

Submission to:

Transport Planning, Environment and
Sustainable Development Directorate
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Submission to the Draft:
Transport for Canberra:
Transport for a sustainable city 2011-2031

Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.

November 2011

The Women's Centre for Health Matters acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

Submission to the *Transport for Canberra: Transport for a sustainable city 2011-2031*
Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.
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Introduction

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community-based organisation that works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing.

WCHM believes that health is determined not only by biological factors, but by a broad range of social, environmental and economic factors known as the 'social determinants of health'. We acknowledge that the environment and life circumstances that each woman experiences have a direct impact on her health, and in many cases, women's poor health is rooted in social disadvantage. For these reasons, WCHM is committed to taking a whole-of-life and social approach to women's health that is also firmly situated within a human rights framework.

WCHM focuses on groups of women who experience disadvantage, social isolation and marginalisation (women with disabilities, institutionalised women, women living with mental health issues, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), and older women) and uses social research, community development, advocacy and health promotion to:

- Provide women with access to reliable and broad ranging health-related information which allows informed choices to be made about each woman's own health and wellbeing
- Advocate to influence change in health-related services to ensure responsiveness to women's needs

Response to the Draft Document *Transport for Canberra: Transport for a Sustainable City 2011-2031*

WCHM is pleased to have the opportunity to provide comment on *Transport for Canberra*. WCHM is an organisation that works with women who may experience, or are experiencing disadvantage, and works to ensure that these women's views and experiences are heard. We are therefore keen to ensure that the vision for transport in the ACT represents the needs of our community's women, particularly those women who are most vulnerable. For this reason we have limited our comments to those aspects of *Transport for Canberra* that connect to what we have learned through consulting with women in the ACT over the last 20 years.

What do you think would help everyone get the best possible access to public transport?

Transport for Canberra sets out six principles that will guide the implementation of the 32 draft action items. There are two specific principles that WCHM would like to comment on:

1. That the transport system will be safe for moving people however they get around
2. That the transport system will be accessible for everybody whatever their level of mobility at any time or place.¹

Safe for moving people however they get around

Feedback from recent research that WCHM has conducted with women living with mental health issues in the ACT revealed that people with mental health issues can find catching public transport a threatening and frightening experience because of the stigma experienced from other passengers and bus drivers. Bus drivers in the ACT do undertake mental health awareness training, which WCHM supports and encourages. This kind of training is three-fold in that it is the only way to ensure that stigma is reduced in the community; that individuals with mental health issues feel safe and respected on public transport; and finally that bus drivers feel equipped to support passengers with mental health issues. WCHM recommends that any mental health awareness training that ACTION staff undertake provides a gendered analysis of mental health issues.

Accessible for everybody whatever their level of mobility at any time or place

Transport for Canberra acknowledges that low density housing combined with poor public transport increases isolation and that one way to respond to this is to encourage active transport. Minimum coverage standards are positive in that they set out to ensure that bus services are available in all ACT suburbs (irrespective of density) and that bus stops are not too far from people's homes. However, anticipating that individuals will be motivated to walk or cycle to their local bus stop to use public transport needs to be supported by a commitment to maintaining suburban infrastructure to a high standard.

Broken, uneven and steep footpaths are not safe for women who use mobility aids or prams and footpaths with curb ramps that do not align put women in scooters and wheelchairs at risk as they have to travel along roads when crossing from one footpath to another. Footpaths need to be wide, free of cracks and breakages and at an appropriate steepness in order for women who use mobility aids or prams to feel supported to travel to bus stops.

There has been a move toward the creation of service hubs in suburban areas, such as the ACT Health Village Creek Centre (the Centre) which aims to bring "together a number of Aged Care & Rehabilitation Services providing a 'one stop shop' to improve the coordination of services for clients".² The Centre boasts that it provides plenty of parking and modern

¹ Transport Planning, *Transport for Canberra: Transport for a sustainable city 2011-2031*, Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT, 2011, p. 1.

² ACT Health Directorate, *ACT Health Village Creek Centre*, available at: <http://www.health.act.gov.au/c/health?a=&did=11147006>

accessible facilities, and yet, as an aged care and rehabilitation service hub, many of the individuals who access Village Creek will not drive. In planning the Centre the surrounding suburban infrastructure, especially in terms of public transport accessibility, has been seriously overlooked. As a result, many women with disabilities—as well as women in caring roles for people with disabilities—have reported to WCHM that the Centre is highly inaccessible for public transport users. The findings of a safety audit completed by women aged 65 years or older of the areas surrounding the Village Creek Centre revealed that: there is inadequate signage from the bus stop to the Village Creek Centre; the lighting in the surrounding areas is poor; there is a lack of tactile markings to the Centre from the bus stop; and it is unclear where individuals with mobility aids can cross the road safely from the bus stop to the Centre.³ WCHM understands that the consultation on *Transport for Canberra* is not the forum within which to discuss particular sites, suburbs or issues, however, these findings highlight that the Centre is actually inaccessible for women with disabilities who do not have private transport or travel by taxi. It therefore illustrates frighteningly well that if public transport is to be “accessible for everyone regardless of their mobility”⁴, suburban infrastructure needs to be developed and maintained as a priority and considered central in the planning and design of future community health hubs.

It is also of value to mention some of the more general findings from WCHM's older women's safety audits project. Of audits conducted at the Woden bus interchange, the Belconnen bus interchange and surrounds and the areas around the Canberra Hospital, relevant to this submission, women reported the following:

- A consistent lack of adequate lighting at bus stops
- A lack of clean, well maintained and safe public toilets at the Woden bus interchange
- Signage at the major bus interchanges was comprehensive but not intuitive to use without the assistance of someone who regularly uses the bus system
- Signage about the location of security or police is not adequate around the Woden or Belconnen bus interchanges
- An insufficient number of public phones around interchanges
- The major bus interchanges feel isolated
- Bus timetable information at bus stops—when present—is written in text that is too small⁵

Lighting is a particular concern to WCHM as it impacts upon how safe women feel to public transport at dawn, dusk and night. Street lighting is inconsistent between different suburbs, rendering some bus stops completely in the dark at night or in the evening in winter. When spaces are well lit and well maintained they are considered safe by the women who use

³ Jac Torres Gomez, *Older Women's Safety Audits (draft)*, WCHM, Canberra, 2011.

⁴ Transport Planning, *Transport for Canberra: Transport for a sustainable city 2011-2031*, Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT, 2011, p. 1.

⁵ Jac Torres Gomez, *Older Women's Safety Audits (draft)*, WCHM, Canberra, 2011.

them.⁶ This is because they feel that the space is cared for, is utilised and that they could be seen in the event of an attack or if they have a fall. Supporting women to catch public transport in the late afternoon and evening is essential in the ACT as in winter many individuals need to commute to or from work and other activities when it is dark.

Once on board the bus, people with disabilities—in particular those with vision impairment—can be supported by audio cues. Audio cues will benefit all bus users, as individuals will feel more comfortable to travel to parts of Canberra that they are unfamiliar with without the worry of not knowing when to get off the bus. It would also be valuable to have a hearing loop in the major bus interchanges.

Transport for Canberra states that community transport options will be explored for individuals who cannot walk to a regular route, while at the same time referencing the findings of the Coverage Service Study that “in many parts of Canberra, a fixed route may be the best way of providing coverage service because demand is too high for flexible transport”.⁷ This is providing inconsistent information to transport service users. To know this and not make a stronger commitment in the Draft to improve and maintain the quality of suburban infrastructure throughout the ACT renders those who rely on scooters and wheelchairs dependent upon taxis and private transport, which is not only unaffordable, but also unsustainable.

WCHM acknowledges and supports that the ACT Government has committed to the continuation of the implementation of the 2010 review of the ACT Taxi Industry. However, the creation of a centralised system for wheelchair accessible taxis and an increase in the number of wheelchair accessible taxis available is an expensive means of travel when compared to ACTION bus services. If women in wheelchairs are able to travel on buses then they should be supported to do so by adequate suburban infrastructure. This will encourage their inclusion in using these public services and empower them to be socially connected to the community.

Transport for Canberra does acknowledge safety fears, lack of lighting and uneven paths as barriers for active transport and indicates that planning is underway for improved lighting and maintenance of bike paths and suburban infrastructure. WCHM advocates, however, that *Transport for Canberra* does not go far enough in acknowledging the range of barriers that exist that will prevent women with and without disabilities participating in active transport nor, therefore, how these barriers will be addressed.

6 Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children, *METRAC's Community Safety Audit: Leader's Guide*, METRAC, Toronto, 2010, pg. 20.

7 Transport Planning, *Transport for Canberra: Transport for a sustainable city 2011-2031*, Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT, 2011, p. 29.

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