



LIVED EXPERIENCE THAT LEADS CHANGE

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The Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) is a peer-based alcohol and other drug (AOD) service that supports people who use or have used drugs. Based in the ACT, CAHMA provides non-judgmental, harm reduction-focused support, information, and advocacy. The organisation offers services such as peer treatment support, naloxone training, needle and syringe programs, education, and referral pathways to treatment and health care. CAHMA is led by people with lived experience, ensuring that its work reflects the voices and needs of the community it serves.




HISTORY

Since the early 1980s, peer-based drug user organisations in the Australian Capital Territory have been working to support and advocate for mothers who use drugs and alcohol, tobacco and other drug services.

Through peer-led organisations, the establishment of Parents and Children's Clinics began creating inclusive, non-judgmental spaces where playgroups, health, welfare, and advocacy support were provided to parents who use drugs—marking a significant shift away from punitive models toward family-centered harm reduction.

Led by pioneers like Jude Byrne from the ACT, whose advocacy brought local lived experience to national and global forums, harm reduction became embedded in policy, ensuring women's voices shaped drug and human rights frameworks, while peer-led organisations like CAHMA strengthened their role as essential partners driving systemic change and reducing stigma.

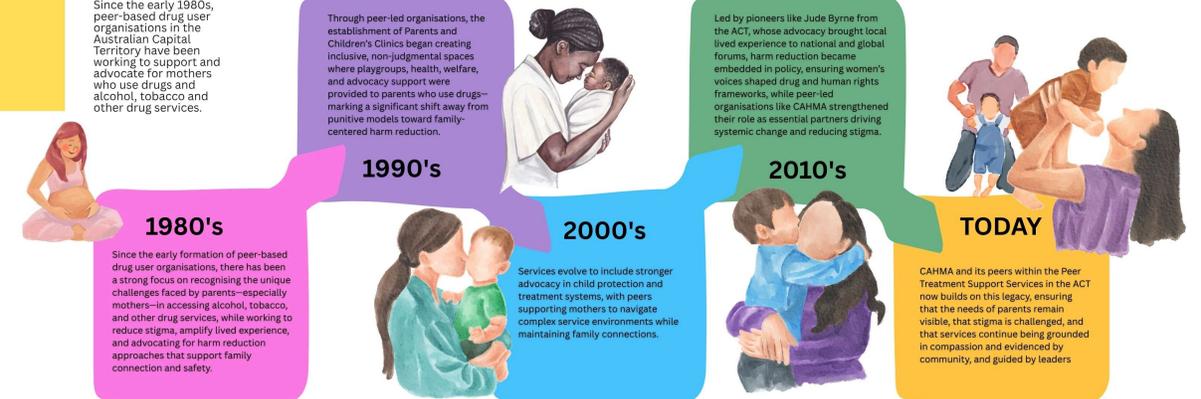
1980's
Since the early formation of peer-based drug user organisations, there has been a strong focus on recognising the unique challenges faced by parents—especially mothers—in accessing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug services, while working to reduce stigma, amplify lived experience, and advocating for harm reduction approaches that support family connection and safety.

1990's

2000's
Services evolve to include stronger advocacy in child protection and treatment systems, with peers supporting mothers to navigate complex service environments while maintaining family connections.

2010's

TODAY
CAHMA and its peers within the Peer Treatment Support Services in the ACT now builds on this legacy, ensuring that the needs of parents remain visible, that stigma is challenged, and that services continue being grounded in compassion and evidenced by community, and guided by leaders



ISSUES

From the very beginning, key issues were identified in this area:

- Stigma and discrimination faced by parents who use drugs;
- Widespread assumptions that drug use equates to poor parenting;
- Lack of awareness by the government agency, Child, Youth and Families (CYF), that parent's health and wellbeing have consequences on the wellbeing of the child.

These issues show a gap in harm reduction service provision within CYF, which CAHMA successfully fills through peer work.

HOW WE DO IT?

BEGINNING OF COOPERATION - A MIRACLE HAPPENS WHEN YOU OPEN YOUR MIND

CAHMA fills this gap by focusing on the health and wellbeing of parents, recognising that supporting parents leads to better outcomes for the children and entire family. CAHMA does this through its Peer Treatment Support Service by providing one-on-one support to parents and helping them navigate and engage with CYF. Our Peer Treatment Support workers have played a vital role in identifying recurring barriers and addressing unmet need in this space. Here are some of the key interventions that CAHMA undertook to initiate this process and provide harm reduction services in this area:

- Community consultations to understand and respond to the needs of parents interacting with CYF;
- The Women's Support Project, provision of individual peer support for mothers and/or fathers and the Women's Support Group;
- Building partnerships and strengthening collaboration with CYF and other relevant services to ensure more informed, compassionate, and effective support for families.

WHERE FROM HERE

BRIGHT FUTURE

In this presentation, we will be explaining how our lived experience brings empathy, hope, insight and first-hand knowledge of working with CYF services to increase the restoration of families. This approach helps individual clients to build collaborative relationships, influences systemic change and fights stigma, discrimination and stereotypes about people who use drugs.

The graph below shows how the partnership between CAHMA and CYF has grown over the past few years to link parents with lived experience workers through a Peer Treatment Support model that supports a harm reduction approach.

