

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

Organisation Name

The Reach Foundation

Name

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

"A lot of work has already been done to reduce stigma. However, there are still many misconceptions and barriers that people face understanding mental illness and then, in turn, seeking support. Continuing conversations that enable understanding and knowledge around mental illness is imperative. Underpinning this would be a promotion and prevention framework; building resilience and good mental health. Research has shown the importance of promotion and prevention in mental health and the importance of this been a main focus for intervention (WHO, 2002 & 2004). Through our work with young people we observe time and again how stigma prevents young people speaking about their mental wellbeing. When attending our workshops, both in community programs and in schools, young people are allowed the space to talk openly and honestly about their experiences leading to greater understanding of mental health problems and illnesses which creates awareness and acceptance amongst their peers. Over the 25 years of running youth workshops at Reach we have observed that it is this awareness and openness that often allows young people to feel more able to speak with wellbeing professionals, enabling them to be linked in with specific services that can support with appropriate intervention around their mental health as required. At Reach we have seen that having these conversations early can help young people to be more aware of not only their own mental health, but that of their peers, friends and family. It helps them to know when and where they can seek support, the importance of doing this early and breaks down misconceptions and stigma of mental health issues. There is also significant value in building the knowledge and awareness of those people who are most directly providing care to a young person such as parents, carers and teachers. Ensuring a person's wider support system is aware of mental health problems and illnesses increases the ability for early intervention and support and increases a young person's willingness to speak to those people about their mental health. Some aspects that we feel may help to reduce stigma and discrimination are:

Utilising promotion and prevention interventions to build knowledge and awareness early;

Build more capacity for young people, their parents, carers and teachers to have open and honest conversations;

Reaching young people through both school-based and broader community programs;

Utilising youth-led programs as young people learning from peers may be more powerful than learning from older people or authority figures; Supporting a broad range of programs in schools and university to learn about mental illnesses to break down myths and misconceptions as these institutions provide spaces where a large range of young people can be accessed and engaged. Building and broadening the range of promotion and prevention programs, like that which Reach run, across schools and Universities (is this one just the same as the others?) Increase the breadth of knowledge delivered to the wider community about prevention of suicide and awareness of mental illness symptoms, similar to what is being done for knowing the risk factors and ways to self-monitor for physical illnesses such as breast cancer, skin cancer etc.

References 1. World Health Organisation (2002) Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health. WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data 2. World Health Organisation (2004)

Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice: summary report / a report from the World Health Organization, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse in collaboration with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the University of Melbourne. WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data "

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?

"At Reach we believe that promotion and prevention strategies are essential in building young people's resilience. By doing this we believe we can reduce the number of young people who may go on to develop mental health illnesses through building their capacity to navigate adversities that may present throughout their life time. We currently have numerous services in early intervention, treatment and crisis intervention and support, however there has not been as much focus on promotion and prevention services. (WHO, 2002 & 2004, O'Conner et al 2017) From our experience, we see that whilst there appears to be an increasing awareness by family members/carers of services available to provide intervention around mental illness, they still find it hard to know what service might be best or where to go for support. We often get calls from parents who tell us they feel helpless as traditional individual therapies might not be meeting the needs of their child and they are struggling to find alternative services. For example, if the young person does not want to see a therapist or has not found success with this, or when their concerns are around the young person's behaviour or disengagement from school or other activities etc. Programs like Reach can provide that first step back into engaging in a service that can build resilience and good mental health and wellbeing. Our youth-led programs may be less confronting than a mental health service for a young person to engage with. Reach programs go beyond a deficit model of support as through a Positive Psychology Framework a young person can be seen beyond the illness or behaviours that they are presenting with. At the same time, we also have parents and young people report to us that they have a good range of supports around them with a range of different services they can engage with. This is often when a young person has connected well individually with a therapist, feels supported at school and has other experiences to engage with that promotes social and emotional connections in a more structured way. While we have observed that there is an increased awareness of mental health care plans and services available amongst the communities we service, there remains large sections of the community who are unaware of what is available or that some services may be free or subsidised depending on circumstance. Socioeconomic factors can also contribute to access particularly after the number of sessions have been reached on a care plan. If someone is not able to pay for ongoing sessions, they will stop accessing support even if their issue is not fully resolved. 6-10 sessions on a care plan does not align with most evidence-based treatment plans for mental illness and therefore many people will never completely return to good mental health if they cannot afford it. Specific strategies that could be helpful could see; the creation of an intake process that is more consistent across all GPs and services so that families and carers have one point of contact they can go to for all services; Increasing specific training opportunities for Teachers, parents and carers; for example, in the same way that teachers and people who work with children or in health fields etc need first aid CPR certificates, mental health first aid should be prioritised; Increasing the availability of school counsellors or youth workers in schools as this is often the first point of contact a young person can have to professional support. Lastly, increasing the focus on services and intervention aligned with promotion and prevention would build the wider community's resilience, awareness and knowledge of mental health. Developing good mental health and resilience enables people to tackle adversity when it arises thus reducing the amount of people developing mental health problems and illness. (WHO, 2002 & 2004). References: 1. World Health

Organisation (2002). Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health. WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/545.pdf 2. World Health Organisation (2004). Promoting mental health : concepts, emerging evidence, practice : summary report / a report from the World Health Organization, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse in collaboration with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the University of Melbourne. WHO Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/en/promoting_mhh.pdf 3. Meredith O'Conner, Ann V. Sanson, John W. Toumbourou, Jacolyn Norrish & Craig A. Olsson (2017). Does Positive Mental Health in Adolescence Longitudinally Predict Healthy Transitions in Young Adulthood? Journal of Happiness Studies 18:177-198. "

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

"Suicide continues to be a significant issue amongst youth, Australian Indigenous community, rural communities and other minority groups. We have seen improvements in access to services and an increasing awareness around available supports. There are many organisations working well to support in these areas, such as Beyond Blue, the Black Dog Institute, R U Ok, Headspace and Orygen. However more needs to be done. Significant funding has been put towards implementing services to support people with a diagnosed mental illness. In addition, there are a number of services focusing on early intervention to support when mental health problems arise. Reach believes that an increase in funding for promotion and prevention interventions would enable a broader approach to the prevention of suicide. We believe this is particularly needed in rural communities where their ability to access these types of services is more restricted. The education system is a good platform to implement promotion and prevention interventions. However, teachers and schools are often expected to perform multiple and significant roles in supporting their students. Supporting organisations to work within the education system can alleviate some of this responsibility and enable a more focused input into the wellbeing of youth. School or year wide interventions (like the workshops Reach provides) can enhance the resilience of a significant amount of young people whilst not overloading teachers and can fit into the structures that are already in place. Through our work with schools we see teachers and wellbeing staff increase their understanding of their students, the adversities they are facing and identify strategies to better engage and support them. Direct strategies suggested are: Increasing support in rural communities and amongst minority groups; Continuing conversations around suicide to reduce taboo; Focus on building resilience in youth, promoting good mental health and bolstering supports for parents; Increase funding to organisations in the promotion and prevention space; organisations like Reach, R U Ok and Reachout.com are good examples of what is working well and what could be increased to reach more young people specifically; Build community knowledge about how to identify indicators of mental health illness in others and how to support them. Again organisations like R u OK, Reach and Mental Health First Aid training are good examples of this. Funding would allow these programs to be more accessible; Continuing programs such as those provided by Headspace to support communities and schools following the experience of suicide to reduce further risk in that community. "

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.

"Through our work at Reach we see the huge value and positive outcomes when people are engaged early around their wellbeing. Utilising a promotion and prevention framework which is

underpinned by Positive Psychology and humanistic theories sees young people being able to explore the usual challenges of being an adolescent, enables the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skills and connectedness and allows young people to better understand and manage adversities they may already be experiencing. Through this we've observed that young people are more resilient and able to navigate life's challenges. We see this as being an important avenue to contribute to the wellbeing of young Australians as they are not always able to access opportunities or have the supports around them to build these skills of resilience. (insert research references) At Reach we work hard to develop relationships with other organisations and communities to deliver these opportunities regardless of socioeconomic or other factors that may impact access.. We receive most of our funding through corporate partnerships. Our experience suggests that cost and location (such as rural or outer suburbs) is one of the most significant factors in stopping people from being able to access our services. With, understandably, a focus being on funding primary services in mental health it has meant that promotion and prevention services are reliant on other avenues of funding making it hard to be able to reach those young people who have the most difficulty in accessing services. Increasing Government funding for promotion and prevention services would enable a more holistic approach for people to be able to achieve good mental health. Currently we are able to connect well with other services and are able to support young people to engage in a range of mental health services. We also support parents to navigate the system when they don't know where to go. One of the main challenges in navigating this effectively is having multiple contact points of entry into support services. As we see in other states, one single triage service for mental health would help to enable better access and streamlined approach to support Particular recommendations are as follows: Building resilience through promotion and prevention interventions including positive psychology and humanistic theories; Increase access to services for those in lower socioeconomic, minority, and multicultural groups; increase the amount of mental health care sessions available through care plans, increase funding to already existing services so that services can provide their programs no/low fee and can service rural communities; Support organisations to translate their content into various languages so that all people can access important information and break down barriers. It is currently difficult for parents and young people when they are not fluent in English to easily access information related to their health and wellbeing. This also occurs for people with disability or other language barriers; Increase GP's confidence and knowledge of how to support people around their mental health and wellbeing; Increase promotion and prevention interventions for mental health Work to understand and break through cultural barriers that prevent open discussion of mental health and mental illness with others Finding ways of young people who are who are home-schooled to reduce risks around social isolation and loneliness Increasing support, awareness and understanding of the needs of gender diverse young people. "

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

"At Reach we see that factors such as socioeconomic standing, cultural background, rural communities and minority groups play a large role in higher rates of poor mental health. Young people that fall within one or more of these risk groups are more likely to experience adversity and less able to engage with a broad range of services for support. This may be due to factors such as cost, access and feeling included. Increasing funding to allow organisations to access these groups and communities at no or low cost to the individual will greatly assist them to engage in pathways that can positively impact their wellbeing. The avenue that has seen the least focus recently is that of promotion and prevention of mental health and wellbeing. These programs often

require a financial contribution and are often less accessible to rural communities compared to metropolitan areas. Whilst these types of interventions, particularly for youth, have typically been attempted to be a part of the education system, we often hear from teachers and schools that they feel overwhelmed with the breadth of what they are asked to provide for their students and that often this is outside of their training. Through our school workshop program we are able to work alongside schools to deliver school wide programs which specifically target building a young person's wellbeing and resilience. We are able to support not only teachers but their wellbeing teams to better understand their students, help address identified needs, and build connection and understanding to all students regardless of their situation which may otherwise limit their ability to access such programs. For example, Reach has been working in the Mildura and Robinvale area for a number of years and have been working with their students across all year levels. This community continues to ask us to return because of the positive impact our programs have had on their community. Funding for this has been sourced from corporate organisations and at times the local community. We know there are numerous other communities that would also benefit from an organisation like ours to work alongside the schools and other services in their area to enable a more holistic approach to the development of positive mental health. Securing this kind of funding can be difficult and not all communities are able to do this. Support from the Victorian Government to increase funding for these communities would enable a state wide approach to the development of good mental health and wellbeing. "

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

"At Reach we often hear from parents and carers that they don't know where to go for support or what services are available. Regularly we are the first service they contact, or they may come to us when other avenues haven't been able to meet all their needs. Promotion and prevention interventions would bolster parents and carers ability to navigate the challenges and needs of supporting someone with a mental illness. Parents and carers often report to us that they feel alone in their experience. Increasing opportunities for them to feel connected and to develop awareness and resilience so they in turn can better support their loved ones would help enable a community wide approach to improving mental health and wellbeing. At Reach we recently ran a pilot program supporting parent/carers to connect with their adolescent. This program received a lot of interest and the outcome was hugely positive with parents/carers reporting a greater understanding of their adolescent and felt better able to communicate and connect with them. We hope to develop this program further so that we can continue to build parents/carers capacity to understand and support their adolescents as well as increasing their own resilience and ability to cope. "

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?

"As we've said in previous answers our focus is on promotion and prevention. In saying this, we also understand the importance of walking alongside people to improve the social and economic engagement. The way Reach does this is by embedding wellbeing support (a team of

Psychologists, Social Workers and Counsellors) into the model of supporting not only our participants but our staff and Crew as well. Whilst wellbeing is becoming more accepted, often in workplaces the focus is on self-care strategies such as exercise, meditation and soothing activities. However not as much emphasis has been given to the importance of having professional wellbeing support to directly address mental health problems and illness in the workplace. Through having a dedicated wellbeing team at Reach we are able to support our staff and Crew through periods of mental health problems and mental illness so that they can remain engaged and supported in employment and volunteering as and how is best for them. This is something that we would recommend that is more widely imbedded through organisations either through on site teams or access to EAP services. "

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?

"Further to our responses above, we believe that an increased focus on delivery of promotion and prevention interventions for mental health would enable a more holistic approach to the mental health of Victorians. We would encourage increased funding opportunities for organisation in this area so that all Victorians can access programs to build their resilience and good mental health. We would also recommend that funding opportunities supported and encouraged organisations partnering together. There are a number of services and organisations that are working in this space and all bring a unique set of skills. Rather than one organisation trying to meet all needs, different organisations could work together to utilise their area of expertise to provide a wider ranging service. An example of this would be that Reach has been working with the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) to be able to join our expertise in facilitation of emotional experience and building of skills of resilience and CMY's expertise in engaging and supporting youth from cultural diverse backgrounds. As mentioned previously two other strategies that could help to improve Victoria's Mental Health System are; No/low cost ongoing support until person experiencing good mental health; and one single phone number across the state that acts as a triage and referral service, services are too disjointed and their isn't a big enough focus on developing. "

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

"Promote upcoming changes, keep people informed. Ensure the community stays updated and that information is shared in simple language in multiple languages across social media, news, networks etc, highlighting and focusing on the key points that will affect specific communities/organisations so that they understand why they need to know these things and why it'll affect them. Continue asking for community input especially from those who require an improved mental health system "

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

"A bit about Reach The Reach Foundation (Reach) is an independent, for-purpose organisation that has been improving the wellbeing of young Australians for the past twenty-four years. Reach believes in a promotion and prevention approach to building social, emotional and mental health awareness in young people to develop their resilience and capacity to thrive. Reach workshops are safe and supportive spaces where teenagers can connect and share stories honestly; spaces where they can experience belonging, discover their strengths, and build their self-efficacy and resilience. General aims of our workshops: Enhance the social and emotional skills of young

people. Build their resilience and belief in themselves and each other as a group. Promote self-awareness and optimism. Provide an opportunity to come together as a group in a meaningful way. Reach provides safe and non-judgemental spaces where young people can push their comfort zones, practice their interpersonal skills, and have open and honest conversations with their peers. Reach supports young people to develop the social and emotional skills they need to be resilient and make positive life choices. Reach draws from evidence-based theories and frameworks to inform the structure of our work, including but not limited to cognitive, behavioural and humanistic theories, Positive Psychology and developmental theories. Our workshops are developed and delivered by highly-trained workshop facilitators (Reach Crew) who are young people themselves. Our Crew go through an extensive self-development and training program so that they can build their own awareness, skills and ability to then go and support other young people.

SUMMARY OF REACH PROGRAMS

Reach workshops are available to young people aged between 10 and 17 and programs include:

SCHOOL WORKSHOPS Reach primary school programs are focused on Grade 5 and 6 students to promote positive peer connections and challenge limiting beliefs as well as preparing them for transition to secondary school. Reach secondary school programs are offered to year 7-12 students, with particular workshops aimed at different year levels aligned to common developmental needs, and include building self-esteem, identity formation and goal setting, for instance. Heroes Day is a high impact one-day workshop for up to 500 Yr 9 students from various schools which encourages students to explore their world, challenge their perceptions and find meaning and purpose in their lives. This highly experiential workshop uses the powerful metaphor of the Hero's Journey' to help young people explore their own lives and reframe challenges they may be facing.

COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS Fused is a safe and supportive space where teenagers can connect with their peers and share their stories honestly. It is run from 6-9pm once a week over five weeks during the school term and is open to young people aged 13-17 years. The content is uniquely designed and delivered by our Crew, it is new and different each term which means that young people can attend all year round. Camps are an intensive experience where safe and supportive spaces are created by our crew so that young people can connect with their peers and share their stories honestly. Camps are run from for three day /two-night period during the school holidays. Each Camp is uniquely designed by our crew to help participants push their comfort zones and expand and grow. These are accessible to young people from across the state. Young people and their families' self-refer to attend these activities. We also receive referrals from organisations that provide support to young people such as schools, youth support and mental health agencies, Victoria Police and DHHS.

TAILORED WORKSHOPS In addition, Reach delivered tailored workshops for a range of sporting groups including sporting teams, rural communities, and Indigenous communities.

TARGETED WORKSHOPS Reach also offers specialist programs such as; Ramp - for young people living in residential care (in partnership with Whitelion who provides mentors for each young person) Grounded - for 13-17 year olds who are disengaged or at risk of leaving education pathways or are experiencing complex issues. Diverge - a two-day workshop series for young people in Yr 10 to explore what they want to do as a career post school and linking them in with mentors who are professionals in various career sectors. All of these programs require the direct provision of wellbeing services including pre-program assessment, in program support, follow up and referral.

CREW TRAINING Training of young people to deliver Reach workshop involves continuing evening workshops specific to three levels of experience and competence. Each training level has a minimum of 16 workshops together with a camp or retreat and specific focused training, such as trauma informed work or cultural competency. Training is delivered by more senior facilitators or external trainers. Wellbeing staff attend all training sessions to support participants and trainers. Wellbeing plays an integral role in the oversight of focused learning, consistency and safety.

Wellbeing Support Wellbeing support is integral to the delivery of safe and supported workshop spaces at Reach. Inherent in these experiences are personal challenges and acknowledgement of the impact of previous experiences, hence we anticipate and support young people through the difficult individual reflections that lead to personal discovery and growth. Wellbeing expertise is provided by a team of psychologists, social workers and counsellors who provide integrated and discreet support to ensure the wellbeing of both young people participating in workshops and the crew delivering workshops. Young people identified as experiencing potential risks prior to their participation are routinely assessed and offered support. Wellbeing professionals are always present during community-based workshops providing support to both participants and crew during the program. They identify young people experiencing behavioural, emotional or social challenges and provide initial crisis assessment, support and referral as required. Short term support is also offered to enable transition to ongoing support through referral or linking in with supports the young person already has in place. The Reach Wellbeing Team work in partnership with a young person's current support network to ensure that what may be uncovered for them can be supported by those already supporting them, or bringing new people on board to help them continue on their new journey. The Wellbeing Team also provides information, referral and short-term assistance upon request to parents, guardians and carers who may require assistance in supporting their young people as well as professionals and young people themselves if they contact Reach for support, regardless of whether they attend a workshop. The Reach model of youth engagement is unique within the sector and nationally for its supportive empowerment approach to promoting positive youth development. As a forerunner in the youth participation space in Victoria and NSW, as well as a leader in promoting team building and positive work relationships, Reach continues to make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of thousands of young people each year. It is through the above that we believe we have a unique opportunity to contribute to this commission in context of young people and mental health. Thank you for taking the time to read and consider our contribution, we value been able to input into this review and continually work to improves the lives of young people. "