

Standing Committee on Environment,

Climate Change and Biodiversity

ACT Legislative Assembly

Email: LcommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretariat

Inquiry into waste management of absorbent hygiene products

Advocacy for Inclusion (Incorporating with People with Disabilities ACT) (AFI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into waste management of absorbent hygiene products.

In considering actions on climate change AFI offers the following principles for testing whether they meet the test of fairness, effectiveness and equity within a just transition framework.

Measures to reduce waste should accord with 'just transition' principles and meet commitments in the 10th governing agreement to 'ensure a just transition for those impacted by the shift to net zero'

A just transition means that those with the most responsibility for waste and emissions should shoulder a proportionate level of reduction effort and the costs, inconvenience and pressure of waste reduction efforts should not fall disproportionately on those with the least capacity to meet them.

A healthy environment is a priority for our community, and especially significant for people with disabilities who are generally more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change. There should be a greater and more intentional focus on mitigating the impacts of climate change on people with disability through planning, design and emergency responses.

Sustainability and equity and access for people with disabilities are not opposing causes. We urge the ACT Government to invest in solutions that uphold the ACTs commitment as a human rights jurisdiction in Australia and marshal efforts for waste reduction where they are most likely to be effective within a just transition framework focused on fairness and equity.

AFI do not support any measures which would reduce access to continence products by people with disability or carers or make access more difficult, onerous or stigmatising. We especially do **not** support any measures which would introduce a price signal on these products – not all people with disability with continence issues are on the NDIS and the NDIS in turn does not cover all the costs of these products.

The 2021 Senate Inquiry into the Purpose, Intent and Adequacy of the Disability Support Pension received submissions stating that, "on average, a person with a mild or moderate disability incurs costs \$87 per week higher than they otherwise would, and that this increases to \$173 per week for someone with a profound or

severe disability.” Credible work by the economist Dr Jack Frisch pointed to a cost of disability premium of between 2-5% above that faced by people without disability. Our [White Paper on Income Support](#) points out that a Canberra with a disability on the Disability Support Pension in private rental faces a fortnightly gap of over \$800 a week to meet the costs of essentials including food, clothing, transport and utilities – without any contingency for emergencies.

Absorbent hygiene products and issues surrounding continence continue to arouse social stigma. Such stigma prevents people from seeking help, information, or alternatives, but it also creates issues of inconvenience and further social isolation to already marginalised groups of people.

In relation to the usage of absorbent hygiene products by the community and care sectors, including to aged care, disability care, and early childhood settings, it is critical to highlight that absorbent hygiene products constitute essential products for some individuals and groups with disability. According to Continence Australia,

- Urinary incontinence is experienced by 1 in 3 women, 1 in 10 men and 1 in 5 children of all ages.
- People with some neurological and musculoskeletal conditions such as MS, arthritis, diabetes, stroke, heart conditions, respiratory conditions and prostate problems are more likely to experience urinary incontinence.
- Faecal incontinence is experienced by 1 in 20 Australians, people with dementia are at a greater risk of experience faecal incontinence.¹

Any discussion on potentially limiting the use of absorbent hygiene products must begin with an understanding of the consequences and ramifications for the people who are dependent on these products in their day to day lives. This is also a highly gendered issue and close consideration must be given to impacts on women as users of products and the high numbers of women who are carers.

The ACT produces a relatively large amount of waste per capita, second only to Western Australia. In addition, the key sources of waste generated in the ACT are (in order of volume): construction and demolition waste, garden waste, commercial waste, and finally household waste.²

The waste sector accounts for approximately 3 percent of ACT greenhouse gas emissions. The social and financial costs of limiting or minimising the availability of absorbent hygiene products will fall disproportionately on an already marginalised group of people.

Absorbent hygiene products, particularly disposable forms, tend to be far more accessible and convenient for people with disability. They have a lower upfront cost, can be used for longer and then immediately disposed. Reusable products may be less expensive over time but are more costly up front and more labour intensive or challenging to maintain. An individual may be granted autonomy and independence by being able to use and manage disposable products themselves. With certain recyclable alternatives, such as reusable or cloth products, an individual may be forced to use their limited hours with a carer to wash and care for the products. There are health, safety and privacy issues involved as well as issues of dignity and autonomy. In addition, reusable products must also be replaced every 6-12 months. Another distinct advantage of disposable products is their wide availability for purchase. This means that a person with disability has a variety of choices available to

¹ Continence Foundation of Australia (2019). [‘Continence in Australia: A Snapshot’](#)

² Environment and Sustainable Development (2011). [ACT Waste Management Strategy: Towards a sustainable Canberra, 2011-25](#). ACT Government, p. 10

them from supermarkets, chemists, and medical practices; allowing people to buy a product which suits their needs in a way which affords both convenience, privacy, dignity and independence.

Finally, placing added costs on disposables on to dependent consumers represents a form of indirect discrimination as it sets an unacceptable and inequitable premium on the already heightened cost of living with disability. Instead, it is more fruitful to take a circular perspective and understand what can be done to enhance the sustainability of these products across the value chain, particularly within product design.

Options might include

- Sustainable procurement within publicly funded disability and aged care settings
- Focussing on areas which are major contributors of waste such as construction and demolition waste, garden waste and commercial waste
- Encouraging the development of disposables from recycled products

In conclusion AFI strongly opposes any steps to ban, limit, restrict from easily available public sale or impose price signals against continence products required by people with disabilities. Moves to restrict these products does not meet a just transition test and poses an unacceptable burden for people with disability and carers, falls unfairly on women, represents indirect discrimination, is ageist and is likely to result in adverse consequences to the health, dignity, privacy and wellbeing of vulnerable people.

This submission is endorsed by: ACT Council of Social Services, COTA ACT

Please feel free to discuss this submission with Isabel Moss on isabel@advocacyforinclusion.org or myself on 0477 200 755.

(Signed electronically)

Craig Wallace

Head of Policy