



Mental Health
Community Coalition ACT

MHCC ACT Submission to the Inquiry into barriers and opportunities for participation in community sports in the ACT

September 2025

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

Mental Health Community Coalition ACT is located on Ngunnawal Country. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. We further acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Custodians and Country and recognise their continuing connection to land, sea, culture and community.

Acknowledgement of mental health lived experience

We also acknowledge the individual and collective expertise of those with a living or lived experience of mental health. We recognise their vital contribution at all levels and value the courage of those who share this unique perspective for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all.

About MHCC ACT

The Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT (MHCC ACT) is a membership-based organisation which was established in 2004 as a peak agency. It provides vital advocacy, representational and capacity building roles for the Not for Profit (NFP) community-managed mental health sector in the ACT. This sector covers the range of non-government organisations (NGO) that offer mental health recovery, early intervention, prevention, health promotion and community support services.

We advocate for a mental health system that offers people support and belonging within their community.

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Introduction

As the peak body for community mental health in the ACT, MHCC ACT welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation's Inquiry into the barriers and opportunities for participation in community sports in the ACT.

We emphasise that while we do not hold specialist insight into the barriers specific to sport participation in the ACT, we wish to highlight the significant **mental health benefits of community sport**. We encourage the ACT Government to recognise these benefits and **support inclusive access to sport for all Canberrans**, particularly those who face barriers to participation.

Mental Health Benefits of Community Sport

Community sport plays a vital role in preventing poor mental health across the broader population. Regular participation provides structure, physical activity, and social connection—all of which are protective factors against the development of mental distress. Team environments in particular foster belonging and identity (Eather et al., 2023), helping to counter loneliness and isolation, which have been increasingly recognised as public health priorities.

The benefits also extend beyond the individual player. For children, participating in community sport strengthens wellbeing, while for parents, it provides valuable social connections and community networks that buffer against stress (Hartono et al., 2025). In this way, community sport builds resilience not just for individuals, but for families and communities as a whole.

While the greatest impact of community sport is preventative, it also offers opportunities for people already experiencing mental health challenges. For those who enjoy and choose to engage, sport can aid recovery by providing purpose, identity, and pathways back into community life – particularly when inclusive supports are available to help maintain involvement. In the ACT, we've seen similar success with community arts programs, which are widely recognised for fostering connection and recovery.

Barriers and Opportunities

The mental health benefits of sport can only be fully realised when participation is accessible to all. Yet barriers such as cost, transport, stigma, lack of tailored programs, and inaccessible facilities prevent many from engaging. For people living with mental health challenges or from marginalised backgrounds, these barriers are often compounded.

Recommendations

Sport is a powerful contributor to mental health, building resilience, connection, and recovery. By ensuring equitable access to community sport, the ACT Government can strengthen both individual mental wellbeing and community cohesion.

MHCC ACT recommends the ACT Government:

1. **Block fund grassroots community-led sport initiatives** that foster belonging and connection, especially for youth and families.
2. **Increase inclusivity in community sport**, particularly for people with mental health issues, disabilities, and those from marginalised backgrounds.

3. **Recognise sport as a mental health promotion activity** and embed it in broader wellbeing strategies.
4. **Reduce barriers to participation**, including cost, transport, stigma, and lack of tailored programs.

References

Eather, N., Wade, L., Pankowiak, A., & Eime, R. (2023). The impact of sports participation on mental health and social outcomes in adults: a systematic review and the 'Mental Health through Sport' conceptual model. *Systematic reviews*, 12(1), 102. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-023-02264-8>

Hartono, S., Kish, A., Bagheri, N., & Davey, R. (2025). Exploring the impact of neighbourhood social fragmentation on early childhood developmental vulnerability. *Health & Place*, 94, 103492. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2025.103492>



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