



## 2024 ACT Election Priorities Statement

13 September 2024

ATODA enters the 2024 ACT election proud to reflect on what has been achieved through advocacy for harm reduction and treatment for alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) use. We commend the work of the ACT Government and other key stakeholders during the last term of government for passing the *Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022* to shift the approach towards drug use from one of criminalisation to one that is person-centred and health-focused. ATODA also welcomes the establishment and continuing viability of CanTEST, to reduce drug-related harms through a drug checking service. While we join our sector partners in celebrating these key milestones, we also recognise that there is more to be done to support our sector and reduce harms for the ACT community.

The ACT Government must ensure the **sustainability of the ATOD sector** in the ACT, to continue to provide efficient and effective specialist treatment and harm reduction services to our community. ATODA is also calling for more support and investment into **harm reduction measures** and we reiterate that therapeutic approaches to drug possession need to continue. **Alcohol-related harms** need to be more directly addressed; **tobacco harm reduction** requires continuing efforts, including options for targeted approaches and management of nicotine dependence; and **e-cigarettes** need to be more effectively understood and with a focus on supporting therapeutic access to those who need them. Finally, action on **housing and homelessness** needs to be taken to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for some of the most disadvantaged people in the ACT.

ATODA would be pleased to provide this document and detailed briefings to Members of the Legislative Assembly, representatives of political parties and individual candidates, upon request, regarding any aspects on this Election Priorities Statement. To make general enquiries or to arrange a meeting, please contact us:

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## 1. Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Sector Sustainability

*The National Drug Household Survey identified that if Australians were given \$100 to spend on reducing drug use, they would give the most to education efforts (\$36.5 on average) and spend the least on law enforcement (\$31.5).<sup>1</sup> However, a pattern of disproportionate funding continues, with ATOD funding primarily directed towards law enforcement, and only 27.4 percent of funding directed towards ATOD treatment.<sup>2</sup>*

- The ACT ATOD sector's current funding, of approximately \$30 million annually, is \$24 million short of the projected investment required to meet treatment demand in the ACT.<sup>3,4</sup> Despite increasing population growth and an increasing need to improve models of care, funding has remained stagnant within the ATOD sector. The sector is enabled to stay 'alive' but not to grow.
- Resourcing and infrastructure in the ATOD sector need to match the true cost of the increasing demand for ATOD treatment services. There is an increasing cohort of clients with complex and co-occurring needs, such as people with co-morbid mental health conditions and ATOD use. Resourcing is required not only to enable the sector to continue to support these clients, but also grow the sector to continue to meet broader community needs.
- ATOD treatment services have proven year-after-year to provide efficient, impacting and cost-effective health outcomes and a reduction of alcohol- and drug-related harms. Services are continuing to take on increased responsibility and complexity of clients in the absence of funding growth in real terms. This cannot go on.



## 2. Harm reduction measures in the ACT

*Government expenditure on ATOD only dedicates 1.6 percent of the total budget to harm reduction measures, despite evidence that these measures reduce the rate of health harms and death from ATOD.<sup>2</sup>*

- There is a strong evidence base that taking person-centred and health-based approaches to drug use results in effective harm reduction and better health outcomes.<sup>5</sup>
- The current model of drug decriminalisation in the ACT allows for people who use drugs to be referred into therapeutic health settings, thus reducing ATOD-related harms.<sup>5,6,7</sup> This reform is not yet 12 months in effect and requires a robust impact evaluation to assess impact. Notwithstanding this – there is no evidence base to suggest that repealing the law at this stage will improve health outcomes for the ACT community. ATODA strongly supports drug decriminalisation as a key harm reduction measure in the ACT.
- The CanTEST drug testing site should be made permanent to continue to reduce harms and increase access to drug-related information, education and support for people who use drugs. The service reported that 70 percent of clients accessing CanTEST had never accessed a health care worker for information about drug use before, and 10 percent of people utilising the service discarded their drugs following the test.<sup>8</sup>
- Supervised consumption rooms play an important role in a comprehensive harm reduction framework, reducing drug-related harms to the individual and the broader community. ATODA recommends that the ACT Government commits to resourcing this harm reduction service for the ACT in the next term of government. This should be designed to be responsive to the specific context of the ACT, meet consumer needs and be informed by best practice models.



### 3. Reducing alcohol-related harms in the ACT

National alcohol-related deaths reached its highest peak in 10 years in 2022. Approximately 46 percent of clients accessing ATOD services in the ACT in 2023 reported alcohol as a drug of concern and 43 percent of ATOD clients nationally reported it as their primary drug of concern.<sup>9-11</sup>

- ATODA calls on the ACT Government to review and amend the membership of the ACT Liquor Advisory Board which is currently comprised of eight appointed members, five of whom have a vested commercial interest in the sale of alcohol. The liquor advisory board cannot effectively fulfill its remit to reduce the harms associated with alcohol consumption via regulation of its sale, supply, and promotion with the current composition.
- Alcohol industry marketing of alcohol products in the ACT should be reviewed and amended where needed, as 73 percent of ACT residents support limiting alcohol advertising online and on social media.<sup>1</sup>
- Online Sales and Delivery licensing regulations in the ACT need to be amended to ensure for 10am-10pm delivery hours and a 2-hour safety pause, to decrease the rapid consumption of alcohol enabled by delivery services. Licensing amendments are important to reduce the role of alcohol in the incidence of domestic and family violence in the ACT.



### 4. Reducing the harms from e-cigarettes and tobacco

Tobacco remains the leading cause of preventable death and disease in Australia.<sup>12</sup> In the ACT, there has been a significant uptake in the use of e-cigarettes, with approximately one in five (18 percent) of the population having ever used e-cigarettes in 2022-23 (an increase from 11.3 percent in 2019).<sup>13</sup>

- ATODA recommends that addressing tobacco and e-cigarette use in diverse and marginalised populations should be prioritised in public health policies.
- There is a demand for improving accessibility and affordability of best practice combination Nicotine Replacement Therapy and support, to meet the goals of the *National Tobacco Strategy*.<sup>12</sup>
- ATODA supports an expanded therapeutic model of access to e-cigarettes to include pharmacies where e-cigarettes can be utilised for tobacco cessation or the management of nicotine dependence.
- ATODA recommends ongoing evaluation of e-cigarette uptake, access and health harms as we move to the next phase of regulatory reform in Australia and the evidence base continues to evolve.



### 5. Housing and Homelessness

In 2023, 39.3 percent of people accessing ACT specialist ATOD services were at risk of experiencing homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

- Poor access and quality of housing, and homelessness, can significantly exacerbate harms for those who use drugs. It is important that long-term access to safe housing is attainable, by reducing barriers to include wrap around support, including AOD, mental health and primary health, for people with complex needs in a housing first model.
- ATODA recommends that the ACT Government adopts and implements a Housing First approach for priority populations. This means that people can be connected to long-term housing options without preconditions. Priority populations include, but are not limited to, people with high and complex needs, people with mental health conditions, and people leaving custodial settings.
- Investing in more affordable housing in the ACT would be made worthwhile due to avoided costs in health, justice and welfare, ranging from \$15,300-\$49,000 avoided costs per person.<sup>14</sup>

## About ATODA

The Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA) is the peak body for the alcohol, tobacco and other drug sector in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). ATODA's vision is a healthy, well and safe ACT community with the lowest possible levels of alcohol, tobacco and other drug related harms. Underpinning ATODA's work is a commitment to health equity, the social and cultural determinants of health, and the values of collaboration, participation, diversity, human rights, social justice and reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.

ATODA's purpose is to lead and influence positive outcomes in policy, practice and research, as the peak body for the alcohol, tobacco and other drug sector in the ACT. These outcomes flow from initiatives in prevention, early intervention, harm reduction, treatment, peer services, and continuing care.

## Additional reading:

See ATODA's Policy Position Statements – [Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms in the ACT](#); [E-cigarettes and Tobacco](#); [Supervised Consumption Rooms](#); and [Better Health through Housing](#).

## References:

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12. Department of Health and Aged Care. *National Tobacco Strategy 2023-2030*. Australian Government, 2023.
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