

National Seniors

Australia

**Submission to the 2013-2014
Australian Capital Territory State Budget**

February 2013

About National Seniors Australia (National Seniors)

With over 200 000 members Australia-wide (**including 4, 567 in the Australian Capital Territory**), National Seniors is the consumer lobby for the over-50s. It is the fourth largest organisation of its type in the world.

We give our members a voice – we listen and represent our members' views to governments, business and the community on the issues of concern to the over 50s.

We keep our members informed – by providing news and information to our members through our Australia-wide branch network, comprehensive website, forums and meetings, bi-monthly lifestyle magazine and weekly e-newsletter.

We provide a world of opportunity – we offer members the chance to use their expertise, skills and life experience to make a difference by volunteering and making a difference to the lives of others.

We support those in need – as a not-for-profit organisation, we raise funds and redirect monies received to older Australians who are most in need.

We help our members save – we offer member rewards with discounts from over 7000 businesses across Australia, we offer discount travel and tours designed for the over 50s, and we provide older Australians with affordable, quality insurance to suit their needs.

Contact:

Sandra Ross, ACT Policy Advisory Group Chair

Phone: 02 62544015

Mobile: 0408438770

Email: sandraross@ozemail.com.au

Head Office

National Seniors Public Affairs, Level 18, 215 Adelaide Street Brisbane

QLD 4001

P: 1300 765 050 F: (07) 3211 9339

E: policy@nationalseniors.com.au

W: www.nationalseniors.com.au

Table of Contents

Recommendations	1
Executive Summary	2
ACT Budget Issues	4
Mobility Disability Parking.....	4
Concessions: Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.....	4
<i>Downsizing</i>	4
<i>Cost of Living Rebates</i>	5
<i>Property and Utility Rebates</i>	6
Health Services.....	7
<i>Timely health services</i>	7
<i>Ambulance Cover</i>	8
<i>Dental Services</i>	8
Airport Security Support.....	9
Conclusion	10

Recommendations

National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government:

- 1.** Extend the availability of disabled parking spaces and maintain the wider parking spaces to ensure people with a disability are able to manoeuvre eg into a wheelchair or to negotiate a clear pathway.
- 2.** Extend the eligibility for the (Pensioner) Duty Concession Scheme to retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card to support older people to downsize their property and remain living in the ACT beyond retirement age.
- 3.** Extend the cost of living rebate (currently \$52.40) to retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, in recognition of their inability to increase their income in line with cost of living increases.
- 4.** Address the significant delays in access within four hours to hospital emergency services and that they lobby the Australian Government to address the shortfall in availability of general practice primary health care service providers.
- 5.** Extend free ambulance cover to retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, in recognition of the importance of this service to prevent escalation of health issues and increased costs to the health system.
- 6.** Extend free basic dental cover under the Adult Dental Health Service to retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.
- 7.** Encourage the Canberra airport security service to provide seating and support to older people who are stopped at security and may have difficulty managing their carry-on baggage and belongings while meeting security requirements.

Executive Summary

National Seniors' Australian Capital Territory Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying emerging issues and trends affecting the over-50s throughout the Territory. It also acts as a conduit between National Seniors' members within the Territory, relevant community organisations and the Australian Capital Territory Government. There are 4,567 National Seniors members in the ACT.

Although the population of the ACT reflects many of the features of the Australian population, it differs substantially in a few demographic measures.¹ The ACT has a population of 370,000, 16% of whom are aged 60 or older, a lower proportion than Australia as a whole (19%).

Similarly, 11% of the population (38,700 people) were aged 65 years and over at June 2011. This was a lower proportion than Australia as a whole (14%) and the second lowest of all states and territories after the Northern Territory (5.5%). However, the percentage of people aged 50 to 64 years of age is similar to that of the Australian population.

This appears to indicate that older people are not ageing in place within the ACT and are choosing to retire elsewhere. Measures to retain older people within the population would therefore be of benefit to maintain the social capital that comes with a range of people across all age groups. This could be an area for consideration by the ACT Government.

In 2011, there were 19,102 self-funded retirees who are ineligible for the age pension or other allowances in the ACT.² The 2011 ACT census figures indicate that 1,916 people aged 65 and older earn between \$41,600 and \$51,948 per annum.³ A number of retirees who earn between \$44,100 (single person cut off for part-age pension) and \$50,000 (single person cut off for Commonwealth Seniors Health Card), or the comparable income thresholds for couples, may be eligible for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.

In 2011-2012 there were 283,631 Australians of retirement age who were holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card⁴. Based on the 2012 Department of Community Services Electorate Report there are 2,736 people in receipt of the CSHC in the Canberra electorate.⁵

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2012. *2011 Census Quick Stats: Australian Capital Territory*. Available at: http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/8ACTE

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). *2008-2009: ABS Multipurpose Household Survey*.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012. *2011 Census Community Profile: Australian Capital Territory*. Available at: http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/8ACTE?opendocument&navpos=100

⁴ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). *2011-2102 Budget Papers*. Australian Government: Canberra.

⁵ Department of Human Services, 2012. FAHCSIA Electorate Data. Australian Government.

<http://www.humanservices.gov.au/corporate/publications-and-resources/facts-and-figures/electorate-data/>

More than a quarter of working people in the ACT are employed either by the Government or Defence at a rate 15 times greater than for the Australian population. The ACT provides a higher level of full-time employment (65% compared with 59.7% across Australia) and lower level of unemployment (3.6% compared with 5.6%).

A higher number of professional, clerical and managerial roles are offered compared with those offered across Australia with a much higher proportion of university or tertiary educated employees (170%) and higher weekly income (150%) than across Australia. Thus household incomes are twice those for the rest of Australia and median family income levels are also 1.3 times higher than for the rest of Australia.

Weekly median rental payments are 1.3 times higher than for the rest of Australia. Combined with the fact that the percentage of people on incomes below \$600 per week is half that of the rest of Australia, it is likely that older ACT residents who are reliant on a pension and do not own their own home would require significant support to find appropriate affordable housing.

The *Report on Government Services* reveals that 1,716 ACT residents aged 50 and older, including 969 on the age pension, receive the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) payment because their rent is greater than 30% of their income. The ACT has the highest proportion (81.4) of CRA recipients who are eligible for the maximum payment, followed by Queensland.⁶

In 2011, the CRA payment reduced the proportion of ACT households experiencing housing stress from 74.1 to 53.0. Of the 6,851 ACT residents aged 75 and older, 472 (6.9%) are in receipt of the CRA. The CRA payment reduces the proportion of this age group experiencing household stress from 62 to 33.1. However 8.4% of this group still experience considerable housing stress by spending more than 50% of their income on housing.⁷

Interestingly the tendency to work 40 hours or more per week is similar to levels for Australia as a whole (45.4%). While people in the ACT participate in unpaid work at similar rates to the rest of Australia, they volunteer at higher rates (21.2% compared with 17.8% across Australia). Therefore the current recognition and support for volunteering roles through Volunteering ACT must be continued.

⁶ Productivity Commission, 2012. *Report on government Services 2012*.

⁷ Productivity Commission, 2012. *Report on government Services 2012*.

ACT Budget issues

Mobility Disability Parking

Recommendation 1: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government extend the availability of disabled parking spaces and maintain the wider parking spaces to ensure people with a disability are able to manoeuvre eg into a wheelchair or to negotiate a pathway.*

Members of National Seniors have expressed concerns regarding the availability of mobility disability parking in public and private spaces. They report a reduction in the number of mobility disability parking spaces previously available (reduced from four to two places in some locations).

They also request increased numbers of disabled parking spaces and maintaining the allocation of wider parking spaces to allow people with a disability to exit the vehicle (to move into a wheelchair or negotiate their passage for example). The location of plastic bollards ensures that these spaces cannot be parked out by other vehicles. Attention to this issue will support older Territorians to continue living in the ACT beyond retirement age.

Concessions - Commonwealth Seniors Health Card

There are 19,102 self-funded retirees in the ACT, most of whom are ineligible for concessions for their rates, utilities and health care costs. There are also 2,736 people in receipt of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card in the Canberra electorate. The ACT Government provides very few concessions to holders of Commonwealth Seniors Health Cards.

This group of self-funded retirees have an income between the \$44, 100 cut off for part-payment of the single age pension and the \$50,000 upper threshold for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card (or comparable thresholds for couples). They continue to bear the brunt of cost of living increases with little ability to generate additional income. Whilst paying full price for their utilities and other living expenses, their income is frequently reduced to less than the cut-off for eligibility to a part-age pension payment.

Downsizing from the family home

Recommendation 2: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government extend the eligibility for the (Pensioner) Duty Concession Scheme for self-funded retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card to support older people to downsize their property and remain living in the ACT beyond retirement age.*

National Seniors applauds the ACT Government's extension for a further three years from 1 July 2012 of the Pensioner Duty Concession Scheme (PDCS) to assist eligible pensioners to move to accommodation more suited to their needs

(e.g. from a house to a townhouse) by substantially reducing the stamp duty involved. This will allow older Territorians to better prepare for retirement and ensure their housing is suitable for them to age in place.

However, those retirees who are self-funded and do not meet eligibility for the above scheme also face the same impediments. While acknowledging the ACT Government's Home Buyer Concessions on duty for purchasers of lower-priced new or substantially renovated properties, this may not assist people who are attempting to downsize to universal design homes that are more highly priced and meet the needs of older people in retirement.

Extension of the PDCS to holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card which is means tested would support them to downsize, thereby ensuring their accommodation is suitable to support them into older age and releasing family suitable housing to the ACT market.

The home modifications program also provides much needed support to assist older people to maintain their independence and continue to live in their own home. Older people are satisfied with the income assessments to determine the charges they pay for structural changes to improve safety and avoid premature and inappropriate admission to long term care.

Cost of Living Rebates

The ACT Government's *Canberra Plan – Towards Our Second Century* expresses its commitment to the principles of access, equity and participation to support all people to participate, make a contribution and share the benefits of Canberra's community. The Plan sets the direction for concessions to ease financial pressure on low income households, fostering an inclusive community that supports vulnerable people and enables all to reach their full potential.⁸

National Seniors commends the ACT Government for the public transport concessions available to holders of the ACT Seniors Card, thereby offering substantially reduced fares during peak and off-peak travel for Seniors/My Way card holders.

However self-funded retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card are not eligible for several of the concessions currently available to pensioners, holders of Centrelink Low Income Health Care Cards and DVA card holders. These concessions include rebates on rates, fire and emergency services levy, energy and other utilities and the vehicle registration component (100% rebate to concession card holders, 10% to ACT Seniors Card holders).

⁸ Australia Capital Territory Government. 2008. *Canberra Plan – Towards Our Second Century*. Chief Minister's Office: Canberra.

Property and Utility rebates

Recommendation 3: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government extend the cost of living rebate (currently \$52.40) to self-funded retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, in recognition of their inability to increase their income in line with cost of living increases.*

Property owners may also be eligible for a 50% rebate on their rates and fire and emergency services levy for their principal place of residence (maximum concession set at \$565 and \$52.40 cost of living rebate per property per annum respectively for new pensioners from 2012-2103).

The Energy Concession is currently set at a maximum of \$292.82 per annum and the related utility rebate is set at \$82 to offset the rise in basic utility costs, including water; therefore worth a maximum of \$374.82 per annum.

The above concessions exclude ACT Senior Card holders and self-funded retirees who are Commonwealth Senior Health Card holders. Self-funded retirees have no means of increasing their income in line with cost of living increases, yet receive no compensation for rises in rates and utilities.

In contrast, the Western Australian Government provides Cost of Living Assistance (CoLA) payment of \$200 (an increase from \$147 on the previous Supply Charge Rebate) to all holders of Western Australian Seniors Card, Pensioner Concession Card, Department of Veterans Affairs Gold Card, Commonwealth Health Care Card and Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.⁹

The South Australian Government also provides an energy rebate of \$165 per annum to concession card holders including the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.¹⁰ The Queensland Government also offered a rebate to eligible households who replaced their electric hot water system with a heat pump or solar hot water system, purchased and installed by June and July 2012 respectively.

A \$1000 rebate was provided for pensioners and low income earners who held a Centrelink Pension Concession Card, Centrelink Low Income Health Care Card, Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, or Department of Veterans' Affairs Pension Concession Card - blue only. A \$600 standard rebate was also provided to other Queenslanders.

⁹ West Australian Government. Cost Of Living Assistance Payment and Electricity Tariffs. Available at: http://www.treasury.wa.gov.au/cms/uploadedFiles/State_Budget/Budget_2012_13/2012-13_budget_factsheet_coland_electricity_tariffs.pdf

¹⁰ South Australian Government: Concessions for Energy Bills. Available at: <http://www.sa.gov.au/subject/Water%2C+energy+and+environment/Energy/Energy+rebates%2C+concessions+and+incentives/Energy+concessions>

Health Services

Recommendation 4: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government address the significant delays in access within four hours to hospital emergency services and that they lobby the Australian Government to address the shortfall in availability of general practice primary health care service providers.*

Recommendation 5: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government extend free ambulance cover to self-funded retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card, in recognition of the importance of this service to prevent escalation of health issues and increased costs to the health system.*

Recommendation 6: *National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government extend free basic dental cover under the Adult Dental Health Service to self-funded retirees who are holders of the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.*

Primary and hospital health services and support to stay in their own home are the most important services for people as they enter retirement.¹¹ Timely attention to these services can ensure that people maintain good health and independence as long as possible. In addition, premature entry to hospital and residential aged care is prevented and costs to the health care system (Territory or Commonwealth) are limited.¹²

Timely health services

The Australian Capital Territory population experience significant difficulties in accessing emergency health services and were the least likely group in Australia to receive care within the recommended four hours in 2012.¹³ The recent AIHW report on hospital statistics states that only 56% of ACT emergency department patients were treated and admitted or discharged within four hours, well short of the ACT baseline of 64%. However the ACT is to be congratulated on exceeding all the targets for meeting elective surgery waiting lists for Category 1, 2 and 3 patients within the designated timelines.

Older Territorians report that new patients experience difficulty in being placed on the books of existing general practices within the ACT. Regular patients of general practices also report that demand exceeds availability of appointments and they are not always able to access timely appointments.

¹¹ Productive Ageing Centre, 2012. *Aged Care Reform: What our Members Think*. National Seniors Australia: Canberra.

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, 2012. *Living Longer Living Better*. Australian Government: Canberra.

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012. *Australian Hospital Statistics: national emergency access and elective surgery targets 2012*. Health services series no. 48. Cat. no. HSE 131. Canberra: AIHW.

When the delays in emergency department responsiveness are combined with the difficulty in being placed on the books of ACT general practices, older Territorians are anxious about their chances of receiving timely health care. Therefore National Seniors believes that this is an issue that requires urgent attention by the ACT Government.

Ambulance cover

Ambulance cover is free to ACT Pensioner Concession and Commonwealth Health Care Card holders but all other residents must purchase ambulance cover from their private health insurance provider or pay full cost for their ambulance services. This cost ranges from \$216 to \$831 depending on the nature of the service – emergency or non-emergency, expertise of the ambulance service provider and the distance transported.¹⁴

Self-funded retirees who hold Commonwealth Seniors Health Cards are not eligible for this essential free health service and members report that they are reluctant to call an ambulance even when the situation may be life-threatening because of concerns that they cannot afford the service.

Other States and Territories have recognised the importance of this service. For example, the Queensland Government Community Ambulance Cover legislation provides all Queensland residents with free authorised ambulance services throughout Australia.

The ambulance service should be considered as important as the concessions provided for PBS and MBS services, and free services extended to ACT holders of Commonwealth Seniors Health Cards.

Dental services

The ACT Adult Dental Health Service is available to eligible adults who hold the Centrelink issued Pension Concession or Healthcare card. Again, self-funded retirees who are eligible for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card are not eligible for this essential service.

The importance of oral health for older people to be able to maintain their nutrition and avoid infection is well established. Maintenance of oral health supports improved nutrition, reduced infection and reduced costs to the health system.

In February 2012, the National Advisory Council on Dental Health reported that poor oral health has an impact on individuals in terms of overall health, pain, nutrition, social exclusion and economic loss. It also has an impact on Commonwealth, State and Territory governments' expenditure through

¹⁴ ACT Emergency Services Agency, Canberra. *Fees and Charges*. <http://esa.act.gov.au/actas/fees-and-charges/#faq8>

treatment of complex problems in hospitals and visits to GPs and pharmacists for treatment of pain and infection.¹⁵

People aged 65 and older experience higher rates of oral health issues than younger groups, with around 20% reporting each of missing teeth, avoidance of certain foods and concerns regarding their appearance.¹⁶

Patients with chronic health conditions may also experience decline in their oral health due to chronic infection, medication use and associated functional limitations and behaviours. Among people aged 65 and older, 78% reported having at least one of nine chronic conditions¹⁷ (15% in the 0-24 age group) and 8% reported four or more conditions (more than 50% of the 45-64 age groups reported one or more chronic conditions).

Although National Seniors is in agreement with the National Advisory Council on Dental Health that the long term goal for dental health in Australia should be a system that allows universal access to dental care, the current reality is that many people are delaying treatment because they cannot afford the cost of private dental services.

Therefore, access to affordable basic dental health services is important for older people, with prevention and early intervention playing a key role in improving oral health status.

Airport security support

Recommendation 7: National Seniors recommends that the ACT Government encourage the Canberra airport security service to provide seating and support to older people who are stopped at security and may have difficulty managing their carry – on baggage and belongings while meeting security requirements.

National Seniors members have raised the need for Canberra Airport security services to be more sensitive to the needs of older Territorians who are stopped for security checks. There have been reports of people who have mobility restrictions experiencing difficulty in removing items of clothing and not feeling safe due to the pressure of other people moving through the security checks.

For example, a person with a hip replacement or experiencing mobility issues would be assisted by the provision of a chair to remove their shoes or belts. They would also appreciate staff assisting them to retrieve their belongings off the conveyor belts if they have been detained for security checks.

¹⁵ National Advisory Council, 2012. *Report of the National Advisory Council on Dental Health*.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012. *Australia's health 2012*. Australia's health series no.13. Cat. no. AUS 156.

¹⁷ Chronic health conditions reported include: asthma, Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, cerebrovascular disease (mainly stroke), arthritis, osteoporosis, COPD, depression and high blood pressure.

Conclusion

National Seniors appreciates this opportunity to raise the concerns of members and older Territorians with the Australian Capital Territory Government. Our submission focuses on ensuring that older Territorians are able to age in place and are supported to continue to participate in their community.