

MEDIA RELEASE

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**Federal Budget will help ease some cost of living pressures on older Australians;
more answers needed on aged care and support for older women**

The Federal Government's 2024 Budget includes important cost of living measures which will help ease some of the pressure Australians, including older Australians, are currently feeling, COTA Australia – the leading advocacy organisation for older people – says.

COTA Australia Chief Executive Officer, Patricia Sparrow said that two measures in particular would assist older Australians – the energy rebate and the freeze on what pensioners and concession card holders will pay for PBS medications.

“The \$300 energy rebate for every household will help the hip pockets of older people who are struggling to pay their electricity and gas bills. Our recent research shows that 1 in 4 older people have overdue energy bills, so this is an important relief measure we hope becomes a permanent feature,” Ms Sparrow said.

“In addition, many older people struggle to afford the medicines they need so the five-year freeze on what pensioners and concession cardholders will pay for PBS medications will also provide significant relief.

“The housing measures in the Budget will go some way to alleviating the affordable housing crisis Australia is facing. Older women are one of the fastest growing groups at risk of homelessness and many older men are sleeping rough – a shocking statistic that governments need to address.

“The 10 per cent increase in the Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment is welcomed and will help many older renters. This year and last year's increases are a step towards the 60 per cent increase that's needed. We're looking forward to the full amount being delivered next year, however it is equally important that the payment is reviewed and redesigned to ensure it is providing the level of support required in the longer term.

Ms Sparrow said the Women's Budget Statement continues the Federal Government's commitment to gender equality.

“The introduction of superannuation on government paid parental leave is a game-changer and will make a big difference to the lives of many women.

“But we can't ignore the shocking statistics around older women's financial security. On average, women retire five years earlier than men, and live five years longer. Despite needing 10 years more retirement income, women have a third less than men, compounding financial insecurity. To address the inequity facing older women we need to look further into the systemic barriers holding many older women back.

“Many women work in low paid sectors like aged care and childcare. The Government’s commitment to funding the recently awarded wage increase is welcomed and we look forward to the determination from the Fair Work Commission in the near future to get money into the pay packets of aged care workers as quickly as possible.

“Older Australians living in residential aged care will benefit from funding through state and territory governments to provide hospital outreach, deliver virtual care, upskill the residential care workforce, and support the Transition Care Program. We saw the terrible gaps and flaws in health care in aged care during the pandemic - ensuring better access to the same health services all Australians can access is critical.

“However, there is less good news for the many older Australians who live independently in their own homes. Only 24,100 additional home care packages were announced for next year, and \$21 million a year of funds earmarked for the Commonwealth Home Support Program will be diverted to other aged care sub-programs.

“This is not enough funding to help those who can wait over a year for support they’re assessed as needing. Older Australians should not be left stranded in hospital, forced into residential aged care, or die waiting for support that never comes.

“COTA Australia believes the most important measure of a successful home care program would be to ensure that any older person needing support is receiving it within 30 days of being assessed. We are a long way from achieving this, with the budget papers setting a new target for low level assessments of 40 days – just for the assessment to be completed.

“Deep in the budget papers, the Federal Government has announced the new Aged Care Act will commence on 1 July 2025 – some 13 months away. Despite announcing the finishing line, we’re still no clearer on the starting line for the parliamentary processes to commence.

“The Aged Care Act was the number one recommendation from the Aged Care Royal Commission. We need the Government to introduce the Act into Parliament as a priority to allow proper scrutiny and community conversation, and we need the support of the whole Parliament to ensure it is passed by the end of this calendar year so the sector is ready to implement it from 1 July 2025.

“Older people have been waiting for their rights to be enshrined in legislation for a long time and need certainty and security when it comes to accessing care. They need certainty around the care they will receive, and need a guarantee that what they will be asked to pay is fair. It’s up to all parliamentarians to make sure that happens.

“Government has announced \$288.1 million to expand Australia’s Digital ID systems, within a broader \$1B investment in My Gov and Services Australia digital enhancements. As Australia raises the digital security of all Australians, we need to ensure the 2.1 million people without government issued photographic ID such as a driver’s license don’t get left out of the new digital world our government is building. After raising it for many years and recent laws passing parliament, a clear timeframe for when these government-issued IDs are embedded in the new system is long overdue.

“Overall we’re looking at a Federal Budget that recognises that Australians, including older Australians, are really feeling the pinch of the cost of living crisis and takes steps to alleviate some of that pressure.

“This budget won’t take away the financial pain Australians, including older Australians, are feeling, but it does go some way to addressing them.”

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