



# 2020 ACT Election Submission

## Council of the Ageing ACT

COTA ACT works to shape a just and equitable society for older Canberrans where they can contribute and live fulfilled, dignified and happy lives.



To all Candidates in the upcoming 2020 ACT election:

COTA ACT is the peak organisation in the Australian Capital Territory concerned with all issues related to ageing. It is an independent, non-party political and non-religious organisation working to protect and promote the well-being, rights and interests of all older people in the ACT irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic, religious or cultural background. For nearly 50 years we have given a voice to ageing issues in the ACT without fear or favour. COTA ACT has a reach of over 35,000 older Canberrans (as well as their families, friends and carers).

We are the ACT's peak organisation for seniors, advancing the rights, needs, interests and futures of people as we age. We work to influence positive outcomes for Canberrans for almost fifty years. COTA ACT provides a connection point for older people, their families and communities, organisations, and Government to address issues for Canberrans and co-create change. We provide independent information and education for older people, their communities, and organisations as well as education and training, advice, and other services to the public and the private sector.

Older Canberrans make up a large and growing proportion of the ACT electorate. This document is to inform political parties and candidates participating in the 2020 ACT election about the needs, concerns, and interests of the large and growing number of older people in our territory.

Canberrans' wellbeing, participation, and continued contribution needs to be supported by age-friendly policies, services, and infrastructure. We strongly support continued action towards an Age-friendly City plan, including place-based approaches as well as support for local community initiatives and businesses.

Urgent attention is needed to address ageism and relationships between the generations. Specific actions continue to be needed to address elder abuse, age discrimination in employment, co-design of an integrated health system, access to affordable and appropriate housing, adequacy of concessions, consumer education, choice, and protections around energy provision, digital inclusion, and affordability and accessibility of transport.

In many of these areas, there are important learnings and opportunities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. Recovery efforts must prioritise the areas of greatest need and optimise the positive developments that have emerged.

There needs to be a focus on local capacity and community responses and how these can be supported, drawing together the public, private, and community sectors

COTA ACT has identified a number of key matters current in our community that are of particular concern to our organisation and the older Canberrans we represent. The following issues have been the subject of consultation and feedback from our members, volunteers, policy committee, Board and staff. We are giving all parties and candidates in the upcoming ACT election the opportunity to comment on or formulate a policy response to these issues. We will make this letter and any/all responses from any party/candidate available via our website and other media.

Our key concerns for older Canberrans are related to health, transport, housing, community infrastructure and the prevention of social isolation. We hope that all candidates in the upcoming ACT election can respond to these concerns and can respond in a meaningful way. Many of the barriers for older Canberrans to access these aspects of everyday Canberra life have been exacerbated by the pandemic and we need to address these in a positive way.

Our key requests are:

- ***Funding and support to increase the connectedness of older Canberrans – through digital literacy, targeted news, relevant information and enhanced intergenerational community connections.***
- ***Commitment and funding for new ways of providing information and assistance to older Canberrans, including outreach of information and support especially for those with transport, health, physical, generational, linguistic or financial barriers to accessing current service models.***
- ***Support and funding for targeted, evidence-based physical activity programs for seniors in our community, along with a commitment to their health, mental health and physical wellbeing.***
- ***Development and implementation of a co-ordinated seniors housing and homelessness strategy with reference and input from both those with lived experiences and the organisations that support them.***
- ***Attention and funding be allocated urgently to repair, upgrade and maintain community spaces (such as the Hughes Community Centre), particularly those in established areas with high passing traffic like shopping centres and village).***

We are planning a special election edition of our hard copy newsletter to be sent to all our members in early October. In order to include statements from current candidates, we will need to receive responses by 1 October 2020 (at the latest).

Background and further information on each of these issues is contained in the attached document. We would be happy to discuss any of these matters further or provide any additional information you may require. Thank you for listening to our concerns and those of ACT seniors. We look forward to receiving your proposals for our future direction.

Jenny Mobbs  
Chief Executive Officer  
Council on the Ageing (COTA) ACT  
Hughes Community Centre  
2 Wisdom Street  
Hughes ACT 2605

Ph 02 6282 3777  
Email: [exec@cotaact.org.au](mailto:exec@cotaact.org.au)  
Web: [www.cotaact.org.au](http://www.cotaact.org.au)  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/cotaact/>

## ***Introduction***

COTA ACT is the peak organisation in the Australian Capital Territory concerned with all issues related to ageing. It is an independent, non-party political and non-religious organisation working to protect and promote the well-being, rights and interests of all older people in the ACT irrespective of socio-economic, ethnic, religious or cultural background.

COTA ACT is a member of an Australian wide organisation – COTA Australia – and contributes to the development of national policies and agendas.

COTA ACT is calling upon all candidates in the 2020 Act Election to support older Canberrans in this community through a range of key areas including:

- Reducing isolation and increasing engagement;
- Information and support;
- Active ageing;
- Housing and homelessness;
- Volunteering; and
- Community venues.

What follows is some information about the current issues, concerns and priorities for older Canberrans, as expressed to us through our over 2,000 active members and our database of over 35,000 seniors over 60.

## **REDUCING ISOLATION AND INCREASING ENGAGEMENT**

During the current restrictions and in the recovery from the pandemic, we will need to establish and support new ways of engaging with our older community in the “new normal” to come. The past six months has been the most isolating and disenfranchising experience for the entire aged population. By government decree, they have been confined to their homes or aged care settings with minimal support and without visitors, friends or family. While our sympathy is given freely to those in the Melbourne city area, few spare a thought for our older population who have been living in total and enforced lockdown constantly – since March.

Older people are struggling with fear, depression and isolation during the current pandemic. Our recent research partnership with the University of Canberra News and Media Research Centre highlighted that while many older Canberrans respondents are comfortable using email (93%), less than half are confident with video apps (Zoom, Skype) or social networking (Facebook, Twitter). We at COTA ACT generally receive over 1500 phone calls each month to our Seniors Information Line, with a marked increase in calls over the past few months. Government statistics show that seniors want to know and understand how to use online technology, learning through face-to-face mentoring. In addition, the UC research has shown that seniors are more comfortable receiving news and information from more traditional media (like radio, television and newspapers). In an era of ‘fake news’ older Canberrans are understandably suspicious of internet news and articles. We would like to embark on a senior’s information strategy – to complement the information line. This strategy would include community radio and news, as well as enhancing digital literacy around trusted information and sources for those aged over 50.

We would like to request ACT Government funding and support to increase the numbers and confidence of our older Canberrans to access digital technology and to explore new ways of getting and staying connected with their family, friends and community.

The recent Age-Friendly City Plan identified intergenerational programs as a key mechanism to keep seniors (and particularly those in residential settings) involved, connected and valued. COTA AT would like to support this call for more intergenerational programs (like playgroups, school visits, mentoring programs etc).

***COTA ACT recommends funding and support to increase the connectedness of older Canberrans – through digital literacy, targeted news and information and enhanced intergenerational community connections.***

## **INFORMATION AND SUPPORT**

COTA ACT currently has one office in the Hughes Community Centre which is in a southern suburb of Canberra.

We propose that COTA ACT – with ACT government support sets up several Seniors Hubs – or outreach services to assist older Canberrans to access information and support that is not currently available in their local area, beginning with one in Tuggeranong and another in the northern suburbs of Canberra.

The Seniors Hub is an initiative that would bring together local seniors and seniors-serving organizations to ensure that the ACT communities are places where seniors can thrive. We are in negotiation with a few community organisations for a working space but need assistance to technology, furniture, and storage.

The spaces managed by COTA ACT would strive to provide a Seniors' **information 'hub'** that will enhance awareness of local programs and services as currently provided in Hughes at the present COTA ACT office. It would also provide leadership in identifying gaps in service delivery and generate community support for seniors' issues. It would aim to connect older Canberrans with services, with each other, with those who could provide accurate information and assistance and in all, build independence and resilience in older people in Canberra. In addition, these hubs could provide information and support to those facing barriers to accessing traditional service (due to geography, transport or health issues), but also for those that struggle with accessing the increasingly prevalent online universe (which has grown exponentially in the time of COVID and sees no sign of abating after).

So, one of the key characteristics of a seniors information hub would be to build upon existing community assets and networks. Through a coordinated network, participating seniors would have access to a wide range of vetted, trusted, discounted and affordable services such as household repairs, home care services and personal trainers. This information is supported in the work that has gone into developing the ACT Seniors Discount Directory.

COTA ACT proposes working with local Men's Sheds and Volunteering ACT to set up more volunteer support networks which would offer personal support and services like transportation, gardening and friendly visitors. There will be a buddy system so seniors share information, do small tasks for each other and look out for each other.

COTA ACT relies on the untiring support of a reliable cohort of trained volunteers who assist with many tasks including meetings and talking with older Canberrans who want information and who

may need help with systems – legal, advice about elder abuse, transport information, that relating to age care and other services. Social connections and engagement through group and learning activities such as health and wellness programs, recreation and educational activities, tool lending library and group trips could also be progressed with the assistance of a sound group of volunteers, supported by COTA staff members

It is simply all about ageing well in place with all the benefits and comforts of home, and at an affordable cost so Canberra truly becomes an Age Friendly city. COTA ACT would aim to build a more responsive and resilient community of seniors on through the power of collective action and support with this sector of our community being able to ask for help, being given a hand so they learn and develop into a responsive and resilient community of seniors through the power of collective action and engagement in their own communities.

***COTA ACT recommends a commitment and funding for new ways of providing information and assistance to older Canberrans, including outreach of information and support especially for those with transport, health, physical, generational, linguistic or financial barriers to accessing current service models.***

## **ACTIVE AGEING**

The World Health Organisation recommends that older people participate in a minimum of 150 minutes of physical activity a week and that at least two sessions should include resistance training. The number of hospitalisations in Australia due to fall related injuries for older adults continues to increase every year and is presenting as a significantly growing health burden in Australia. There is considerable evidence that endurance and strength training, combined with balance training, can reduce falls. Research findings demonstrate that whole body strength and balance training programs (such as the COTA ACT Strength for Life program) are an effective and safe intervention for reducing falls risk in community dwelling older adults, and to prevent or reverse frailty. Population health data suggests that no more than 15% of older people are meeting the recommended levels of physical activity and that nationally, more than 40% of those over 65 are considered sedentary - resulting in many chronic conditions and obesity.

There is also growing evidence about the negative impact on physical and emotional health of social isolation and a lack of supportive social networks, and of the importance of health promoting physical activity programs building in socialisation opportunities for participants. This has been exacerbated by COVID19, where even those older Canberrans who were engaging in regular exercise have seen that cancelled or curtailed and the future of many types of exercise (like gyms) is uncertain for those in the senior cohort.

COTA ACT would like to see the 2020 ACT Government form a new commitment on supporting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of seniors, especially through evidence-based and COVID safe exercised programs and activities. This would also help to improve the quality of life of people 50+ who are living with one or more chronic condition, with a focus on active ageing. In particular, delivering and promoting physical activity programs and services that contribute to increasing physical activity levels, improving strength, balance, wellness and social connectedness of older Canberrans.

***COTA ACT recommends support and funding for targeted, evidence-based physical activity programs for seniors in our community, along with a commitment to their health, mental health and physical wellbeing.***

## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

COTA ACT believes that older people need to be able to access affordable, safe and appropriate housing in order to live independent, socially connected and active lifestyles. These needs are not being met for many older ACT residents.

High rents and a shortage of social housing place too many older ACT residents at risk, particularly older women. COTA ACT supports the expansion of social housing, and increased assistance for those low-income older Canberrans renting privately.

There is an absence of timely support available for older residents at risk of or experiencing homelessness. There is no suitable crisis accommodation available for older men or women in the ACT.

For those older Canberrans wishing to downsize, there is a lack of appropriate and affordable housing options. COTA ACT supports changes to planning and development policies to encourage the availability of housing stock that meets older people's needs.

### ***Affordability***

Canberra is one of the fastest ageing capital cities in Australia – the proportion of the population aged 65 or over is expected to double over coming decades.

Leasing data shows Canberra is one of the most expensive places in Australia to rent privately, with median rents for houses, apartments and rooms second only to Sydney. There is an overall shortage of rental properties in the ACT. Vacancy rate for rental properties is consistently very low – 1.3% May 2020. High charges for land rates and land taxes are not attractive to investors.

Social and community housing is in critically short supply, with very long waiting lists. The eligibility criteria for public and community housing prevent many older people from registering on financial grounds – the assets test rules out people with modest lifetime savings. This is creating a growing cohort of older people who have too much money to apply for social housing but not enough to rent or buy on the private market.

For those age pensioners or part-pensioners forced to rely on private rental, the Commonwealth Rent Assistance program has failed to keep up with increases in recent years. The maximum rate of assistance does not cover half the rent of the cheapest one bedroom flat, and much share housing is unsuitable for older people.

Research indicates Canberra has an increasing number of older women who do not have secure and stable accommodation, and a large number of women aged over 45 who spend an unacceptably high proportion of their low income on rent.

### ***Addressing ignorance of legal and financial considerations***

COTA ACT has learned of many instances where older Canberrans have suffered due to lack of knowledge of legal and financial considerations relevant to their housing situation, for example as exploited renters or as victims of unfair housing arrangements forced on them by family members.

These examples are evidence of the need for better education and information to improve older residents' awareness of their legal and financial position and the assistance and remedies available to them. Government must recognise and deal with these factors both procedurally and through appropriate resourcing of agencies and community organisations.

### ***Impact of Covid19 on older homeless Canberrans***

Should the Covid19 pandemic affect Canberra more severely, those older Canberrans who are homeless (for most, this means reliant on informal share accommodation) may find themselves at increased risk of infection, or at risk of being forced onto the streets.

### ***Appropriate housing design***

Older Canberrans who want to downsize can find it difficult to locate appropriate and affordable housing that meets their particular needs in their local neighbourhood.

Currently, there is insufficient diversity in available housing across the ACT, especially in established suburbs. New development is focused on one to two bedroom, multistorey apartment buildings.

Properties for older Canberrans need to be of Universal Design to allow them to age in place:

- preferably single level
- easy to enter, exit and move around
- able to accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility aids
- close to transport and amenities
- energy efficient.

COTA ACT supports changes to planning and development policies that encourages greater diversity of appropriate and affordable housing stock that meet older people's needs within new and established neighbourhoods.

***COTA ACT recommends the development and implementation of a coordinated seniors housing and homelessness strategy with reference and input from both those with lived experiences and the organisations that support them.***

## **VOLUNTEERING**

Older Australians make significant contributions by volunteering. ACT has the highest rate of volunteering in Australia. Volunteering and Contact ACT has estimated that in the ACT nearly four in ten people volunteer, contributing an estimated \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy annually. The COVID 19 pandemic has stalled this important resource and has left many individuals isolated and organisations unable to deliver vital services and support. As the ACT emerges from the impact of the past few months, strategies need to be developed to re-start this important sector of the community, particularly in ways that make older volunteers (and older clients) feel safe and supported. 2020 has been a difficult year for volunteers – especially older ones.

A new plan is required to help older Canberrans return to (and take on new) roles in supporting their local community. Senior volunteers may need help with getting back into schools, aged care facilities, community services and others. Transport, safety, masks and PPE, health concerns, or just getting out of the house are some of the current concerns reported to COTA.

***COTA ACT recommends that special attention be given to re-starting volunteering by seniors in the ACT community in safe, supported and accessible ways.***

## MAINTENANCE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY SPACES

COTA is aware that much of our community infrastructure used by senior Canberrans is falling into disrepair. Many of these places are unsafe or inaccessible to our older and frail residents. Local venues and the services that operate from them are the life-blood of our community. These venues are integral for the affordable provision of non-profit and volunteer services and supports, but many of the offices, shopfronts and activity areas are well below the standard we expect in other settings. Buildings have been neglected for too long and COTA ACT is concerned that many older Canberrans are managing, navigating or avoiding these services or spaces due to their increasing risk to health and safety. COVID-19 had made this worse, where it has become apparent that the spaces are difficult to manage, separate and clean effectively.

Age-friendly design principles should also be applied to all places and venues where older Canberrans meet, socialise and access essential services and supports.

***COTA ACT recommends that attention and funding be allocated urgently to repair, upgrade and maintain community spaces (such as the Hughes Community Centre), particularly those in established areas with high passing traffic (like shopping centres and villages).***