

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

SUB: 0002.0018.0033

N/A

Name

[REDACTED]

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

"Positive media portrayals and information about mental health that focus on the person, and engender empathy with the challenges they face, rather than focusing on the disease/illness and promoting views of people suffering from mental illness as 'other'."

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?

"My brother suffered from both schizophrenia and the mental health system for more than 15 years before he died in a head-on collision that also killed the other driver (the coroner's findings were inconclusive, but suicide was likely). Things that worked well: programs like 'Outdoors Inc' that organised excursions ranging from half-day bicycle rides to multi-day camping/canoeing trips offering opportunities to be with others and to be outdoors and active; communal cooking programs that offered opportunities to interact with others and be creative. Things that can be done better: expand rather than cut funding for programs like the above. Early treatment and responses to psychotic episodes should be constructive and supportive - forcible admissions, forcible injections, and confinement can cement a view of the 'system' as the enemy (based on lived experience, not paranoid delusions). Invest financially and in training staff that provide on-ground support and the day-to-day contacts - people who are able to listen and empathise with someone suffering from psychosis are gems! Those who focus on managing difficult behaviour rather than engaging with the person exacerbate the problem."

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

Support for suicide prevention seems to only be available when there is a crisis - when it is already too late.

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.

"Social isolation, lack of social connections, an inability to connect socially contribute to poor mental health, and addressing these is key to help people improve their mental health. 'Treatment' for schizophrenia in Australia seems to focus primarily (often exclusively) on the use of anti-psychotic drugs, and repeated forcible administration of these numbing drugs destroys any notion for the person suffering from poor mental health that the mental health system is 'supporting' them. Solitary confinement is an approach used to 'break' people in prisons - psychiatric wards use 'low stimulus' rooms for people suffering from mental illness. These sorts of 'mental health treatment' do not promote mental health."

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?

"Supporting people suffering from mental illness is emotionally draining, and family members and carers, along with professional carers in the mental health system, need support to maintain their own mental health."

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

"Better pay, better training, and more support for people at the 'coalface' of the mental health workforce, particularly those who see patients as people (rather than most of the \$\$ going to psychiatrists who rarely see the person). High staff turnover, whether because of poor pay or the emotional demands of the work, means a lack of continuity and difficulty building constructive long-term relationships that are necessary to provide real support to someone suffering poor mental health."

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?

"Programs that offer people suffering mental illness opportunities for employment are very rare (eg MadCap Cafe, Geelong), but invaluable for giving people a sense of purpose and worth, opportunities to interact with others, and a reason to get up in the morning. Making these available early in their experience of mental illness, and even to people with low levels of functioning that would require a high level of support to enable them to participate would be worthwhile - even if as an experimental program to test whether their capacity to function improves. It may end up being less expensive in the long run than ending up having to accommodate people for weeks or months in psychiatric wards. Often being discharged because of the lack of beds rather than improvement in mental health, with resultant repeated re-admissions adding to long-term costs."

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?

"Getting in early to promote mental health, positive ways of thinking about and responding to life's challenges with school programs on 'Emotional First Aid' (e.g. Guy Winch book of that title). Not having good strategies for dealing with the common emotional challenges of things like failure, loss, and rejection, leads to poor mental health outcomes that can escalate to more severe mental illnesses, eg when using drugs to 'self-medicate'. Significant investment in prevention (introducing children/people early to a variety of strategies for coping with emotional injuries) would be more effective and reduce the demands for crisis management - which usually comes too late to be effective."

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

"Money invested into Victoria's mental health system should go into approaches that build relationships - with people suffering poor mental health and (i) peer support, (ii) mental health care

providers, (iii) the community, etc. Not to profiteering opportunists."

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

N/A