

17 May 2023



MEDIA RELEASE

AFPA SUPPORTS FUNDING FOR UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

The Australian Federal Police Association (AFPA) issues this statement in strong support of an early intervention program, run by the University of Canberra, which protects the wellbeing of young people living with complex mental health concerns.

The WOKE program (**standing for “wise knowing, skillful behaviour and effectiveness¹”**) is in danger of being unable to continue by June 2023 due to a lack of government funding.

AFPA President Alex Caruana said that while the Federal Government had funded the program since July 2019, it was disappointing that funding ultimately wouldn't continue.

“Programs like the WOKE program are rare in the ACT, and relieve ever-increasing pressures from police, first responders, and other mental health agencies. It's often ACT Policing members who first assist young people during mental health crises; initiatives like the WOKE program keep children out of the criminal justice system.

“I would ask the Federal Government to reconsider the removal of funding for this life-saving program,” Mr Caruana said.

With the ACT Government raising the age of criminal responsibility to 12, and then again to 14 in two years' time, programs providing support to young people will be more important than ever.

Mr Caruana said that early intervention and diversion strategies would be crucial when the age of criminal responsibility increased.

“There is already a lack of early intervention and diversion strategies in Canberra for police to divert young people to; if the Federal Government won't fund the WOKE program, then the ACT Government must step in.

“It's scary to think that 30 per cent of young people are thinking of self-harming in Australia. One in three children — and it would only cost the government \$300,000 per year overall to support them. Surely early intervention would be a better option than cutting services and causing young children to enter an already stretched public health or criminal justice system.

“In the ACT, it's my members who attend incidents where young people with mental health concerns can no longer be supported by their family members. I would rather see these young people get early support instead of entering the criminal justice system,” Mr Caruana said.

¹ <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/newsroom/2019/october/empowering-young-people-to-create-positive-mental-health-trajectories>

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