



## Online submission to Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System 5<sup>th</sup> July 2019

The following is responses to prompted questions from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. For more information visit <https://rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/>

### **Q1. What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?**

Campaigns and interventions that focus on mental health and wellbeing can help to normalise mental health discussions and promote positive mental health. A number of different approaches are needed to reduce stigma and discrimination including education/mental health literacy campaigns, providing opportunities for community connection/story-telling, peer services, advocacy and policy changes to promote social equity and improve overall quality of life.<sup>1</sup> Consumer centred approaches that acknowledge diversity and perception of mental health by different communities can inform more inclusive, safe and accessible mental health promotion messaging and support services.

Improving the community's understanding of mental illness and reducing stigma and discrimination also requires supporting the mental health workforce and allies (e.g. teachers, managers, youth workers) who encounter and interact with people who have a mental health illness. Capacity building for the workforce and allies through education and training such as mental health first aid training can assist people to appropriately respond and support people who have signs of illness.

Finally, reducing stigma and discrimination within the medical community (such as doctors, nurses, and paramedics etc.) who face barriers to accessing support for mental health care themselves are greatly needed to support a healthy workforce that can in turn provide care to the community.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

- Use a multi-pronged approach including working with the community, workforce capacity building, addressing mental health barriers faced by the medical community, and implementing social equity and wellbeing policies.
- Deliver health promotion and support services that are inclusive, safe and accessible to support the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Science of Changing Behavioral Health Social Norms; Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences; Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Ending Discrimination Against People with Mental and Substance Use Disorders: The Evidence for Stigma Change. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2016 Aug 3. 4, Approaches to Reducing Stigma.

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Blue. (2013). National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students.



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**Q2. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?**

The introduction of youth mental health hubs in some Local Government Areas (LGAs) have been a welcome investment by the Australian Government. However, these services are not yet readily accessible for young people in Hobsons Bay who still face a significant gap in mental health support. With limited youth dedicated mental health services in Hobsons Bay, young people face a range of accessibility barriers. A key barrier is access to transport and travel times to seek support from services outside of the municipality. Currently a young person residing in Hobsons Bay is potentially required to undergo a one to two hour public transport round trip, excluding the consultation appointment, to access Headspace at either Werribee or Sunshine. Additional support and advocacy from the Victorian Government to improve access to these services are needed.

A generalist youth counselling service exists within Hobsons Bay City Council's free Youth Service, but it is not co-located with a range of other key health and wellbeing services specific for young people to support effective coordination. The biggest barrier to achieving a holistic model and coordination of services locally is the funding to have a range of services (such as mental health and counselling, alcohol and other drug services, legal support, and vocational support) co-located in Hobsons Bay. Funding that supports the co-location and collaboration of services enables a more holistic model of care. A submission by Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health and Headspace, reported that they have observed positive clinical and vocational outcomes for young people who used their service.<sup>3</sup> Hobsons Bay City Council is seeking support for a holistic satellite headspace service to be established at Newport Community Hub.

In addition services in the community setting, early intervention and support programs such as Student Support Services in schools that include a range of professionals (e.g. psychologists and social workers) help to bring the services to where the young people are. However, this should complement and not replace community services so that young people are provided with options in situations where they do not want to seek help via a school setting.

**Recommendations:**

- Support and advocacy from the Victorian Government for a holistic satellite headspace service in Hobsons Bay.
- Continue to provide Student Support Services and strengthen health and wellbeing policies in schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Orygen. (2019). Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health. Orygen, The National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health and Headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation.



### **Q3. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?**

The Victorian Suicide Prevention Framework 2016-25 has been a useful document in identifying key populations disproportionately affected by suicide, including men, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and young people, compared to the general population<sup>4</sup>.

Importantly, the document acknowledges the significance of social policy reforms in relation to family violence, closing the gap, and education to support suicide prevention.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Continue efforts to address gender inequity, Reconciliation, discrimination and provide access to fundamental conditions and resources for health to prevent suicide.

### **Q4. What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.**

Orygen has identified that young people with moderate to severe and complex mental health issues are the 'missing middle' who are slipping through the gaps in care.<sup>5</sup> These young people need more specialised care that is not currently available in primary care, but are not regarded as severely ill enough to be eligible for state funded acute and continuing care.<sup>6</sup> Orygen presented a case study of a young person who still faced barriers in getting referrals for psychiatric care, despite attempting suicide, due to their condition not meeting the threshold of severity required. Gaps in services for varying severity of mental health issues means that young people experience disconnected health care and presents risks for young people progressing to poorer and more severe mental health illness due to lack of appropriate services available.

The mental health system should enable young people to prevent mental health illness and maintain good mental health, rather than wait for mental illness to progress to level of severity that requires intensive treatment. There is also a need to explore how to better support individuals who require access to more sessions than offered by the current mental health care plan scheme. Providing a cap on the number of sessions per annum can deter people from accessing counselling at the onset of mild symptoms, and instead delay treatment until severe symptoms set in.

In addition, geographical, cultural, literacy, social isolation and other barriers need to be addressed to provide better access to and experience of mental health treatment and support. For example, offering cultural competency training, providing translated materials, offering interpreting services, outreach services, internet and phone services are some ways that can improve access.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). Victorian suicide prevention framework 2016-25, Victorian Government, Melbourne

<sup>5</sup> Orygen. (2019). Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health.

<sup>6</sup> Orygen. (2019). Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health.

**Recommendations:**

- Provide services to support young people across all stages of mental health, including ‘moderate to severe’ and ‘complex’ mental health needs for more effective linkages and appropriate referrals between services.
- Remove the annual capping of subsidised mental health sessions offered by the mental health care plan scheme.
- Address cost, geographical, cultural, literacy, and social barriers to accessing mental health care.

**Q5. What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?**

Orygen describes young people as a group going through a complex period of their life, for example, transitioning between different levels of education, from education to employment, and moving away from families into independent living.<sup>7</sup> They are also faced with developing and navigating new social connections and relationships.<sup>8</sup>

In VicHealth’s Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-19, young people were prioritised as a key community for VicHealth’s strategic efforts because about 75 per cent of all serious mental illness begins before the age of 25.<sup>9</sup> Factors associated with poorer wellbeing among young people include being from lower-income households, living alone, aged between 22 and 25 years and not currently in paid work and looking for work, and having limited access to social support.<sup>10</sup> Approximately one in four young people reported limited access to social support when they needed it.<sup>11</sup>

VicHealth has recommended a number of strategies to build resilience and social connection with a focus on young people. Resilience is defined as ‘the ability of individuals, families and neighbourhoods to cope positively with change, challenge, adversity, shock or trauma’.<sup>12</sup>

Although strategies for building resilience and social connections is important for good mental health outcomes, it is limited to building individuals’ skills to respond to adverse changes to their environment and does not adequately address the social determinants of health. For instance, if we look at other health issues such as reducing obesity, it would not only require a person to have knowledge and skills to manage their diet and exercise, but would also require socioeconomic and other environmental factors to enable them to afford and access healthy food options, and have access to nearby and well connected foot/cycling paths. Changes to the environment that enables better mental health and wellbeing is needed, as further explained in question 8.

<sup>7</sup> Orygen. (2019). Submission to the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Mental Health.

<sup>8</sup> Orygen. (2019). Submission to the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Mental Health.

<sup>9</sup> VicHealth. (2015). VicHealth Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2019, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

<sup>10</sup> VicHealth. (2015). VicHealth Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2019

<sup>11</sup> VicHealth. (2015). VicHealth Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2019

<sup>12</sup> VicHealth (2015). VicHealth Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2019



Additionally, young people are diverse and may associate with many identities such as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual (LGBTIQA+), culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, a person with a disability, or other attributes. As such they may experience layers of discrimination that can amplify and impact their mental health. Acknowledging intersectionality can help to provide more appropriate services to respond to this.

**Recommendations:**

- Prioritise young people's mental health and provide appropriate support services that consider intersectional issues compounding mental health outcomes.
- Employ diverse strategies that creates enabling environments for better mental health in addition to building individual resilience and social connection.

**Q6. What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?**

It is recommended that the Victorian Government engage with family members and carers, and organisations such as Carers Victoria to better understand their support needs.

**Q7. What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?**

Reviewing current and future workforce capacity in relation to the evolving needs for mental health services will help to plan appropriate service models and allocate necessary resources to fund the mental health system effectively. For example, the Australian Health Workforce Institute conducted modelling in 2013 to project and estimate the mental health workforce requirements up until 2020.<sup>13</sup> Similar research is needed to inform future planning regarding the required disciplinary makeup of the mental health workforce, places available in relevant courses, positions available in the workforce etc.

Adequately funding the systems to address supply and demand can help to reduce the likelihood of skill and staff shortages. This in turn will help to improve the health and wellbeing of the mental health workforce, and reduce staff burnout and turnover.

A shift to early intervention approaches to promote positive mental health and wellbeing, and prevent progression of illness from early onset to severe will also help to reduce system cost. Mental health funding needs to support the workforce in making this shift.

**Recommendations:**

- Use research to monitor and predict future trends for mental health and wellbeing services to adequately plan and fund the mental health system.

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<sup>13</sup> Freijser, L. and Brooks, P. (2013). The Australian Health Workforce Institute Addressing Workforce Challenges for Youth Mental Health Reform, Parkville



- Support the workforce to shift to early intervention approaches to promote positive mental health and wellbeing, and prevent progression of mental illness.

**Q8. What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?**

In order for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, the social determinants of mental health needs to be addressed.

These include:

- access to economic resources such as housing, income, education and employment
- social inclusion such as having supportive relationships, being involved in community activities, and civic engagement
- freedom from violence and discrimination
- urban design elements within the built and natural environment such as natural light and green spaces.<sup>14,15</sup>

In particular, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion recognised shelter as a fundamental condition and resource for health<sup>16</sup>. Infrastructure Victoria argues that social housing is a priority form of infrastructure as ‘not acting [to build social housing] will come with even greater costs to society and the economy, which will be felt by generations to come’.<sup>17</sup> Literature suggests that investments in affordable housing has many benefits to individuals and the state, including: improved physical and mental health outcomes, reduced use of justice services, improved education, financial, and employment outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

A review conducted by the University of Melbourne found that the benefit exceeds the cost for supporting someone to move from sleeping rough to social, public or supportive accommodation by a factor of 2.31.<sup>19</sup> The Melbourne Apartments Project study looked at the cost and benefits associated with current public housing tenants moving out of public housing into affordable homeownership.<sup>20</sup> The Melbourne Apartments Project assisted eligible public housing tenants to move out of public housing and into home ownership by utilising an affordable purchasing arrangement. Eligible residents were those who lived within four kilometres of the project and were

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<sup>14</sup> Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. (2005). A Plan for Action 2005-2007. Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton

<sup>15</sup> Townsend, Prof M and Weerasuriya, R. (2010). ‘Beyond Blue to Green: The Health Benefits of Contact with Nature in a Park Context – Literature Review’, Deakin University, Beyond Blue Ltd., Burwood

<sup>16</sup> WHO. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.  
<https://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/>

<sup>17</sup> Infrastructure Victoria. (2018). Improving Evaluation for Social Housing: Methods and Data, Victorian Government, Melbourne

<sup>18</sup> Raynor, K, Palm, M, O’Neil, M and Whitzman, C. (2018). Investigating the costs and benefits of the Melbourne Apartments Project, Transforming Housing, The University of Melbourne

<sup>19</sup> Raynor *et al.*, (2018). Investigating the costs and benefits of the Melbourne Apartments Project

<sup>20</sup> Raynor *et al.*, (2018). Investigating the costs and benefits of the Melbourne Apartments Project



able to demonstrate their ability to save for a small deposit and make regular repayments. The researchers estimated the state would receive \$2.19 for every \$1 spent on the project with the benefits attributed to the recently vacated public housing dwellings (resulting from the project) being reallocated to a high-needs applicant on the public housing waitlist.<sup>21</sup> If every vacated public housing dwelling was allocated to a high-needs applicant the government is estimated to save \$27,458.22 for every person moved into affordable homeownership.<sup>22</sup>

Hobsons Bay City Council is committed to ensuring households in the municipality are able to live in affordable, secure and appropriate housing that meets their needs, as outlined in our Affordable Housing Policy Statement 2016<sup>23</sup>. Council is in the process of developing an affordable housing trust, to increase the number of affordable housing available to residents in the municipality.

We encourage the Federal and Victorian Governments to invest in affordable housing strategies as it has numerous benefits including mental health and wellbeing.

Another aspect that can improve economic participation is having a work environment that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing, such as equitable workplace policies (e.g. flexible hours and types of leave), employee assistance programs, and wellbeing programs etc. Promoting, resourcing and supporting volunteering in local communities is also important for fostering social connection and facilitating economic participation. Research has estimated that there is a 450 per cent return for every dollar invested in volunteering.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Victorian Government to invest in affordable housing and advocate to Australian Government to work together on affordable housing strategies.
- Develop and enforce mental health policies that influence workplace environments and policies.
- Promote, resource and support volunteering in local communities.

#### **Q9. Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?**

As discussed throughout the submission, the key recommendations are:

- Support policies that address social determinants of mental health such as affordable housing.
- Adequately plan for and supply a multi-disciplinary and skilled mental health workforce.

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<sup>21</sup> Raynor *et al.*, (2018). Investigating the costs and benefits of the Melbourne Apartments Project

<sup>22</sup> Raynor *et al.*, (2018). Investigating the costs and benefits of the Melbourne Apartments Project

<sup>23</sup> Hobsons Bay City Council. Affordable Housing Policy Statement 2016.

<https://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/Council/Strategy-Planning/Social-policy-and-planning/Affordable-Housing-Policy-Statement>

<sup>24</sup> Volunteering Australia. (2017). The Value of Volunteering Support Services.



- Support the workforce to shift to more early intervention approaches, while ensuring that there are services available at all stages of mental health for more effective linkages and appropriate referrals between services.
- Support positive health promoting policies and initiatives in schools, community and workplace settings.
- Support and advocate for holistic satellite headspace services in areas lacking access such as Hobsons Bay.
- Remove the annual capping of subsidised mental health sessions.
- Address cost, geographical, cultural, literacy, and social barriers to accessing mental health care.

**Q10. What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria’s mental health system and support improvements to last?**

Continue to engage with and support all relevant stakeholders including people experiencing mental illness, families and carers, mental health organisations, the mental health workforce, and allies (e.g. schools, workplaces, other government departments) to respond iteratively to their feedback and partner on key strategies.

**Q11. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?**

Hobsons Bay City Council has provided other recent submissions in relation to mental health:

- Submission to Department of Premier and Cabinet - Royal Commission into Mental Health Terms of Reference<sup>25</sup>
- Submission to Productivity Commission - Mental Health Inquiry: The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health Issues Paper<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Available at

[https://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/documents/council/advocacy/submissions-2019/hbccsub\\_royalcommissionmentalhealth\\_jan-2019.pdf](https://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/documents/council/advocacy/submissions-2019/hbccsub_royalcommissionmentalhealth_jan-2019.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Available at

<https://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/documents/council/advocacy/submissions-2019/mental-health-inquiry-the-social-and-economic-benefits-of-improving-mental-health-issues-paper-april-2019.pdf>