



Spring update – September 2020

Impacts of coronavirus

The Commission recognises the difficult circumstances and additional pressures being felt right across the community during the coronavirus pandemic and acknowledges that the short and longer term impacts on our mental health and wellbeing cannot be overestimated.

The pandemic is changing the way we all live and is having a negative impact on jobs and education, resulting in the loss of many social connections. The Commission has heard how some people have responded well to these new ways of living, but this is not the case in all circumstances.

The Commission welcomes the ongoing collaboration and mental health response between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments as they start to address the surge in demand created by the pandemic and consider how the service system can best respond to and support the 'missing middle'. This is an important first step.

In our Interim Report we wrote about the 'missing middle' and highlighted the large service gap for people who need access to a range of ongoing services that cannot be provided by primary care services alone, but who also do not meet the threshold for treatment in public specialist clinical mental health services.

We welcome the recent announcements from the Commonwealth Government outlining the development of new mental health clinics across Victoria. The Commission will carefully consider what place they may have in a future mental health system.

The Victorian Government has also continued to deliver the recommendations from the Commission's Interim Report, announcing new public acute mental health beds and the state-wide roll out of the Hospital Outreach Post-Suicidal Engagement (HOPE) program.

Recognising the surge in demand for mental health support we would like to share our thanks with the mental health workforce and service providers for their ongoing dedication as they continue to support people living with mental ill health, their families and carers during this time.

The Commission acknowledges the personal resilience of many people living with mental health challenges. We also know that for many people however, this period continues to be challenging. We would like to highlight the ongoing importance of seeking help and support, particularly for people living with mental ill health, their families and carers.

It is extremely important to seek help if you feel like you need it. A range of support services are listed below.

- **Lifeline** 13 11 14 or [lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)
- **Beyond Blue** 1300 22 4636 or [beyondblue.org.au](https://www.beyondblue.org.au)

It is clear that now more than ever, we must maintain our focus on designing a future mental health system that is able to respond to current and emerging needs.

One of our witnesses recently told us, "*There is nothing like a crisis to get people to work together*".

We will harness this sense of opportunity and hope as we continue our work towards a mental health system that will support generations now and into the future.

2020 witness statements

Witness statements are now online



Royal Commission into
Victoria's Mental Health System

While the Commission's second and final round of public hearings were cancelled due to coronavirus, we have continued to collect witness statements from individuals who were scheduled to appear as witnesses before the Commission.

We're collecting more than 150 witness statements this year about ideas to develop a more contemporary and responsive mental health system in Victoria, and we're continuing to publish them on our website. More than 40 of these statements are from people living with mental health challenges, family members and carers.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all of our witnesses who have shared their personal and professional experiences with us, despite the additional challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

Witness statements are not a simple thing to prepare and we recognise the enormous effort that goes in to providing this evidence, often of a very personal nature, as part of the formal processes of a Royal Commission. Most of the statements are very detailed and provide a rich and insightful source of evidence for our consideration.

These stories, reflections and ideas for improvement are invaluable to our deliberations. We are incredibly thankful to everyone who has trusted in our process and contributed so generously to our work.

Our community witnesses were also offered the opportunity for a one-on-one virtual meeting with a Commissioner, to share more information about their experiences. We've held more than 20 of these meetings so far, and in the absence of our public hearings, these meetings have been particularly valuable.

The changed circumstances also gave our community witnesses the opportunity to talk to us from the comfort of their own homes. We shared experiences of family members or pets wandering in the background and some of the connections created by our common human experiences in this extraordinary time have been one of the positive benefits of the Commission adapting its approach.

We have found these meetings to be powerful and informative – because the experiential knowledge of people with lived experience really goes to the heart of our work. These meetings have challenged us all to think deeply about how we can best support people, and how we can make real improvements to the system in terms of individual needs.

Some witnesses also participated in online panel style discussions led by our barristers to help us examine some of the more contested themes and topics. The Commission will publish content from these panels in a range of formats soon.

The witness statements build on the huge amount of information the Commission has received, through consultations, submissions and last year's public hearings. More than 130 statements have been published so far and I encourage you to visit [our website](#) to read them and to learn more about our themes of inquiry.



Engagement

Following our broad information gathering phase last year, including our public submission process, this year the Commission has moved into more detailed analysis of evidence and system design, filling gaps in the information we've gathered and testing potential reform directions.

The Commission made the decision that in the current environment we wanted to provide as many opportunities as possible for people to engage with our work. Over the past few months, the Commission has continued to find new ways of engaging people with lived experience, families, carers, people working in the sector, and the wider community.

Despite remote working arrangements affecting so many people, the Commission has held more than 70 different online focus groups, forums and roundtables to hear ideas from a range of people on topics related to our [Terms of Reference](#).

Sessions have been held with consumers and carers with diverse experiences and backgrounds including members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTIQ+ communities, people with experience of the justice system, people who have experienced homelessness, alcohol and other substance misuse, young people, Aboriginal community members, and people from rural and regional areas.

The information and feedback we've gathered through these focus groups has been extremely valuable. The focus groups are one of many inputs into the Commission's work, and critically, they're helping us to hear directly from people with lived experience as we shape our thinking about future systems and design.

Sessions have also been held with services and community groups. As an example, the Commission recently hosted a roundtable session with some leading Victorian businesses to discuss mental health and corporate responsibility. We heard about the efforts and strategies being implemented to promote mental health for their people and the broader community.

Roundtable sessions often run for around two hours and include detailed presentations on specific themes and robust discussions with participants. We've heard some powerful stories and ideas from these different groups, and people have been incredibly generous sharing both their time and experiences with us.

The Commissioners also led a number of virtual meetings to provide updates on our work and to hear ideas for change with groups including Tandem Carers and with young people from YACVic. Holding these sessions online has allowed us to talk to large groups of people across the state.

In our most recent engagement activities, we asked for feedback on some of the ideas for change that we've heard over the course of our work so far. This is a crucial step – it's important that people who will be directly affected by our reforms and our work have the opportunity to help inform and shape our decision making.

This work builds on a recent survey conducted for the Commission with frontline workers to get an understanding of Victoria's mental health workforce and to hear their ideas for change. Almost 3,000 people participated in the survey, which was a great response particularly given the increased pressure on the workforce as they respond to the pandemic and remote working arrangements.

We have been heartened by the ongoing willingness and adaptation of people to participate in our work, despite the current challenges, and would like to acknowledge the goodwill that has been demonstrated time and again to the Commission.

The enormous level of commitment and interest in the work of the Commission has been extraordinary and reflects the sense of shared responsibility that people feel, as they have a deep and vested interest in being involved in shaping a reformed mental health system.

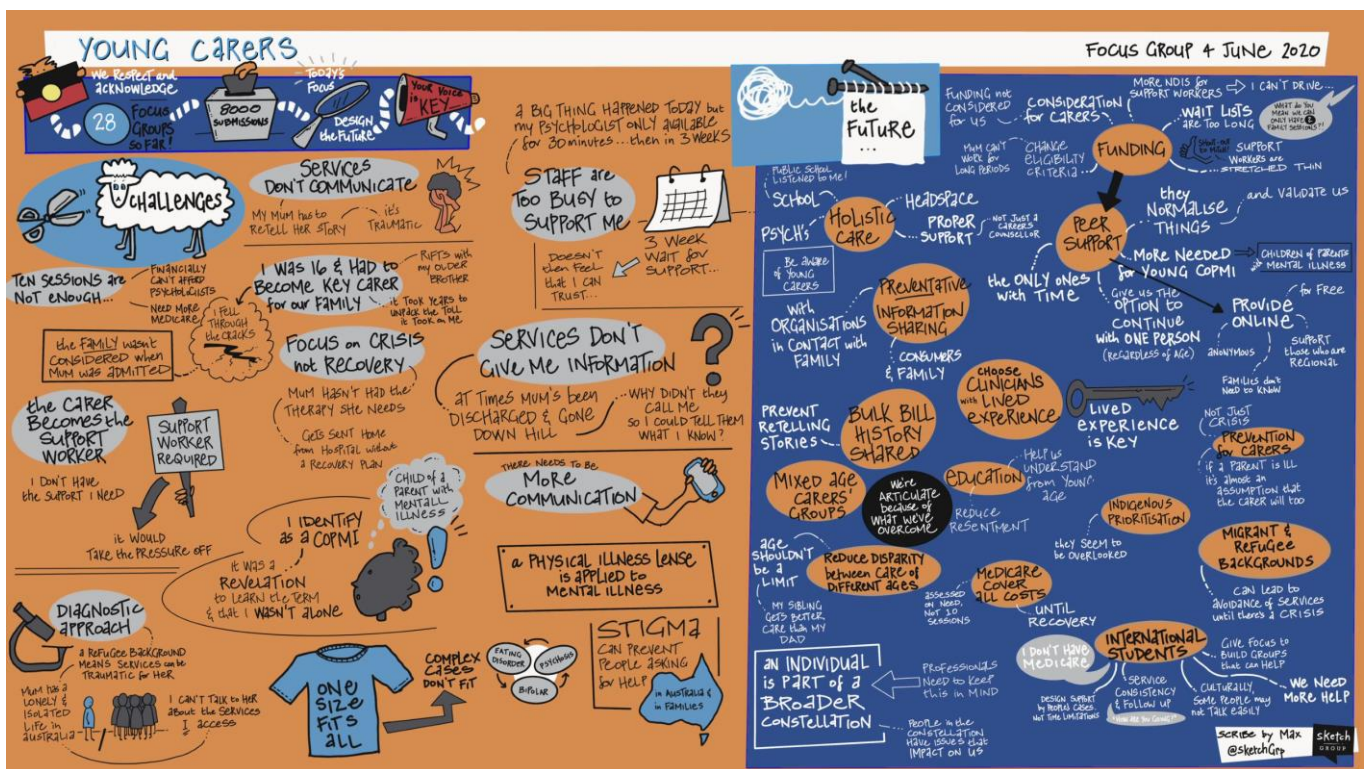


Image: Live scribe from the young carers focus group in June 2020.

Final report

In late May, the Victorian Government announced a three-month extension to the Commission, due to the pandemic and its impact on the ability of individuals, service providers, and other organisations to contribute to our work.

Our final report is now due to be delivered by 5 February 2021.

We're at a critical phase of our deliberations, as we examine the huge amount of evidence gathered through witness statements, submissions, community consultations, surveys, research, stakeholder meetings, and a substantial program of focus groups.

All of these inputs will help us shape our final recommendations for change. Our final report will set out an ambitious blueprint for transforming Victoria's mental health system, including the design of central elements of a future mental health system.

Stay up to date

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