

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Organisation Name

I CAN NETWORK

Name

Mr CHRISTOPHER VARNEY

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

"We are concerned with the Autism understanding of the mental health workforce. I CAN Network is Australia's largest Autistic-led organisation with 41 staff (28 of whom are Autistic) delivering mentoring programs that service 1,500 Autistic kids, teenagers and young adults nationally. We support the mental health of our teen and young adult community through face-to-face group mentoring programs and online group mentoring programs. Our main suggestion is we believe Autistic-led and Autistic-focused organisations need to be actively engaged in educating the mental health workforce on Autism. Practically, this could look like: - - Recommending that storytelling by Autistic speakers be institutionalised into the professional learning of the mental health workforce. - Recommending that in their storytelling, Autistic speakers focus on equipping mental health services with insights into (a) triggers of anxiety (b) anxiety management strategies and (c) the 'catastrophisation' that can occur when the Autistic person is highly, highly anxious. - The Commission could promote and recommend connections between Autism and mental health services that look to customise the delivery of Autistic storytelling into the framework of mental health training. "

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?

"More diverse services are emerging for mental health promotion. Our context as an organisation is the demand for our services has far outpaced our capacity. In our 5.5 years of operation we have worked with close to 100 Victorian primary and secondary schools to deliver group mentoring and delivered 19 camps for Autistic teenagers and young adults in Victoria. Against this context, and to our great relief, we have generally observed the following: - - A marked increase in the number of Autistic advocates available to share positive stories of resilience and self-efficacy - An increase in the number of Autistic-led initiatives in the community, across public advocacy to sport. Whilst we do not have quantitative data to support this, we generally find that an Autistic family's understanding of local mental health services is far deeper when they are (1) connected to a local Autism support group (2) enjoy a strong relationship with the educational support team at a school and (3) connect with peers in the Autistic community through social media, such as Facebook. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

"I CAN Network is partnering with the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to deliver Mental Health First Aid Training to our staff, including our 28 Autistic staff. Our staff are not counsellors, they are mentors. Our Code of Conduct and policies necessitate that staff are equipped to respond appropriately to disclosure of mental illness and recognise what they may need to refer onto professional services. It is very positive that a small social enterprise like I CAN Network has received a grant from the Department of Social Services to put I CAN staff through Mental Health First Aid Training. Given the high vulnerability of young people, especially

Autistic young people, we would encourage the Commission to recommend that Mental Health First Aid Training be free and accessible to start-up disability or mental health organisations. Victoria is the start-up State of Australia. Minimal investment would be needed to remove funding barriers that small, start-up organisations may face in training their staff in mental health first aid. "

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.

We have observed too few instances in which mental health services are safely mainstreamed into local schools. We believe this mainstreaming can bring great benefits to Autistic students and school wellbeing teams. Our case study is Wanganui Park Secondary College in Shepparton (soon to become merged into Greater Shepparton College). Wanganui Park Secondary College has a very close partnership with Headspace in Shepparton. I CAN Network came to know this partnership through our own three year program at the school which has worked with close to 30 Autistic students. Our insight from this partnership is it has provided quality support in a very timely manner to students and parents.

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

N/A

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

"Parents of Autistic teenagers and young adults need their own peer support program. We are encouraged by the peer support that we observe through I CAN Network's webinars for parents, Different Journeys peer support dinners, Aspergers Victoria peer support groups, Yellow Ladybugs events and online community, and Amaze's Info Line. These initiatives are tremendously positive for parents, however we acknowledge their respective capacity and resourcing is outpaced by public demand. We would encourage the Commission to recommend that the Victorian Government resource Autistic-led and Autistic-focused organisations to support Autistic parents with Autistic children at all ages and stages. We would exhort the Commission to specifically call out the importance of supporting parents of Autistic children who might be non-speaking and have greater support requirements. "

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

N/A

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?

N/A

Thinking about what Victorias mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

N/A

What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victorias mental health system and support improvements to last?

N/A

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

N/A