicate the full suite of programs currently delivered at Tuggeranong Arts Centre. The need for this expansion is supported by demographic, developmental, and wellbeing trends specific to the Gungahlin region. It complements the recommendation buy the Youth Coalition of ACT, to establish the CAMHS satellite clini in Gungahlin and North Community Team expansion.

Gungahlin is one of the ACT’s fastest growing regions and has one of the highest proportions of children and young people in the Territory. This rapid growth has been accompanied by increasing behavioural and wellbeing complexity across schools, as well as higher than average rates of developmental vulnerability in early childhood. These factors create a “pressure point profile”, where a large youth population intersects with elevated emotional and behavioural support needs. Schools in the region report challenges linked to enrolment growth, overcrowding, and rising numbers of students presenting with mental health related behaviours or developmental delays. As a result, wellbeing staff capacity is stretched, and there is strong demand for accessible early intervention supports.

Messengers is well positioned to address these needs. The program provides safe, inclusive, arts based therapeutic groups that are internationally recognised for improving emotional regulation, reducing anxiety, and increasing school engagement. This approach aligns closely with the concerns raised by ACT educators, who continue to report increases in behavioural incidents, disengagement, and complex student presentations. Creative therapeutic environments offer an alternative pathway for young people who may not respond to clinical or school-based interventions and are especially effective for those experiencing bullying, identity related stress, or social isolation; issues also present within Gungahlin’s diverse and multicultural youth population.

While Gungahlin has schools and general community services, it lacks longstanding, nonclinical youth mental health programs equivalent to Messengers. As a free ACT wide service, Messengers currently delivers outreach where possible, but the absence of a dedicated northside hub limits access for young people who face transport barriers or family constraints. Establishing a Gungahlin program would fill a clear service gap and ensure young people in the region can engage in early intervention supports before issues escalate into more intensive service needs.

Given Gungahlin's rapid population growth, high number of developmentally vulnerable children, and rising behavioural and mental health complexity, the evidence strongly supports the establishment of a locally delivered Messengers program. A dedicated satellite site would expand equitable access, respond directly to community and school identified needs, and provide an essential, well validated therapeutic option for vulnerable young people in the region.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**That the ACT Government commit funds for the expansion of Messengers to Gungahlin/Northside as a strategic, evidence-based initiative that aligns with ACT Government priorities (youth mental health, early intervention, service equity).**

## **ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT POLICIES**

#### ***ACT Wellbeing Framework:***

The ACT Wellbeing Framework identifies 12 domains that shape the quality of life for Canberrans. Increased investment in the Messengers Program would directly strengthen priority domains including:

- *Health:* improving young people's mental health and access to supportive care;
- *Social connection:* fostering stable peer relationships and reducing loneliness;
- *Identity and belonging:* creating an inclusive space where young people feel safe and accepted; and
- *Education and life-long learning:* supporting engagement, emotional safety, and school connection.

These domains are recognised in the Framework as critical for positive life outcomes and stronger community wellbeing, with indicators focused on mental health, belonging, participation, and student safety and inclusion

#### ***ACT Government Priorities***

The proposed increase in funding for the Messengers program directly supports ACT Government priorities by strengthening youth-focused, community-based mental health services, reducing hospital pressure, and aligning with national mental health reform strategies.

- *Youth Mental Health Investment:* The ACT Government's 2025–26 Budget committed more than \$9.4 million over four years to expand community-based mental health programs for young people, emphasising accessible, timely, and effective care. Increased funding for Messengers fits squarely within this priority by targeting early intervention and non-clinical supports.
- *Reducing Hospital Strain:* Government policy highlights the importance of shifting care into the community to reduce demand on acute services. Evidence consistently shows that early, nonclinical therapeutic programs deliver strong improvements in young people's wellbeing and reduce pressure on acute mental health services. Increased funding for Messengers would extend access to timely early intervention support, helping prevent escalation to hospital-based care and improving long-term outcomes.

- *Equity of Access:* ACT strategies emphasise equitable service delivery across regions. Expanding Messengers to Gungahlin/Northside addresses a critical service gap, ensuring young people outside Tuggeranong can access supports without prohibitive travel or cost barriers.
- *Whole-of-System Reform:* The 2025–2030 ACT Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Regional Plan stresses integrated, community-driven approaches to care. Messengers aligns with this by working alongside schools and local networks to deliver coordinated support.

## CONCLUSION

Investing in the Messengers Program at Tuggeranong Arts Centre is critical to addressing the growing mental health needs of young people in our community. The program has consistently demonstrated its unique ability to provide effective, arts-based support that builds resilience and offers a safe, creative space for self-expression. Increased funding will strengthen its capacity to reach more young people, deliver tailored non-clinical mental health support, and improve social and wellbeing outcomes.

Additional investment also aligns with broader government priorities for improving mental health care and reflects a proactive, compassionate approach to supporting the wellbeing of young people. Strengthening this program now will ensure more young people have access to the support they need to thrive—both today and into the future.

Messengers plays a vital role in ensuring equitable access to creative, therapeutic support for young people experiencing mental health challenges. Expanding the program to Northside will extend its proven model to a larger cohort, enhancing early intervention, improving wellbeing outcomes, and delivering long-term benefits for participants and the wider community.

Increasing demand for youth mental health support, combined with the growing complexity of participants' needs, makes additional funding a timely and necessary investment to ensure the program can continue providing effective, meaningful, and responsive interventions.

This submission has been prepared by Caroline Downer CEO, and Roger Jillard, Manager Messengers Program, March 2026

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