



## Submission to the ACT Government Consultation:

# ACT Preventive Health Plan: Second Action Plan 2023-2025

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## About VolunteeringACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness. VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection.

VolunteeringACT values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity, and participation. VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, volunteer involving organisations and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

## Introduction

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the draft ACT Preventive Health Action Plan 2023-2025 (the Action Plan). Overall, we support a whole of government approach to reducing the prevalence of chronic disease and supporting good health at all stages of life.

The draft Action Plan would benefit from a greater focus on and prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing along with greater recognition of the contribution of volunteering to health and wellbeing, including healthy ageing. A summary of our full list of recommendations is provided below, with further details provided on the following pages.

## Recommendations

- 1. That volunteering is recognised as a key contributor to health and wellbeing in the ACT, with the volunteer workforce integral to the delivery of preventative health outcomes, and that the ACT volunteering sector is consulted with and engaged in the implementation of the Action Plan.**
- 2. That any resourcing provided to implement preventative health actions includes an allocation to support volunteering programs such as the Connections Program that are designed to or demonstrate strong preventative health outcomes.**
- 3. That volunteering is recognised as an important activity within the context of healthy ageing and actions/resources to support older people to access volunteering opportunities and volunteer programs are included within this priority area.**
- 4. That the Action Plan has a greater focus on mental health and wellbeing and includes specific mental health actions across the priority areas.**
- 5. That ACT government resources and undertakes further co-design with the mental health sector to agree and define meaningful mental health preventative outcomes and actions.**
- 6. That the Action Plan facilitates a genuine co-design/co-production approach to realising accessible, inclusive, and culturally sensitive health service offerings aimed at addressing the systemic barriers that can prevent good health outcomes for these cohorts.**

## Contribution of Volunteering to Health and Wellbeing

VolunteeringACT would like to emphasise the key role that volunteering plays in the health and wellbeing of ACT communities.

There is a two-fold connection between volunteering and good overall health and wellbeing, providing a dual impact of improving the wellbeing of people undertaking volunteering, as well as volunteering activities contributing to enhancing the wellbeing of others. Volunteering has been found to help individuals develop stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships, improve self-esteem, relieve stress, alleviate symptoms of depression, and help with mental health recovery and/or self-management.<sup>1</sup> This important link is reflected in the ACT Wellbeing Framework, within the *Social Connection* and *Time* domains, with volunteering used as a key indicator of Canberrans being connected with family, friends, and community, and having the time to live life well.<sup>2</sup> This has also been acknowledged within the new National Wellbeing Framework, with volunteering included as a measure of the Social Connection Indicator.<sup>3</sup>

In the ACT, a diverse network of volunteers contributes each day to enhancing the wellbeing of our communities. Volunteering strengthens social capital in our region – creating bonds between people, building bridges across diverse communities, and linking us to people and opportunities that we would not have without it. In the words of Emma Davidson MLA, ACT Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services, “*Volunteering makes our city a fairer and more sustainable place in which to live, increases inclusivity for all, enables participation and connection, and contributes significantly to our economy through delivery of services and support*”.<sup>4</sup>

The mental health benefits of volunteering vary among different cohorts. They are especially pronounced for older people, unemployed people, and people with chronic health conditions. Volunteering may also have particular benefits for people with disability and people experiencing mental ill-health.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of enhancing the wellbeing of others, volunteer-operated programs are often at the forefront of the ACT’s core support services to individuals and communities, providing interaction via different one to one and/or group programs such as education programs, befriending activities, or volunteer mentoring with extremely effective results. Volunteers can sometimes provide support and help facilitate solutions for people in a way that cannot always be achieved within conventional service system models, particularly when a service has fairly strict operational parameters, or a narrow remit.

For example, the *Mentoring Young Men Program – ‘Bro-Gram’* operated in the ACT by Menslink, pairs volunteer male mentors of all ages and backgrounds with young males aged 10-16 needing a constructive influence in their lives, to benefit from the support and friendship a mentor provides. Following engagement in the program, feedback from parents shows that 80% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons’ confidence and self-esteem, 71% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons’ willingness to seek support and 86% report

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<sup>1</sup> [Benefits of volunteering | healthdirect and Purposeful activity - volunteering | Head to Health](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Explore overall wellbeing - ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Measuring what Matters statement 2023 – Treasury - p56](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Canberra’s Volunteering Landscape 2021-2023 – Listening Report – VolunteeringACT, p4](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Volunteering and Mental Health - Volunteering Australia](#)

positive/very positive impacts on their sons' relationship with peers and family.<sup>6</sup> These are all important contributing factors in improving wellbeing and maintaining good mental health and indicate the preventative nature of such programs and their person-centred approach. The Menslink program design ensures that young men have the support they need in a timely manner, before things in their life escalate and potentially result in negative health and wellbeing impacts further down the track. Community-based interventions like this are a vital component in addressing social isolation and contributing to suicide prevention amongst men in the ACT, and volunteers are at the heart of this service delivery model.

A specific, high-impact program that VolunteeringACT strongly recommends is included and resourced within the Preventative Health Action Plan is the Connections Program. The Connections Program was a one-to-one social support and mentoring program for people experiencing social isolation that spanned two decades and was implemented by VolunteeringACT up until 2021. This Program followed a strengths-based, recovery-oriented model to reduce stigma associated with mental illness, social isolation and to increase positive self-perception. Screened and appropriately trained volunteers established safe and supportive structured friendships with participants, enabling them to reconnect with their broader community. This Program was both low-cost and highly successful, demonstrating a significant impact on participant mental health and wellbeing. Surveys conducted by VolunteeringACT in 2020-21 revealed that 83% of Program participants had seen an improvement in their connections with friends, 91% of participants indicated an improvement in their connections with family and 75% of participants indicated an improvement in their connections with community. Participants also reported a high awareness of the correlation between social connections and mental health with 83% of participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing that a lack of social connection prior to their involvement in the Program had negatively impacted their mental health.

*“The Connections Program has literally been a lifesaver for me. Having a social connection; someone to sit down for a coffee and chat about things, means not only to have that social connection but also gave me something to look forward to every few weeks.”*

*– Connections Participant*

## **Recommendations:**

- 1. That volunteering is recognised as a key contributor to health and wellbeing in the ACT, with the volunteer workforce integral to the delivery of preventative health outcomes, and that the ACT volunteering sector is consulted with and engaged in the implementation of the Action Plan.**
- 2. That any resourcing provided to implement preventative health actions includes an allocation to support volunteering programs such as the Connections Program that are designed to or demonstrate strong preventative health outcomes.**

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<sup>6</sup> [What We Do Works - Impact Survey Results 2022 - Menslink](#)

## Volunteering and Healthy Ageing

VolunteeringACT supports the inclusion of a focus on promoting healthy ageing within the Action Plan and in particular the focus on supporting behaviours that facilitate good mental health. Volunteering creates important opportunities for older people to interact socially and engage in meaningful activity. As recognised in the National Strategy for Volunteering, *“The community engagement [volunteering] facilitates is an invaluable contribution to healthy ageing in Australia. The role of volunteering and volunteers in the lives of older people in Australia should be supported and strengthened as the population ages.”*<sup>7</sup>

A great local example of the impact of volunteering on healthy ageing is *Best Club* – a social group program for seniors in Canberra. Participants have reported that their involvement in this program helped them find friendship, connections and prevent depression.<sup>8</sup>

Given this, we believe the Action Plan would benefit from recognising volunteering as a key contributor to healthy ageing and including support for volunteering activities within this priority area.

### Recommendation:

- 3. That volunteering is recognised as an important activity within the context of healthy ageing and actions/resources to support older people to access volunteering opportunities and volunteer programs are included within this priority area.**

## Greater Focus on Mental Health and Wellbeing

VolunteeringACT would like to emphasise the need for greater focus on promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing within the Action Plan. While we support alignment with the ACT Wellbeing Framework, we feel the draft Action Plan does not currently reflect strongly enough the integral role mental health plays in determining overall health, as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

There is a strong bidirectional relationship between mental and physical health. The National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030 states that people with mental ill-health are at an increased risk of physical illness and vice versa. There is also a strong link between mental health and modifiable risk factors as people with mental illness are more likely to smoke and use alcohol and other drugs. Strengthening mental health therefore not only increases wellbeing but it is also a protective factor against other health conditions.<sup>9</sup> This is further supported by ACT Health’s 2022 Community Survey on Prevention, that found mental health was a top concern amongst Canberrans in relation to preventing long-term health issues.<sup>10</sup> Further, as recognised in the Action Plan, many ACT community members identified as living with chronic health conditions are people living with mental illness.

This evidence clearly demonstrates that actions aiming to support and foster good mental health should be a central element of preventive health in the ACT. This would also ensure

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<sup>7</sup> [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 – Volunteering Australia, p22](#)

<sup>8</sup> [“It stops you getting depressed”: Carole and Irene found friendship through volunteering - ABC Canberra](#)

<sup>9</sup> [National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030](#)

<sup>10</sup> [ACT Community Survey on Prevention 2022](#)

alignment with National preventative health policy. Australia's *National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030* includes "Promoting and Protecting Mental Health" as a key focus area.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, other jurisdictions have a focus on mental health within their preventive health strategies and plans. For example, The *Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan 2022-2026* includes "Mental Health and Wellbeing" as a key focus area.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the ACT Action Plan only refers to mental health within the 'healthy ageing' focus area. While this is accurate and important, there is a need for a much broader application of a mental health lens across all population groups.

Nationally, the Productivity Commission Report on Mental Health clearly identifies and justifies the need for the Australian mental health system to be refocused towards prevention and early intervention.<sup>13</sup> Research demonstrates that prevention-focused approaches to mental health are more cost-effective than treatment alone and also lead to more efficient use of mental health resources.<sup>14</sup> The ACT Mental Health and Suicide Prevention plan reflects a focus on prevention with priorities including early intervention in life, illness and episode; whole of person care; and improving the social and economic conditions of people's lives.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside the ACT Wellbeing Framework, the Action Plan should be informed by and aligned with existing relevant mental health strategies and activities within the ACT region. This includes the ACT Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan and the work of the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing, which includes a focus on mentally healthy communities and workplaces.<sup>16</sup> At present, it is not clear how this Plan intersects and aligns with these other plans and work programs.

A focus area on mental health and wellbeing within the Action Plan could, for example, include improving mental health literacy amongst the community; targeted prevention and early intervention programs for children and their families and stigma-reduction initiatives including promotion of accessing mental health services early (early intervention).

We agree with and support recommendations made by ACTCOSS in their recent submission to this consultation, for more specific mental health actions that could provide funding for community mental health organisations, increase recognition of impacts of climate change on mental health, expand provision of perinatal mental health supports, and increase support for mental health and wellbeing programs centred around nature.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 4. That the Action Plan has a greater focus on mental health and wellbeing and includes specific mental health actions across the priority areas.**
- 5. That the ACT government resources and undertakes further co-design with the mental health sector to agree and define meaningful mental health preventative outcomes and actions.**

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<sup>11</sup> [National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030 - Volunteering Australia](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Healthy Tasmania - Five Year Strategic Plan 2022-2026](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Productivity Commission Inquiry report - Mental Health](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Everymind - Prevention and Promotion Approaches](#)

<sup>15</sup> [ACT Mental health and Suicide Prevention Plan](#)

<sup>16</sup> [The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing](#)

## Marginalised Cohorts and Importance of Genuine Co-design

Finally, Volunteering ACT would like to emphasise the need for the Action Plan to reflect and respond to the specific needs of cohorts that may experience marginalisation, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, LGBTQI+ communities and people with disability. While the Action Plan references priority population groups, there is an overall lack of clearly targeted actions, or enough detail on how these groups will be actively engaged in the design and implementation of the Plan.

The Action Plan would benefit from a greater emphasis on the need for preventative health activities and services in the ACT to be inclusive, culturally safe, and accessible to all community members. Importantly, achieving this will require genuine and meaningful co-design with community members and relevant service providers and organisations. Genuine co-design or co-production requires authentic and equitable collaboration and should be underpinned by respect and sharing of decision-making power.<sup>17,18</sup>

Currently the draft Action Plan only references co-design in relation to health promotion campaigns and education materials on sexually transmitted infections and bloodborne viruses. The Action Plan offers great potential, however, in its current form, there is a missed opportunity to embed genuine co-design and co-production approaches more widely across all aspects of preventative health, and benefit from expertise by experience of community members in the design, delivery and evaluation of activities across the Action Plan priority areas.

As recognised within the National Preventative Health Strategy, there is strong evidence that a co-design approach where people with lived experience are at the heart of development, delivery, and evaluation of services results in the best outcomes that are more likely to meet their needs.<sup>19,20</sup> It should be noted, that meaningful and genuine co-design requires allocation of appropriate time and resources to enable it to occur.<sup>21</sup>

### Recommendation:

- 6. That the Action Plan facilitates a genuine co-design/co-production approach to realising accessible, inclusive, and culturally sensitive health service offerings aimed at addressing the systemic barriers that can prevent good health outcomes for these cohorts.**

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<sup>17</sup> Butler T et al (2022) A Comprehensive Review of Optimal Approaches to Co-Design in Health with First Nations Australians, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 19(23):16166, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9735487/>

<sup>18</sup> [A Guide to Build Co-design Capability - Agency for Clinical Innovation, NSW Government](#)

<sup>19</sup> [A Guide to Build Co-design Capability - Agency for Clinical Innovation, NSW Government](#)

<sup>20</sup> [National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Co-design and Co-production - National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum](#)



## Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.

Jean Giese  
Chief Executive Officer

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