

2026-2027 ACT BUDGET CONSULTATION

BUDGET SUBMISSION

BY

ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY
CANBERRA/GOULBURN

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St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN

good works

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INTRODUCTION

The St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to engage with you through our pre-budget submission to the ACT Government's 2026-27 Budget priority setting and consultation.

As a registered charitable not for profit organisation, we operate in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding southern and western regional areas of New South Wales. Our volunteers visit people experiencing disadvantage and provide emergency assistance (food, clothing and material aid). People at risk of or experiencing homelessness are referred to our Specialist Homelessness Services where our professional staff provide case management, support services and referrals to other agencies for assistance.

We currently have 461 Members, 1314 Volunteers and 347 Employeesⁱ dedicated to delivering person-centred support to those most in need in our community. The strength and reach of our impact are made possible through the strong partnerships we have built across the community for more than 100 years. We welcome the opportunity to contribute our experience and insights to inform the ACT Government's 2026–27 Budget decisions.

BUDGET SUBMISSION

The Society makes its budget submission on the thematic areas of Housing, Homelessness, Energy, Cost of Living, Migrants, People Seeking Asylum and Indigenous Justice.

HOUSING

Fast Track the Delivery of Affordable Public Housing

RECOMMENDATION

Continue to prioritise the increase of the existing stock of affordable social housing in the ACT. We encourage the ACT Government to fast track the delivery of the additional 5000 social housing properties it has committed to in its 2024 Election platform.

The ACT Government has committed to enabling 30,000 homes by the end of 2030. This includes the commitment to deliver 5,000 public, community and affordable rental homes by the same year. Among the suite of commitments is the allocation of 20 per cent of suitable residential land for community, public and affordable housing. These measures respond to growing demand for affordable housing within the Community.

Between December 2024 and December 2025, the number of approved public housing applications increased from 3002¹ to 3,497², demonstrating the rising demand for public housing in the ACT. By June 2025, the ACT public housing portfolio contained 11,873³ homes, up slightly from 11,731⁴ in June 2024. The data indicates that a good proportion of social housing is occupied by low-income familiesⁱⁱ.

ⁱ 2024-25 Annual Report [vinnies-cg-annual-report-2024-2025.pdf](#)

ⁱⁱ See 18A.10, Proportion of dwellings occupied at 30 June – Public housing, 2026 ROGs

Year	Number of Public Housing Dwellings	Occupancy Rate	Low-income households in public housing
2022	10,880	95.2%	10,233
2023	10,952	94.5%	10,173
2024	10,952	94.2%	10,205
2025	11097	95.3%	10471

Source: Compiled from Tables 18A.3; 18A.10; 18A.24, Report on Government Services 2026⁵

As demand continues to grow, industry stakeholders have expressed doubts about the Government's ability to reach its own goals. The Property Council of Australia has pointed to the slow rollout of public housing and suggested that the ACT's lengthy building approval process plays a role in these delays.⁶

Risk:

The amendment of the Human Rights Actⁱⁱⁱ to include housing as a human right has raised the stakes for the Government to deliver on its housing commitments. The slow pace of delivery has wide-ranging impact on individuals, communities, the economy, and the government's own credibility.

Risk Area	Description
Housing Affordability	Higher costs, more people unable to secure stable housing
Homelessness	Increased demand for crisis services, more people at risk
Social Inequality	Disadvantaged groups face greater barriers, community wellbeing declines
Economic Impact	Reduced productivity, workforce shortages, higher government costs, lost economic growth
Public Trust	Erosion of confidence in government, reputational damage
Sectoral Strain	Overburdened community sector, risk of losing key advocacy and service organisations
Innovation Stagnation	Missed opportunities for new housing models and reforms

Strategic Links:

Building more public housing is a practical, measurable way to advance nearly every domain of the ACT Wellbeing Framework⁷. It not only addresses immediate needs for shelter but also supports broader goals of inclusion, health, education, economic participation, and community wellbeing.

Wellbeing Domain	How More Public Housing Helps
Housing & Home	Secure, affordable homes; reduces homelessness
Living Standards	Reduces financial stress; improves economic security
Health	Supports physical and mental health
Safety	Safer environments for vulnerable people
Identity & Belonging	Fosters inclusion and pride
Social Connection	Enables stable relationships and community ties
Education & Learning	Stable environment for study and growth
Environment & Climate	Opportunity for sustainable, efficient living
Access & Connectivity	Better access to services and opportunities
Economy	Frees up income; supports local economy
Governance & Institutions	Demonstrates fair, responsive government
Time	Saves time and reduces stress for families

ⁱⁱⁱ [Human Rights Act 2004 | Acts](#)

In summary, the delivery of more public housing will reduce homelessness and housing stress, ensuring more Canberrans have a stable foundation on which to build all aspects of their lives. It will also lift living standards, reduce poverty-related disadvantage, increase personal safety and community security.

SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Funding For Additional Capacity in the Street To Home Program

Recommendation

To fund 1 assertive outreach case worker and 1 specialist mental health worker in the Street to Home team

The ACT is experiencing a noticeable increase in the number of people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including sleeping rough, many of whom are living with significant mental ill health and other complex needs. In 2022-23, 641 rough sleeping clients (Males-385, Females- 256) were supported by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in the ACT⁸.

At the national level, a higher proportion of SHS clients who were rough sleeping died each year compared with clients experiencing other forms of homelessness and housing situations⁹. SHS clients who were experiencing rough sleeping demonstrated a higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to other SHS clients. In the ACT, 4.6% of rough sleepers supported by SHS agencies in 2022-23 had a mental health diagnosis from a service provider, up from 2.4% in 2017-18¹⁰.

This cohort faces multiple and intersecting barriers to accessing wrap-around support services such as case management and mental health support which leads to safe and secure housing and improved health outcomes.

In 2023–24, the Street to Home (STH) program provided case management support to 72 people sleeping rough. In 2024–25, with the same staffing levels, the program supported 90 rough sleepers, a 25 percent increase in service demand.

In 2024-2025 reporting year

90 

rough sleepers were case managed

25% increase from 2023-2024 (72 people)

STH case managers each support between 10 and 13 individuals with extremely complex needs at any given time.

The STH team currently receives 10–15 requests each week to investigate or provide support to rough sleepers, referred from a

range of sources including Ministers’ offices, the Licensing and Compliance Team, ACT Housing, members of the public, and local businesses. This level of demand is unsustainable for the current staffing capacity.

The program typically maintains a waitlist of 20 to 30 people seeking support. In recent years, the STH program has experienced a significant increase in demand for assertive outreach services to rough sleepers across the ACT. Albeit not included in our contract currently, STH provides assertive outreach in addition to the requirement to support up to 30 people at any one time.

Risk:

The need to respond to almost daily outreach requests diverts time and resources away from supporting existing clients. As demand continues to grow, case managers are under increasing pressure to meet competing priorities, which affects staff wellbeing, service quality, and overall capacity. It is becoming progressively difficult to balance outreach, ongoing case management, and securing stable housing for clients, highlighting the urgent need for additional team capacity to maintain effective and sustainable service delivery.

The costs of inaction include:

- Increasing numbers of unsupported rough sleepers in public places, particularly in the inner city of Canberra.
- Increasing concern from the public and local businesses about rough sleepers.
- Without early intervention, mental health issues among rough sleepers often escalate into severe and complex conditions, increasing the likelihood of crisis situations, social disturbance, and costly admissions to mental health care facilities.

Strategic Links

Most individuals engaging with the STH program are experiencing mental ill health exacerbated by their situation of rough sleeping. This is a growing cohort within the community who are experiencing homelessness and are too acutely mentally unwell to engage in case management through other homelessness services or access mental health services independently.

The STH program provides vital support to individuals experiencing homelessness through direct outreach, providing transitional accommodation, and access to essential services. Addressing rough sleeping is a direct, measurable way to achieve the ACT Wellbeing Framework's outcomes. It improves individual lives and lifts community wellbeing across multiple domains, supporting a more inclusive, healthy, and resilient ACT.

ACT Wellbeing Domain	Relevant Indicator(s)	Impact of Addressing Rough Sleeping
Housing and Home	Homelessness	Reduces the number of people sleeping rough
Health	Overall/Mental Health	Improves health outcomes, access to care
Safety	Feeling Safe	Increases personal and community safety
Social Connection	Social Connection, Loneliness	Reduces isolation, increases community engagement
Living Standards	Income, Financial Position	Supports economic participation
Identity & Belonging	Belonging, Inclusion	Fosters dignity, inclusion, and self-worth

Increasing the Service Delivery Capacity at Samaritan House

Recommendation:

- *To fund 1 case worker role to support the increase demand for outreach work at Samaritan House*
- *To develop the Samaritan House site to expand the availability of crisis accommodation for men experiencing homelessness.*

Samaritan House offers the only 24/7 hour crisis accommodation service for single men facing homelessness in the ACT. The 13-bed facility serves men who have experienced persistent housing insecurity and homelessness and is focussed on supporting men to source and sustain safe, stable, and ongoing tenancies. This is done through case management, and referrals to help individuals achieve stable housing and personal goals through a person-centred approach.

In the 2023-24 reporting year, Samaritan house supported 90 men, which was an astronomical 111% increase to the 42 men it had supported the year prior. At present and on average, the program holds a needs-based waiting list of 32 men.

The program also currently supports 12 outreach clients - 80% having had a residential support period and due to service capacity, 20% are being supported without a residential support period. On average, it also supports 15 men and women per week who are referred to or seek out Samaritan House for assistance by phone and/or attending the centre. This support is unfunded and provided in addition to the requirements of the ACT government funding contract.

Many of the men presenting to Samaritan House have previously been allocated Housing ACT properties or other stable / long-term accommodation options and have been unable to sustain these tenancies. While these men could identify the need for ‘a roof over their head’, they did not have the experience, or the living skills needed to create a home – resulting in failed tenancies and a perpetuation of the cycle of housing insecurity and homelessness.

In the last 6 months in 2025, seven (7) Samaritan House residents were given the opportunity to make their house a home with the assistance of Goodies Junction. The value of providing furniture, whitegoods, and other household items has proven to exponentially increase the ease of transition between homelessness, crisis accommodation, and having a long-term place of security and safety.

Risk

A smaller capacity for Samaritan house directly translates into more single men who are facing homelessness being left without any immediate shelter options. In this current situation, men in this category are more likely to be placed into housing without adequate preparation or support, leading to increased tenancy breakdowns, and recurring homelessness. This has higher cost implications for housing systems, particularly higher costs for emergency and justice systems, potentially leading to an increase in overall government expenditure.

Identified Risk	Why This Matters
Placement into housing without adequate preparation or support	Failed tenancies undermine investments in social housing and increase demand for crisis and transitional services
Reduced access to supported crisis accommodation	Prolonged homelessness contributes to poorer community safety, health, and wellbeing outcomes
Lack of transitional and case-management support	Preventable demand is shifted to higher-cost systems, increasing whole-of-government expenditure
Insufficient support to sustain tenancies	Repeated tenancy failures reduce turnover and limit access for others in housing need
Reduced crisis accommodation capacity	Visible homelessness signals gaps in the service system and undermines equity objectives
Disproportionate impact on single men	Unequal access creates structural service gaps and entrenches disadvantage for a specific cohort

Strategic Links

Increasing the capacity of crisis accommodation, such as Samaritan House in the ACT, is strategically aligned with the Wellbeing Framework. It will play a key role as a preventative investment that improves multiple wellbeing domains through direct service outcomes. The connection to personal safety, security and its impact on health and wellbeing of citizens underscores the very relevance of the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

Samaritan House is not just a bed-based service, but a pathway service focused on helping men “source and sustain safe, stable, and ongoing tenancies” through person-centred case management. Increasing the service delivery capacity contributes to key wellbeing indicators for men and positive effects on their socio-economic contributions to the ACT economy.

ACT Wellbeing Domain	Strategic Link – Role of Crisis Accommodation
Housing and Home	Crisis accommodation provides immediate, safe and secure shelter for people with no housing options and functions as an entry point into the housing system .
Health	Stable accommodation provides safety, warmth, rest, and hygiene , creating the conditions needed to access health, mental health, and AOD services.
Safety	Crisis accommodation removes people from unsafe environments , including street homelessness, and provides supervised, secure settings .
Social Inclusion and Access to Services	Crisis accommodation acts as a service hub , linking people to case management, housing pathways, and government and community supports.
Economy and Employment	By stabilising housing, crisis accommodation provides the preconditions for employment or training engagement , rather than acting as an employment program itself.
Whole-of-Government Wellbeing and Cost Avoidance	Investment in crisis accommodation prevents escalation into higher-cost health, justice, and emergency responses and aligns with wellbeing-led budgeting.

More Transitional Housing in the ACT

Recommendation:

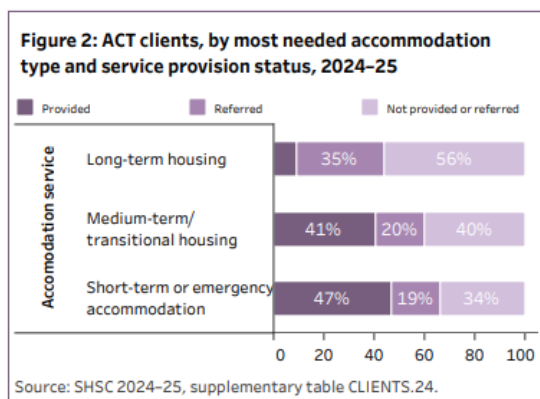
- *To increase the number of Transitional Housing properties in the ACT to address the growing demand.*
- *To develop clear and accessible pathways for Victim-Survivors in Housing ACT properties to be allocated their own public housing property, especially where they are already registered as tenants.*

The ACT’s Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) assisted 3,800 clients in 2021-22 and 4,200 in 2024-25. The sector is seeing a significant number of individuals who, at first presentation, are experiencing homelessness. This figure has remained above the national average throughout this period. SHS in the ACT have been unable to provide housing for more than 50% of their clients during this time.

Year	Number of Clients Assisted	% Homeless on First Presentation	% of Homeless Clients Assisted into Housing	% Homeless on First Presentation (National)
2021–22	3,800	59%	36%	44%
2022–23	3,900	57%	46%	47%
2023–24	4,000	56%	45%	48%
2024–25	4,200	53%	52%	49%

Source: AIHW reports (2021-22¹¹, 2022-23¹², 2023-24¹³, 2024–25¹⁴)

According to AIHW data for 2023-24, 32.8% of SHS clients in the ACT received material aid or brokerage and 23.7% were given family or domestic violence assistance¹⁵. In 2024-25 financial difficulties (57%) and housing crisis (53%) were among the top reasons clients sought support from SHS¹⁶. A greater proportion of clients (76%) supported by SHS agencies in the ACT needed accommodation. 47%, 41% and 35% who needed long-term, medium-term/transitional and short-term/emergency accommodation were not provided or referred¹⁷.



Data supports the observed need and urgency for more transitional accommodation.

The Vinnies Family Services program has seen a rise in the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness seeking help due to income issues and domestic violence. Our program supports victim survivors who are continuing to live with the person using violence (PUV) due to limited availability of emergency accommodation options.

The program is also assisting single dads with children, a group that traditionally has more limited accommodation options. For people currently living in Housing ACT properties who are escaping violence, the program has noted a gap in available housing options. These victim-survivors may be listed as a tenant, and this can affect their options. These dynamics contribute to the high demand for transitional housing for families experiencing homelessness, outweighing the amount of available transitional housing in the ACT.

Risk:

While living in our transitional housing individuals and families are able to address their ongoing health issues, obtain diagnoses and medical treatment, stabilise their finances (budgeting, paying off debts, engaging in work or study) and improve school attendance for children. We see a reduction in episodes of homelessness, improved health outcomes, and engagement in work and study. This reduces costs for the government and community by lowering demand for emergency hotel accommodation, crisis mental health services, and other crisis support services.

Risk Category	Description	Impact
Increased Homelessness	Fewer crisis beds and transitional units force people into unsafe environments or street homelessness.	Higher exposure to violence, health risks, and social isolation.
Mental Health Decline	Lack of stable housing exacerbates trauma, anxiety, and depression.	Increased hospital admissions and demand for mental health services.
Economic Burden	Greater reliance on emergency accommodation and health services.	Higher government expenditure on reactive measures instead of long-term solutions.
Domestic Violence Risk	Victim-survivors unable to access safe housing remain in abusive situations.	Increased harm and fatalities linked to family violence.
Impact on Vulnerable Groups	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older women, and people with disabilities disproportionately affected.	Widening inequality and failure to meet social justice commitments.

ENERGY & COST OF LIVING

Reduce Energy Poverty through Cost of Living Interventions

Recommendation:

To continue to implement targeted cost of living interventions to address the key drivers of energy poverty and inequality among vulnerable households in the ACT

In its 2025-26 Budget, the ACT Government announced several relief measures aimed at addressing the cost-of-living crisis being experienced by Canberrans. This includes permanently increasing the Electricity, Gas and Water Rebate to \$800 to eligible recipients in 2025-26 (around 40,000 households); providing a one-off payment of \$250 to all ACT apprentices and trainees working in the ACT and an additional \$250 to first-year apprentice and trainees; an expansion of the Future of Education Equity fund in the 2025 school year to support an additional 1,000 students; and establishing a Food Bank Fund to support Canberrans facing financial stress and food insecurity.¹⁸

Since July 2023, ACT households have seen a \$265 increment in their annual gas costs¹⁹. In July 2024, electricity bills were increased by \$240 for Canberran households²⁰, which reduced the full impact of the \$300 Federal Government energy payment to each Canberran household.²¹ The typical annual gas bill for ACT households is between \$1709 and \$2514, depending on the retailer used. This price is expected to increase sharply in the years leading up to 2045, ACT's target for transitioning households off gas²². The average all electric ACT household has also seen bill increases of 13% since July 2023²³. Cost of living concerns remain a major media and political item across the ACT as it is in Australia²⁴.

The Society delivers the Household Energy Efficiency Program (HEEP). This program supports low-income households to better manage their energy consumption which has a significant impact on household finances and living standards. During the 2024-25 financial year, the HEEP program supported 700 households in the ACT, including draught-proofing doors and windows for 685 households. The program also distributed heated throw rugs to 699 households, energy-saving kits to 700 households, and curtains to 275 households. Of these, 52 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and 164 households belonged to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. 174 households were community housing tenants, 60 were owner-occupiers, 367 were Housing ACT tenants, and 73 were private rental homes. Through the Energy Efficiency Community Partnership program, the team delivered 172 community activities and four (4) education programs to community organisations.

Risks

Without targeted action to reduce household exposure to rising energy costs, the ACT risks entrenching cost-of-living stress, exacerbating inequity, and increasing long-term fiscal and social pressures. Failure to act shifts energy affordability from a temporary cost-of-living issue into a multi-domain wellbeing risk, undermining equity, health, fiscal sustainability, and confidence in the ACT's long-term transition strategy.

Risk	Living Standards	Housing & Home	Health	Social Connection	Governance & Institutions
Entrenched energy-driven cost-of-living stress	Reduced disposable income, and ongoing financial insecurity	Increased energy poverty	Stress, anxiety, and poor mental health linked to financial pressure	Increased isolation as households cut back on social activities	Public perception that government relief is insufficient or ineffective
Increased demand for crisis supports	Household budgets become unsustainable without emergency relief	Housing instability increases due to utility stress	Poor nutrition and mental health outcomes linked to financial crisis	Increased reliance on community food and relief services	Shift from preventative to crisis-driven policy weakens strategic governance
Reputational and political risk	Public dissatisfaction with cost-of-living outcomes	Perception that housing affordability is deteriorating	Community wellbeing seen as declining	Reduced trust and civic confidence	Erosion of trust in wellbeing-led decision-making
Long-term fiscal pressure on government	Ongoing rebates required without reducing underlying costs	Continued investment in inefficient housing stock	Rising health system costs linked to stress and poor housing	Greater reliance on funded community services	Weakened capacity to deliver long-term wellbeing outcomes

Strategic Links

The ACT Government has legislated a target of net zero emissions by 2045, supported by the Climate Change Strategy 2019–2025²⁵ and the Integrated Energy Plan (IEP)²⁶. These frameworks emphasize Electrification of homes as the cheapest and most effective pathway to net zero; Energy efficiency upgrades for households, particularly low-income and vulnerable groups, to reduce emissions and energy demand.; and “just transition” ensuring equity and affordability for all Canberrans.

The ACT Government’s net zero policy stresses fairness: no one should be left behind. HEEP operationalizes this principle by targeting Housing ACT tenants, Community housing residents, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and Culturally and linguistically diverse households. These groups often face energy poverty and cannot afford upgrades independently. HEEP ensures they benefit from the transition, reducing cost-of-living pressures while contributing to climate goals.

Continuing to fund programs like the HEEP program will ensure that hard-won gains in energy affordability and climate resilience are sustained. With energy prices projected to remain high, demand for the program will continue to increase. Complemented by other energy related cost of living measures, continued investment in the HEEP will protect vulnerable households from energy poverty, and advance ACT’s climate commitments.

MIGRANTS, REFUGEES & PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

Increasing Support to Schools for Children Moving from IECs to Mainstream Schools

Recommendation:

- *To provide schools with a high number of students from a migrant or refugee background with additional funding to ensure they have at least one qualified full-time EALD teacher.*
- *To provide more support to newly arrived parents to better understand the ACT education system, including how to enrol students in a school, how to apply for education equity grant and how to make a complaint.*

In the 2021 Census report²⁷, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that on census night, 28.7% of the 454,000 residents in the ACT were born overseers. 1 in 3 people in the ACT come from a culturally diverse background. There were nearly 200 different nationalities²⁸ resident in the ACT, with Canberra officially being declared a “Refugee Welcome Zone^{iv}” in 2015. The ACT Government officially joined the Welcoming Cities Network in 2019, solidifying its intention to creating a city where everyone can belong and participate²⁹. Multiculturalism is therefore a key part of the social fabric of the ACT today.

The Society’s Migrant and Refugee Program is a Settlement Engagement Transition Support (SETS) provider and offers a range of services and programs to children, young people and their families, from migrant background. This includes our “In School Support Program”, where volunteers visit schools to work one on one with students who need additional support with their learning. The program continues to grow at a rapid pace due to high number of students requiring support.

In 2025, we supported over 80 students per week across 14 schools, which is an increase of over 100% since 2023. This growing demand for this program demonstrates that schools are severely underfunded in the provision of support for English as Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) students. Most schools with a high number of EALD students only have one part time EALD teacher, who is not able to provide the intensive support that many of these students require, particularly those who have had interruptions to their schooling due to their refugee experience.

As these students reach adolescence, they face even greater challenges with regard to the demands of the academic curriculum which becomes much more complex and also requires considerable cultural understanding, often not explicitly taught. The need for EALD teachers and effective EALD programs increases. In addition to this, the challenges young people encounter as they navigate adolescence and seek to clarify their own identity also increase. They typically experience significant conflict between the cultural expectations of their families and the freedoms they seek as they work towards independence in a very different cultural context. Alongside academic tutoring, one on one mentoring is an effective tool to assist young people as they negotiate high school and adolescence.

We reiterate the fact that there needs to be greater support for newly arrived families to better understand the ACT education systems, including common education processes, such as how to enrol

^{iv} A Refugee Welcome Zone is a local government area which has made a commitment to welcoming refugees into the community, upholding their human rights, demonstrating compassion for refugees and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in the community.

your child, how to enrol in an out of area school, how to apply for an Education Equity grant and how to make a complaint. For example, Introductory English Centres (IEC) are only available to students enrolled in the public system, not the Catholic and independent schools. This is critical information that parents should know about before they enrol their children in school.

Increasing Housing Support for Refugees

Recommendation:

- *To allocate more affordable housing units to cater for individuals and families from refugee backgrounds.*
- *To enforce and ensure that minimum ceiling insulation standards are complied with in these units*
- *To provide education, preferably in the first language of refugees, on how the public housing system works in the ACT.*

We have noted the immense impact that limited access to affordable housing has on the cohort of refugees we support. Many in this cohort rely on Centrelink payments while working to improve their English to secure employment. This process takes time and can lead to newly arrived individuals and families struggling. Many newcomers struggle to find jobs due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with local hiring practices. Even those proficient in English often find their qualifications and experience unrecognised, forcing them to abandon their professions and take up work in industries such as Uber, construction, or hospitality. The combination of housing insecurity and unemployment leaves many in severe financial distress, with no choice but to seek emergency relief. Unfortunately, most find it deeply embarrassing to ask for financial assistance.

We have observed cases where families are paying rent to live in houses that are freezing cold in winter and hot in summer and they have no recourse to insist that their landlords provide better sources of heating and cooling, and better insulation. Also, we find that families are often housed in inappropriate housing, such as two storeys for a client living with a disability, or not enough bedrooms for the number of family members. These conditions add further stress to families, especially those from refugee backgrounds who have already experienced significant trauma.

Remove Barriers To Sports Participation For Refugees

Recommendation:

- *To fund Case Worker position to support and coordinate the social connection actions for migrant or refugee background. Connection through sports and sporting activities can be a major outcome area for the role.*

In the 12 months leading to August 2025, the Migrant and Refugee Program provided 80 children with in-school support across 14 schools in the ACT. The depth of engagement of our youth programs, particularly in supporting a diversity of young people across cultures and income levels, provide insights into the complexity of being a young child from a refugee family.

Sports and participation in sporting activities often offer opportunity for young people to build social connections. Yet our team members have observed challenges ranging from financial barriers to participation, distance from sporting venues, cost of transportation and inaccessible registration

procedures. Even our experienced staff and volunteers have faced difficulties in simply getting young people to be registered so they can participate in sport in the ACT.

For young people from migrant and refugee background, these challenges become an additional layer that impedes their integration into the Canberra community. The additional challenge for these children of dealing with language barriers whilst striving to build new relationships in a new country is something our teams have witnessed many times.

Continue to Fund the Humanitarian Funding Program

Recommendation:

To provide a Humanitarian Funding Program at the level of \$135,000 for FY 2026-27.

The ACT joined the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa Scheme (SHEV)³⁰ in 2016 and this has allowed people who arrived in Australia without a visa and seeking asylum, to live, work and study here temporarily for 5 years³¹. As the waiting period between applying for protection visas and seeking asylum can be lengthy, the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)³² has been an avenue of support from the Federal Government in support of people seeking asylum. Unfortunately, successive Federal Governments have maintained strict SRSS eligibility limits for asylum seekers, leaving thousands nationwide and around 50 ACT households without support.

Since 2018 the Society has partnered with Companion House and Canberra Refugee Support to assist these vulnerable people. We are grateful for the ACT Government's funding support over the years that has been complemented by our own funding. Notably, the annual allocation of \$195,000 generously given as discretionary funding from the ACT Government for asylum seekers with no other income since 2021, dropped to \$150,000 for FY 2024-25. In the 2025-26 Budget, the Humanitarian Funding Program was introduced (to replace the Discretionary Funding) and committed \$150,000, with no increase from the previous year and for the one financial year.³³

The Society continues to value the ACT Government funding, which forms an essential part of support jointly delivered by the three community organisations. Thankfully since late 2025, there has been an increased number of people seeking asylum being granted permanent visas in the ACT and we expect that process to continue. This is decreasing the number of destitute people that the three agencies expect to have to support in FY 2026-27. However, in the continued absence of Federal Government funding, the three organisations will be unable to sustain the level of support we are currently providing to the smaller group of people still seeking asylum without continued ACT Government funding. The Society therefore requests that the annual allocation for the Humanitarian Funding Program be decreased by 10% to \$135,000 for FY 2026-27.

Risks

Migrants and refugees may face barriers to education, employment, and housing. Addressing these challenges will enable the ACT Community fully to harness the diverse skills, perspectives, and cultural contributions that this cohort bring with them. A failure by Government and the community to proactively address these barriers can lead to entrenched disadvantage and intergenerational poverty.

Risk Area	Impact on Government	Impact on Community
Social Cohesion	Loss of public trust, reputation	Increased division, isolation
Economic	Higher welfare costs, lost talent	Unemployment, poverty
Health & Wellbeing	Strain on health services	Poor mental/physical health
Legal & Human Rights	Non-compliance, legal exposure	Vulnerability, discrimination
Housing	Crisis demand, homelessness	Unsafe, unsuitable living conditions
Education	Lower achievement, disengagement	Lost potential, social exclusion

Strategic Links

Adopting the policy recommendations would advance nearly every domain of the ACT Wellbeing Framework. These policies would not only address immediate needs for education, housing, and employment, but also foster a more inclusive, healthy, and resilient ACT community—lifting the quality of life for migrants, refugees, and all Canberrans.

Policy Benefit	Wellbeing Domains Impacted
School & EALD Support	Education & Life-long Learning, Identity & Belonging, Social Connection, Health, Living Standards
Housing Support	Housing & Home, Health, Safety, Living Standards, Identity & Belonging, Social Connection, Environment & Climate
Economic Participation	Economy, Living Standards, Access & Connectivity, Education & Life-long Learning
Social Cohesion & Inclusion	Identity & Belonging, Social Connection, Health, Governance & Institutions

INDIGENOUS JUSTICE

Recommendation:

- To prioritise and implement the 28 Recommendations from the “Our Booris, Our Way Report”
- To continue to resource the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children & Young People Commissioner’s Office to deliver on its mandate
- To continue to prioritise actions that Seek to Reform Justice and Prison Systems particularly as captured in the Australian Law Reform Commission’s “Pathways to Justice Report” in response to the Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
- To take steps to explore a Cross Border Justice Scheme with the NSW Government.

Prioritise the Implementation of Federal and Territory Agreements

The ACT’s 2025 Closing the Gap (CTG) Annual Report highlights the signing of a partnership agreement³⁴ in March 2025 between the *Our Booris Our Way* Implementation Oversight Committee (OBOWIOC) and the ACT Government (through its Community Service Directorate). This agreement aims to facilitate a more strategic partnership that will transition the current working relationship from one of oversight and reporting to one of partnership underpinned by the principles of shared decision making as reflected in Priority Reform 1³⁵. This is a good step as a functional and fit-for-purpose partnership is crucial for achievement of agreements such as the CTG and OBOW.

The Productivity Commission’s “Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Study report³⁶” recommends for States/Territories to review and update funding and contracting rules so that they explicitly incorporate accountability for funders to abide by the Priority Reforms in commissioning processes. The ACT Government responds that: “*This has not been implemented across all programs yet. Further work is required to amend funding and contracting rules to ensure that all funded service providers are accountable to abide by the Priority Reforms in commissioning. Community Services Directorate (CSD) has implemented new clauses in contracts to define expectations as it relates to embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principles and undertaking joint work with ACCOs to refresh policy and practice guides to support achieving the CTG targets through system and service change requirements*”³⁷.

Government contracting and funding has significant leverage and impact on building the capacity of ACCOs to function and thrive. It is important that steps are taken to ensure this progress is reflected across the whole of Government machinery.

The need to prioritise the achievement of the priorities and outcomes of the CTG and OBOW is now more urgent than ever. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only 2% of the ACT population³⁸, Indigenous clients accessing SHS in the ACT were 707.3 clients per 10,000 in the ACT in 2024-25, representing the highest among all the interest groups³⁹. Nearly 17% of clients who return to homelessness after achieving housing in the ACT identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, as compared to 13.2% for all people⁴⁰.

The Independent Review into the Overrepresentation of First Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System noted that there has been minimal progress since 2017 regarding prior imprisonment rates, with nearly ninety percent of First Nations men incarcerated in the ACT having previously served time. Additionally, in 2023, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people held on remand in the ACT was 49%, exceeding the national average of 41% for First Nations individuals on

remand⁴¹. The persistent over-representation of individuals identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander within the ACT justice system requires attention.

There has been little improvement in the situation in 2025. The proportion of prisoners in the ACT identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander rose to 31.6% in 2024-25, up from 26.1% in 2021-22⁴². Efforts to reduce recidivism could benefit the 45.6% of adults in this group who according to the data, are likely to reoffend within two years. The rate of return to corrective services with a new sanction for this cohort fell to 50.9% in 2024-25, down from 73.9% in 2023-24⁴³.

The ACT has recorded a significant rise in the number of young people aged 10–17 in detention, increasing from an average of 13 young people in 2023–24 to 17 in 2024–25. The detention rate has escalated from 3.9 to 5.0 per 10,000 young people, placing the ACT well above the national average of 2.7 per 10,000 young people. The detention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people has jumped from 39.2 to 51.9 per 10,000 in just 12 months. In contrast, the rate for non-Indigenous young people rose modestly from 2.7 to 3.5 per 10,000. The resulting rate ratio of 14.9 reflects extreme over-representation⁴⁴.

The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People’s Commissioner fills an important gap within the Community. In this role, and through advocacy, the Commissioner aims to promote the rights and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the ACT, both individually and at a systemic level⁴⁵. Adequately resourcing and funding the role will therefore go a long way to deepen the partnership with Community and to facilitate the achievement of agreed outcomes under the OBOW and CTG agreements.

Risks

The risks to the non-adoption of these recommendations are system-wide, high likelihood, and high impact across nearly every ACT Wellbeing domain. From the Society’s perspective, the most severe risks sit in Health, Safety, Housing, Governance, and Economy, with cascading multigenerational consequences.

Wellbeing Domain	Risk Description	Impact
Health	Increased trauma, poor mental health outcomes from continued high incarceration, child removals and homelessness	Severe
	Worsening long-term health disparities due to lack of culturally safe, ACCO-led supports.	Major
Safety	Higher community harm due to increased reoffending.	Severe
	Continued unsafe child protection practices and system harm without OBOW implementation.	Major
Housing & Home	Rising homelessness among Aboriginal families linked to justice churn and systemic instability.	Severe
	Increased out-of-home care rates leading to family displacement.	Major
Social Connection	Breakdown in trust between communities and government; weaker community cohesion.	Major
Identity & Belonging	Erosion of cultural identity without proper resourcing of the Children & Young People Commissioner’s Office.	Major
	Declining sense of belonging due to harmful interactions with systems.	Major
Education & Learning	Lower school engagement for children impacted by homelessness, care or justice involvement.	Major

	Intergenerational educational inequality persists without early intervention.	Major
Living Standards	Entrenched poverty worsens through incarceration cycles and family separation.	Major
	Higher financial stress due to inadequate culturally safe prevention services.	Major
Economy Economy	Rising government expenditure due to high remand rates and incarceration churn.	Severe
	Lost workforce participation among young people entering justice system.	Major
Environment & Climate	Reduced cultural land-based healing practices from disrupted community stability.	Moderate
	Lower community participation in environmental stewardship.	Moderate
Access & Connectivity	Continued service fragmentation without ACT–NSW cross-border justice scheme.	Major
	Unequal access to culturally safe supports due to stalled commissioning reform.	Major
Governance & Institutions	Erosion of public trust, failure to meet Closing the Gap obligations.	Severe
	Legislative and compliance risks arising from failure to embed Priority Reform 1 and CTG actions.	Major
Time	Increased time burden on families engaging with multiple systems (justice, child protection, housing).	Moderate
	Greater delays as courts, care systems and corrections remain overloaded.	Major

Strategic Links

The recommendations directly strengthen the ACT Wellbeing Framework by addressing wellbeing across multiple domains. By implementing reforms to reduce over-representation in child protection and the justice system, the ACT improves Health and Safety, while culturally safe, ACCO-led approaches enhance Identity & Belonging and Social Connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Resourcing the Children & Young People Commissioner supports Governance & Institutions, ensuring accountability and shared decision-making consistent with the Framework’s principles. Actions to reduce homelessness and justice churn contribute to secure Housing & Home, better Living Standards, and more stable conditions for Education & Learning.

Cross-border justice collaboration improves access & connectivity, while prevention-focused reforms reduce long-term economic and social costs, supporting Economy outcomes. Overall, the recommendations align with and reinforce the ACT Wellbeing Framework’s holistic focus on creating a safe, fair, inclusive and thriving community.

ACT Wellbeing Domain	Benefit from Adopting All Recommendations
Health	Reduced trauma, improved mental health
Safety	Lower recidivism, safer families, safer communities
Housing & Home	Reduced homelessness, stronger family stability
Living Standards	Better long-term economic outcomes
Social Connection	Stronger family cohesion, cultural bonds
Identity & Belonging	Strengthened cultural identity, self-determination
Education & Learning	Higher educational stability and participation
Environment & Climate	Stronger cultural and land connection
Access & Connectivity	Better access to services, cross-border safety
Economy	Reduced justice costs, stronger ACCO economy
Governance & Institutions	Shared decision-making, better accountability
Time	Reduced stress and system burden on families

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: MOTHER, SON AND DAUGHTERS RECEIVING SUPPORT INTO PERMANENT HOUSING

A single mother of three children: a son in high school and twin daughters in primary school. After the breakdown of her marriage, she and her children experienced homelessness before moving into transitional housing with support from the Vinnies Family Services Program

When Vinnies first connected with this client, she and her family were struggling to meet basic needs such as food, fuel, and medical expenses. Both she and her children face ongoing health challenges. Her daughters have required hospital care, and she deals with significant physical and mental health issues. The family's financial situation is precarious, often destabilized by large, unexpected expenses such as car repairs, property maintenance, school supplies, or specialist medical appointments.

The family received support from Vinnies to address their immediate material, educational and transport needs. The team further supported the family, and they have since moved into permanent housing. The family continue to receive support and remains in regular contact with Vinnies, typically seeking assistance with food, fuel, and prescriptions every 1-2 months.

Despite her challenges, this client works hard to manage her family's needs. However, unavoidable high-cost expenses often disrupt her budgeting, underscoring the importance of continued support. Families like this are doing their best to move forward, but they remain vulnerable without a safety net to address unexpected financial shocks.

CASE STUDY 2: CHALLENGES IN REGISTERING YOUNG REFUGEE CHILDREN INTO SPORT

Amid and Mahmoud are 15 and 16 years old. They are both from a refugee background and have recently arrived in Australia. While they are committed to their studies, it has been a difficult process to make up for the education they missed due to their refugee experience, especially because they spoke no English when they arrived. Both boys love football, and delight in doing something they are good at. They play every lunch time at school and find it offers them friendships and an escape from the stresses in their lives.

Amid says:

All I wanted to do was play football. So, when I was asked to submit many documents, I did not know what that meant. More difficult for me was that, after my family and the team at Vinnies had helped me to submit the documents, I had to wait for about 6 weeks. It was a very anxious time for me. I kept asking myself, "Will I ever get to play football?". Some days, I will go to watch the teams play and hope that one day, I will be able to play like the other kids.

After my registration was successful and I was able to play, I have a feeling of being accepted into the society. When I play, I always look to doing my best for the team. Playing football is helping me improve my English language skills and this is helping me build my social connections. Now my family is happy because they see me happy.

I am looking forward to playing other sports. However, I am anxious that I will not be able to complete the registration process.

CASE STUDY 3: OLDER CANBERRAN RECEIVED WRAPAROUND SUPPORT FROM SAM HOUSE

A 65-year-old man was referred to Samaritan House after becoming homeless due to a rapid decline in his health and the subsequent loss of his accommodation. Having been diagnosed with a life-limiting illness, he struggled to maintain casual employment while supporting a wife and three young children overseas. When his condition deteriorated, his primary goal of finding stable, long-term housing expanded to include navigating complex medical care, securing income support, and reuniting with his family before the end of his life.

Samaritan House provided intensive wrap-around support tailored to his escalating needs. Staff pursued urgent advocacy with Housing ACT, lodging a Priority Needs Report to secure stable accommodation—a critical step for progressing visa applications for his family. They accompanied him to oncology consultations, helped him understand treatment options, and supported him to complete essential legal and medical planning documents. When he could no longer work, staff assisted him to apply for the Age Pension. Throughout this period, they also coordinated the complex process of applying for visas for his wife and children.

Although he was eventually allocated a Housing ACT property, his condition had deteriorated to the point where independent living was no longer safe. Recognising his trust in the service and his need for daily support, Samaritan House continued to provide accommodation and consistent care until his family arrived from overseas.

Today, he is living with and cared for by his family, while Samaritan House maintains ongoing support as an outreach client.

CASE STUDY 4: YOUNG ABORIGINAL MOTHER RECEIVES SUPPORT

A 23-year-old single Aboriginal mother arrived in Canberra with her two young children after relocating from interstate, seeking safety and stability but with no family, friends, or local support networks. Shortly after settling, she entered a relationship that became violent, leaving her and her children in crisis and cycling through temporary accommodations until she was eventually allocated permanent housing by Housing ACT. Despite this transition, she faced overwhelming challenges: the high cost of essentials such as formula, nappies, and fuel; limited resources to furnish her new home; and a lack of knowledge about local services. Managing these pressures while also caring for two young children and navigating pregnancy placed her at significant risk of social isolation, financial hardship, and declining wellbeing.

A coordinated response was delivered through three Vinnies programs beginning with immediate material relief—food, fuel, clothing, and a Christmas hamper—to stabilise her circumstances during the crisis period. When she moved into permanent housing, tailored support addressed the practical barriers to establishing a safe and functional home. An energy efficiency audit identified the absence of window coverings, prompting the provision of curtains, while volunteers supplied essential furniture including a lounge. Ongoing assistance with nappies, food, and fuel eased the cost-of-living pressures that had left her regularly short on funds for basic needs. Recognising her unfamiliarity with local services, she was also connected with Tuggeranong Child and Family Services and Winnunga Family Services, enabling culturally-appropriate support, parenting assistance, and links into the broader community.

As a result of this comprehensive and sustained support, the young mother has begun to establish stability for herself and her children during a critical period of transition. She remains connected to the Vinnies for continued material support and guidance as she prepares for the arrival of her third child.

Her experience demonstrates the essential role of holistic, community-based interventions in supporting vulnerable families to move from crisis to resilience. The positive outcomes achieved—improved safety, strengthened community connection, restored stability, and increased capacity to maintain her household—highlight the importance of ongoing funding to sustain and expand this vital support.

CASE STUDY 5: CLIENT'S JOURNEY TO STABILITY AND WELL-BEING

The Justice Housing Program (JHP) supported a client presenting with extreme and intersecting vulnerabilities, including homelessness following seven years of family violence, severe physical and mental health issues, neurodivergence, substance dependency, and a pregnancy resulting from assault. With multiple services unable to assist due to the complexity of her needs, JHP became the only remaining pathway to safety. The client initially engaged inconsistently due to her health and trauma impacts, requiring a flexible, trauma-informed approach to stabilisation and crisis response.

Through intensive case management, JHP coordinated a multi-agency response, providing persistent advocacy across housing, health, legal and wellbeing systems. Key actions included facilitating GP engagement, securing documentation for priority housing pathways, convening cross-agency case conferences, and obtaining Victim Support brokerage for home security. The program also assisted with financial relief applications, harm-minimisation supports, and logistical needs such as transport, appointment reminders, energy efficiency referrals, and access to essential baby items.

Within three months, the client transitioned from crisis and homelessness into safe, long-term housing, achieving stability that previously seemed unattainable. The intervention prevented a likely return to violence, strengthened engagement with essential services, and provided a secure environment for the imminent birth of her child. This case demonstrates the critical value of flexible, well-resourced programs capable of responding to clients whose needs exceed mainstream service capacity, and highlights the effectiveness of trauma-informed, persistent, and coordinated support in achieving life-changing outcomes.

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