



Moving Canberra: Integrated Transport Draft Strategy Submission

MHCC ACT Submission

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mental health
community coalition ACT

Peak Body in the ACT for the Community Mental Health Sector

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About Mental Health Community Coalition ACT Inc.

The Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT (MHCC ACT), established in 2004 as a peak agency, provides vital advocacy, representational and capacity building roles for the community-managed mental health sector in the ACT. This sector covers the range of non-government organisations that offer recovery, early intervention, prevention, health promotion and community support services for people with a mental illness.

The MHCC ACT vision is to be the voice for quality mental health services shaped by lived experience. Our purpose is to foster the capacity of ACT community managed mental health services to support people to live a meaningful and dignified life.

Our strategic goals are:

- To support providers deliver quality, sustainable, recovery-oriented services
- To represent our members and provide advice that is valued and respected
- To showcase the role of community managed services in supporting peoples' recovery
- To ensure MHCC ACT is well governed, ethical and has good employment practices.

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Introduction and Recommendations

MHCC ACT would like to thank Transport Canberra and City Services for providing the opportunity to put in submissions in response to *Yoursay* on the future of Canberra's integrated transport network following the construction of the light rail and restructuring of the bus network in Canberra in the following areas:

- Active travel
- Future transport
- Safety
- Accessibility

MHCC ACT's submission will focus on the needs of people living with mental illness and their carers, referred to as 'lived experience' who use public transport. People with lived experience of mental health issues are often socially isolated. Access to safe public transport is one method of reducing such isolation yet the evidence shows that as a cohort they travel less. Various factors contribute to this such as anxiety, experiences of trauma, lack of confidence, crowding in public transport, inadequate and inaccessible information about times and destinations/routes, and the costs of travel.

Reducing barriers to public transport for people with lived experience of mental health issues is also useful in increasing community cohesion and increases people's potential for economic activity.

Mental health conditions are mostly not visible, so the needs of people experiencing mental illness often go unmet, are misunderstood or misinterpreted. This submission will also focus on the needs of public transport staff to be trained and supported to achieve this, as well as maintain their own mental health and wellbeing. People working in the public transport area may be witness to events which impact their mental health and wellbeing. It is therefore important that they are both trained to be able to work with people with lived experience of mental illness as well as look after their own mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

- Social isolation is a common factor for people with lived experience and it's important that their needs are catered for in the ACT Transport Strategy to ensure they are integrated and socially included.
- Need to ensure safety of people using public transport and those working for the public transport system:
 - People with lived experience of mental health issues using public transport need clear and accessible information about all aspects of travel to assist in decision making as they may feel vulnerable in public spaces and not be confident in using public transport.
 - Transport staff who are at risk of developing mental illness as a result of being witness to public transport incidents. Need to ensure that there are systems and procedures in place for public transport staff who may witness incidents that may subsequently affect their mental health and wellbeing.
- Public transport staff must be adequately supported to recognise the signs of mental distress and how to work effectively with and support someone in this situation. Very good ACT based organisations that provide this kind of support through training and storytelling are Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT) and Lifeline Canberra.
- Investment in programs is needed to enhance travel skills for people with lived experience of mental health issues through training and providing positive experiences with public transport.

ISSUES RELATED TO USERS

ACCESSIBILITY

An important aspect of accessibility is ensuring the feeling and reality of being safe.

Safety

Safety of passengers

The safety of passengers is vital and appropriate actions need to be taken to ensure it is guaranteed. MHCC ACT appreciates the fact that the draft strategy mentions that loneliness and isolation are increasing in Australia and Transport Canberra has a vision to improve social inclusion for the Canberra community especially in health services. It is however not clear how the use of public transport will operate in the ACT to ensure that people with lived experience of mental health issues are socially integrated and feel safe to use public transport as they are a cohort that are often isolated as stated in the introduction. Thus, MHCC ACT recommends for certain factors to be considered to meet these needs.

First, improving the interactions of drivers with passengers is important. Empowering drivers to interact positively with passengers getting into public transport is a good start as that first point of contact will determine how the person feels for the rest of their journey. For people with lived experience of mental health issues, it is particularly important as that person might be experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges. A positive initial social interaction will give the person confidence and help them feel safe as well as make their trip pleasant.

Secondly, MHCC ACT recommends that safety information is made accessible to passengers so that everyone is advised on how to ensure their safety. Accessibility can be provided in different ways:

- MHCC ACT recommends that there are mechanisms in place to allow for ease of access and comprehensive information for aspects such as fare, schedules at platforms, tickets and/or Transport Canberra cards, location of platforms (having easy to read maps would be helpful). This may be provided in different ways, such as adverts, pamphlets and brochures, at location information etc

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- MHCC ACT has noted from the draft Strategy that Transport Canberra will provide real time information as it has in the past with its bus network. This is commendable and is an indication of what to expect with the light rail as having real time information kiosks will make use of public transport easily accessible. This is useful especially for people with lived experience of mental health issues. People can become anxious when the waiting times are unknown or if they are unsure of where their stop is.
- Public transport personnel should be easily accessible around the stations/kiosks to assist people especially with the light rail since this is new in Canberra and some people have probably never used this form of transport. Ample access to such assistance will help in ensuring that people with lived experience of mental health issues do not have their symptoms aggravated.

MHCC ACT commends Transport Canberra for factoring in their strategy the need to have emergency help points at each stop where people can get assistance in case of emergency. This will provide assurance of immediate assistance especially for people with lived experience of mental health issues. Moreover, it is important to enhance the travel skills of people with lived experience of mental health issues through providing opportunities for them to learn more on the use of public transport. This will build their confidence and make work easier for public transport staff. Additionally, it would help them feel safe.

Additionally, CCTV cameras are a good safety feature.

ISSUES RELATED TO STAFF AND WORKERS

Workplace training

Stigma about mental illness is still rife and leads to misinformation and misunderstanding.

The confidence to approach staff by people with mental health illness and conditions can be increased by better staff training to improve their skills on how to recognise and work with people with mental illness.

MHCC ACT recommends that Transport Canberra review and invest in training to increase awareness and skills relating to mental health issues from both individual as well as day to day workplace perspective. Updating mental health workforce training for employees in the public transport sector is a safety measure for both staff as well as public transport users.

Some particularly good example to source this sort of training is MIEACT and Lifeline Canberra which provide short, affordable and evidence based effective training courses. Lifeline offers courses such as accidental counsellor, Mental Health First Aid, Dealing with People in Difficult Situations, ASIST. MIEACT offers mental health workshops that involve lived experience stories that break down stigma and promote early help seeking as well as other workshops on how to sustain one's mental health and wellbeing.

Safety of drivers and other public transport personnel

For the last 10 years the suicide rate in Australia has been increasing. An unknown number have occurred on the rails. When a suicide incident, injury, fatality or even near hit occur on the rail, the public transport driver and/or other rail employees may suffer severe trauma. This is likely to negatively influence their mental health.

Safety for train drivers is an important issue due to the high level of mental health issues that arise in this profession. Experiences from other states shows that in 2017 Victoria recorded 41 deaths on the rail, NSW 33, 9 in WA, 5 in SA. This led to discussions between mental health experts and transport infrastructure networks.

Following these experiences, MHCC ACT is concerned with the mental health and wellbeing of light rail personnel in the ACT. There is need for development of policy and procedures specific to light rail workers on how to deal with issues following a rail incident. MHCC ACT recommends that Transport Canberra partner with the various community mental health organisations in the ACT to provide its employees opportunities to engage in education about mental health including suicide awareness. TrackSAFE in New South Wales have developed a partnership with Lifeline Australia with an aim to address suicide on the rail network with a strong ongoing commitment through collaboration, research and raising public awareness, to reduce suicides in the rail environment.

MHCC ACT further recommends that training is provided to drivers to guide them on how to deal with challenging situations that they face on the rail. We also recommend having a safe space or an employee assistance program or something similar to support staff in circumstances which may consequently affect their mental health.

Active travel

MHCC ACT would like to recommend Transport Canberra for including this aspect in the strategy particularly on the fact that walking and cycling has demonstrated health benefits and can aid mental health and wellbeing. We urge Transport Canberra to protect and build on investment in this area.

Future transport

In addition to future transport initiatives mentioned in the strategy, mobile phone apps may be created to assist people with lived experience of mental health issues when travelling. Alternatively, the existing apps may be enhanced with further features that are specific to mental health. An example would be providing answers to questions such as: “What to do if I have a panic attack while using public transport” or “How to feel safe on public transport”. MHCC ACT recommends that it would be important to ensure people with mental health conditions are involved in a genuine co-designing and evaluation of such apps as they would best know what their needs are. MHCC ACT, The Mental Health Consumer Network and Carers ACT could assist in making connections with people with lived experience to engage in such codesign.