

Communique: Early impact of COVID-19 on the ACT Youth and Family Sector

In early April, the Youth Coalition and Families ACT disseminated a survey to programs and services supporting children, young people and families in the ACT, to better understand the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the survey was to find out how workers and services are being affected by COVID-19, and the issues that they are seeing children, young people and families experiencing.

We received 94 survey responses across 48 organisations and directorates, including 42 programs or schools. We extend our thanks and appreciation to the workers and services that completed the survey.

We are considering doing a follow-up survey in 1-2 months, as we anticipate the impact upon the sector will evolve over time as the needs of young people and families change, and as early supports are implemented.

Key Themes

The survey findings indicate that the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant impact upon children, young people and families in the ACT; and on the services that support them. The following interdependent themes emerged across the child, youth and family sector:

1. **Increased demand from existing clients, including young people and families:** Many services reported increased help-seeking and needs from children, young people and families they already support. Key concerns for families included:
 - a. domestic violence and increased conflict;
 - b. financial stress;
 - c. housing and homelessness;
 - d. mental health;
 - e. alcohol and other drug use;
 - f. access to technology.

2. Changes in practice and service delivery:

Demands on service provision have changed for all services. Most services have shifted service delivery online in some form, which brings a range of logistical, technical and ethical challenges, along with opportunities for innovation. Services continuing to provide face-to-face support (such as residential services) are experiencing different pressures related to implementing social distancing.

3. Self-care for practitioners and other staff:

Many workers and services reported higher levels of anxiety and overwhelm among staff, who are continuing to support clients while also managing the effects of COVID-19 in their own lives and transitioning to different forms of service delivery. They also reported feeling socially isolated and wanted opportunities to share information and ideas with other workers and services.

4. Transition to remote learning for children and young people:

The transition to remote learning for education is bringing new challenges for families, including where parents may be working from home or where there may be limited access to devices and internet data.

5. Needs of specific population groups:

Certain population groups are experiencing additional challenges and pressures. Services supporting multicultural young people and families report increased help-seeking from asylum seekers and those on certain types of visas who have become unemployed and are not eligible for income support.

6. Technology:

Challenges for services to transition online include supporting staff to work online and increased overhead costs. Services have reported that some children, young people and families do not have adequate access to devices, internet data, or a reliable network to engage in support or education. There are also concerns about how to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of clients while providing support online to them in their family homes.

7. Expected increase in new demand for support:

Services are expecting an increase in new referrals over the coming weeks and months as COVID-19 continues to impact upon families. This may include young people and families who have not previously sought assistance from the service system and may not know how to access support.

Recommendations relating to the findings of the survey are provided at the end of the communique.

Survey Findings

Survey findings indicate that the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant impact upon children, young people and families in the ACT; and on the services that support them.

Impact upon children, young people and families

With ACT schools going pupil-free and social distancing restrictions in place, families are spending more time together at home, coping with increased pressures. Services identified the following key concerns:

- increased domestic and family violence, and family conflict;
- concerns that there will be increased homelessness caused by family conflict;
- employment and income support, including youth and parental job loss, difficulties engaging with Centrelink, and a lack of income support for asylum seekers and certain types of visas;
- increased mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression;
- increased help-seeking for accommodation/homelessness services;
- access to affordable and secure housing, including confusion about the implications for people in the private rental market;
- inadequate access to the Internet for young people and families, including access to devices, adequate data packages, and reliability of connections; each of which can limit engagement with support services and education;
- emergency relief: access to and affordability of food and other essentials;
- access to transport, particularly with the closure of some community-based transport services;
- increased use of and help-seeking for alcohol and other drug issues among young people;
- difficulties for families managing home education, including if parents are working from home;
- for young people and families from diverse cultural backgrounds: increased help-seeking for emergency relief and income support, alongside increased experiences of racism and language barriers;
- impacts for families who are involved with the NDIS, including access to support.

Many services identified that they are experiencing increased demand from existing clients, particularly for emotional support and emergency relief. This is placing additional pressure on workers who already have full caseloads. Services also highlighted the need for more brokerage funding to support these young people and families.

Some services reported an increase in demand from new clients, predominantly related to mental health support, emergency relief, and support to access accommodation. Several services reported that they are expecting an increase in new referrals over the coming weeks and months as services settle into new modes of delivery and COVID-19 continues to impact upon families and

communities. Many of these services are concerned that they will not be able to cope with increased demand without additional resourcing.

Impact upon services supporting children, young people and families

Nearly all services have shifted delivery online in some form, using a variety of platforms to continue engaging with children, young people and families. Challenges with this transition include:

- supporting staff to transition to working online or from home;
- increased overhead and administrative costs associated with purchasing equipment and software;
- concerns about young people and families' access to devices, internet data, and network reliability to be able to engage with services;
- concerns about ensuring privacy and confidentiality of clients while engaging them online within their homes (e.g. through counselling).

Services that are continuing to provide face-to-face services (such as residential services, community-based health services and some community transport programs) are experiencing additional pressures. This includes limited personal protective equipment and hand sanitizers; along with the need to develop and implement new procedures for hygiene/cleaning procedures and to limit physical interactions.

Staff and services also report feeling increased anxiety, overwhelm and isolation; particularly frontline practitioners, as well as staff and volunteer shortages. Some organisations are considering 'redeploying' staff across their programs to meet areas of increased need. Many practitioners and services identified that they would like to participate in opportunities to share and access ideas and information, for peer support, and to participate in training.

Services also reported concerns about loss of funding. This included immediate losses, particularly for those operating on fee-for-service models or that rely on fundraising; as well as fears about medium and longer-term financial viability for services and across the sector, especially if demand increases. There is also uncertainty regarding flexibility for meeting contractual obligations.

In the face of these challenges, services are innovating and finding new ways to engage with children, young people and families; such as shifting parent groups online, providing a board games library to families, holding online music nights, and hosting competitions on self-care and living skills.

Recommendations

The Youth Coalition and Families ACT have identified the following recommendations:

1. Provide additional support, including funding, to assist services to:
 - a. provide brokerage to children, young people and families; including for devices and internet data;
 - b. provide support to families to improve family functioning;
 - c. provide support to families to access emergency relief provisions;
 - d. transition to online service delivery, including support to cover increased overhead and administration costs.
2. Assist services providing face-to-face support to children, young people and families, such as residential services, transport services, and community-based health services. These services need to cover increased overhead and administration costs, obtain personal protective equipment, develop new policies and procedures related to COVID-19, and are expecting an increase in demand.
3. Provide support structures for workers and services in the child, youth and family sector, including:
 - a. review the literature examining online/virtual work in service delivery to children, young people and families;
 - b. use online platforms to support youth and family workers and services to engage in online training, supervision and peer support;
 - c. support to transition to online service delivery, including the development of policies and procedures to support safe and ethical engagement with young people and families online.
4. Develop pathways to support young people and families to easily navigate and access the service system when needed; particularly for those who have not had prior engagement with support services.
5. Provide additional supports to young people and families who cannot access income support, such as asylum-seekers and people on certain visas.
6. Monitor the transition to remote learning of education in Term 2, to ensure that children and young people, and their parents are adequately supported to remain connected to education and their school community.
7. Provide economic certainty and flexibility to not-for-profit services affected by changes to funding or operational arrangements, particularly:
 - a. services affected by fee-for-service funding arrangements, loss of fundraising income, or loss of volunteers;

- b. to provide flexibility to services in meeting their key performance indicators (KPIs);
 - c. to provide funding certainty for programs that may not be able to meet KPIs due to COVID-19;
 - d. supporting the viability of services and the community sector in the medium and longer-term.
8. Continue dissemination of information regarding the changing ACT and federal policy and legislative environments to workers and services.
9. Monitor the impact of COVID-19 on workers and services in the child, youth and family sector; as well as on children, young people and families, in order to respond to emerging needs over time.