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### **LGBTIQ Strategy Submission**

A Gender Agenda (AGA) is pleased to contribute to the ACT being a safe and empowering place for LGBTIQ people and welcomes the opportunity to feed into the consultations for this submission process.

As an organisation providing peer-led, specialists services to trans, gender diverse and intersex people in the ACT, AGA is an important partner in achieving the ACT Government's LGBTIQ strategy. AGA is embedded in Canberra's trans, gender diverse and Intersex communities, which enables us to reach the most vulnerable members of our community and provide tailored support and resources to meet their complex needs.

#### **Background**

The ACT is renowned as a fair, welcoming and inclusive community that celebrates diversity. Thanks to the strong leadership of the ACT Chief Minister, the ACT is a front-runner in advancing the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer people (LGBTIQ).

The ACT Government's commitment to and investment in LGBTIQ rights, support and inclusion has been reaffirmed with the Government's commitment to develop the first ACT LGBTIQ Strategic Plan. Importantly, the priorities articulated in the 2018/2019 Territory Budget demonstrate the ACT Government's understanding that trans, gender diverse and intersex people have specific needs and require targeted support services to ensure they can benefit from all our community has to offer.

In recent years, AGA has been the beneficiary of additional funding, both directly from ACT Government as a result of election commitments, and through our involvement in the LGBTIQ consortium. This additional funding has enabled AGA to invest in creating a professionalised training and development service to support government and non-government organisations meet the needs of trans, gender diverse and intersex communities. It has also enabled AGA to employ an Intersex Project Worker to ensure the Darlington Statement is implemented in partnership with intersex people. Significant progress has been made towards the Government's priorities for advancing LGBTIQ rights, support and inclusion, however ongoing focus and financial support is key to building on early successes and creating lasting social change.

## **Evidence of the need**

There is an urgent need to address the elevated risk of mental health issues and suicide for trans, gender diverse and intersex people in our community. Trans, gender diverse and intersex people are at high risk of experiencing marginalisation, stigma, isolation, prejudice, social exclusion, discrimination, abuse and violence. These experiences are correlated with poor mental and physical health and wellbeing, unemployment, poverty, homelessness and social exclusion. Trans, gender diverse and intersex people are more likely to experience violence than any other group in our community, with over 40% of transgender people having experienced violence.

The LGBTI Alliance snapshot of mental health and suicide prevention in 2016, found that transgender people are 11 times more likely to attempt suicide and intersex people are six times more likely to attempt suicide than are members of the general population. It found that 41% of trans and gender diverse people over 18 reported thoughts of suicide or self-harm in the last two weeks and 60% of intersex people over 16 had thoughts about suicide on the basis of issues related to having an intersex variation.

Transgender people are nearly three times more likely to be diagnosed with and or receive support for psychological and emotional related problems than the general population. At the time of the research, nearly 60% of transgender people had been diagnosed with depression, and 40% with an anxiety disorder. Recent research also shows a correlation between stigma and discrimination and a number of health problems and conditions, such as cancer, flu, and hypertension.

These statistics are disturbing and show the critical need for services tailored to the specific needs of trans, gender diverse and intersex people to support resilience and wellbeing.

## **Equal access to services**

Access to inclusive, appropriate and quality psychosocial support and healthcare is paramount to protecting the health and wellbeing of trans, gender diverse and intersex members of our community, yet this remains a significant gap in the ACT. Trans, gender diverse and intersex people continue to experience stigma and discrimination when accessing healthcare and social support services. The Trans Pathways report found that 42.1% of respondents had reached out to get help from healthcare professionals and found that the service provider did not understand, respect or have previous experience with gender diverse people.

As a peer-led service embedded in trans, gender diverse and intersex communities, AGA plays a crucial role in providing tailored support services in a safe and gender-affirming environment. In 2017/18, AGA delivered over 100 hours of workshops and activities to the community to support wellbeing, enhance connection and build skills and knowledge. Peer-led, community engagement and support services, such as those provided by AGA, have been shown to improve mental health and wellbeing, promote social inclusion, and strengthen peer networks.

AGA also works with families, partners and peers of trans, gender diverse and intersex people, to cultivate understanding, family cohesion and support. Parental, familial and peer support and understanding is consistently identified as a major protective factor when it comes to supporting trans, gender diverse and intersex people to develop resilience and foster strong mental and physical health and is shown to reduce risk factors for depression, suicide and homelessness.

There is a clear and urgent need for greater access to a variety of services in the ACT with the current system of largely private healthcare providers unable to meet the needs of this high-risk and



vulnerable population. We expect presentations of gender incongruence to continue to increase into the future and current services are often suboptimal, with long delays, prohibitive costs or a requirement for interstate travel to access them. Current services also suffer from considerable fragmentation given the range of health providers required to manage often-complex needs.

A peer-led community clinic, similar to those offered in other states and territories, is essential to ensuring access to services and reducing barriers for those in greatest need.

***Recommendation.***

- 1. Additional funding to be available to community based, peer based organisations to ensure wrap around services and clear pathways for equal access to services.***
- 2. Support and resource a peer led community based outreach service for the trans and gender diverse community***

**Understanding and awareness**

AGA's Intersex Project Officer is the only position in the ACT (and Australia) funded to provide affirmative peer support to intersex people and is uniquely positioned to ensure the implementation of the Darlington Statement is deeply connected with the intersex community. This role is essential for understanding and awareness raising in the broader community.

As a group, intersex people face a range of health and human rights issues, and deep-seated stigma. They have, in many cases, been subject to medical interventions in infancy and childhood that are explicitly intended to make intersex bodies conform to social norms relating to sex or gender. Such interventions are now recognised to be deeply harmful to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Intersex people are often misgendered, both socially and in healthcare environments or other spaces and services, something that contributes to negative health outcomes, potential avoidance of services and spaces, and impacts on overall wellbeing. The intersex community is exposed to a high level of discrimination, social exclusion, and violence. Research evidences that this kind of negative exposure can have significant impacts on health and wellbeing. Research shows that 21% of people with an Intersex variation over the age of 16 have been diagnosed with depression, 13% with anxiety and 8% with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. One study found that 19% of people with an intersex variation over the age of 16 had attempted suicide on the basis of issues related to their intersex status.

Over the last 12 months, the Intersex Project Officer has been working to raise awareness of the importance of intersex appropriate and inclusive healthcare and build a community of intersex people. Peer-led intersex support and advocacy is a first in the ACT so it has taken time to build relationships and establish a foundation for future work. Without ongoing funding for this position, these gains will be lost.

LGBTIQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those who identify as Sistergirls and Brotherboys, experience a number of intersecting points of marginalisation. These include structural, institutional, and interpersonal forms of discrimination based on race, gender, colonialism, and LGBTIQ status. As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ peoples face multiple challenges to their overall mental and physical health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

***Recommendation.***

***Ensure adequate and sustainable funding is made available for work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Intersex communities, through a peer and community based model.***

**Open doors participation**

Trans and gender diverse people are overrepresented in mental health statistics of anxiety and depression, and have an increased risk of self-harm and suicide due to their experiences of stigma, discrimination, prejudice, abuse, violence, exclusion and isolation. Many services do not feel confident in supporting intersex, trans and gender diverse people and so at times undertake to 'treat everyone the same'. However the mental health of trans and gender diverse people does not benefit from this framework as it does not create room for specific lived experiences, nor does it redress the barriers that reduce the ability of intersex, trans and gender diverse people to access mental health services. To this end, specific training and programming to increase service providers' knowledge is needed.

AGA's professional training and education services are in high demand from government agencies, non-government organisations and medical practitioners who are on a journey towards more inclusivity. Funding is limited and without additional funding this resource will be unable to be secured into the future.

***Recommendation.***

***Support and provide funding for specific education, training and programming to increase service provider's knowledge and skills and ability to ensure open doors participation.***

**Equal rights under the law**

Trans and gender diverse people who rely on Commonwealth income support, childcare and family tax benefit payments also need additional and specialist support. Commonwealth law has, in many cases, enshrined heteronormative views of family, financial arrangements, and social and civil obligations. Consequently trans and gender diverse people can be at a disadvantage when accessing rights under Commonwealth law, this is particularly the case in accessing social security and other entitlements where heteronormative structures and assumptions underpin the eligibility criteria.

ACT residents who are employed by the Commonwealth Government can also experience stigma, discrimination and distress in employment practices common in the Commonwealth. For example, transgender people have been required to "out" themselves as part of the Commonwealth security clearance process, often many years of living in their affirmed gender.

Over recent years there have been a number of legal and policy reforms that have benefitted the lesbian and gay community (not the least of which was the passage of same-sex marriage). However, many of these changes have been piecemeal in nature, and not significantly beneficial for trans and gender diverse communities. This is due to a lack of representation of the LGBTI community in decision-making, policy development and program design. Without the representation and involvement of people of diverse sexuality and gender the default policy making and legislative position is heteronormative, with LGBTIQ people "othered" both by the default assumptions of the law and the interpretations of the bureaucracy and the courts.

**Recommendation.**

***Ensure equal rights under the law for all LGBTIQ communities with a focus on trans and gender diverse equality.***

**Inclusive government policy and service delivery**

To develop effective policies, programs, and services, and to inform social, political, and legislative reforms, we need accurate population data. Without it, people with diverse sex characteristics, gender identities, and sexual orientations risk becoming invisible to society, with their needs neither identified nor understood.

There is a significant knowledge gap about identities, practices and experiences of LGBTIQ people in the ACT – information that is crucial for achieving equity in health and wellbeing outcomes for our communities. AGA and the AIDS Action Council have developed a peer informed monitoring and evaluation methodology to ensure much needed information is collected and analysed.

Healthcare providers also have a role to play in collecting information about the health and wellbeing of patients and clients. The Canberra Community Consortium's *Guide to LGBTIQ-Inclusive Data Collection* provides guidance on developing more inclusive data collection practices. With this resource, the ACT Government can support health services to collect LGBTIQ-inclusive data and bolster social research, policy and practice.

***Recommendation - Support community-based, peer-led organisations to conduct representative and high-quality social, cultural, and epidemiological research within their communities on key issues identified by the sector.***

**Conclusion**

It has been well established that trans, gender diverse and intersex people experience poorer health and wellbeing outcomes than the wider population. This is directly linked to stigma, discrimination and denial of their civil and human rights. Research consistently shows that peer-led organisations that are embedded in trans, gender diverse and intersex communities, are essential in reducing barriers to wellbeing, social inclusion and services. As the only organisation providing peer-led, specialists services to trans, gender diverse and intersex people in the ACT, our communities rely on us to provide ongoing support throughout their life.

Regards



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