

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

Organisation Name

People and Parks 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?

"Greater recognition of the now established evidence-base that mental illness is more likely the more disconnected we are from nature - that 'nature deficit disorder' is a significant contributor to our state of health overall. This recognition takes the focus and pressure off the individual, and acknowledges that when human beings aren't living in 'healthy human habitats' (ie. without access to healthy nature spaces) we become unwell. Nature Deficit Disorder, and the subsequent impact on our mental health, is caused by increased urbanisation and lack of access to healthy nature spaces for all in our daily lives. If the Victorian community knew about Nature Deficit Disorder, and the impact on our whole health, we would understand that often the causes of an individual's ill-health are actually systemic and so health equity issues. There is ample evidence that people who are able to live in the 'leafy green suburbs' have better health than those in lower SES, nature-poor suburbs. We need greater acknowledgement of the structural, systemic causes of poor health and wellbeing, and what constitutes a health equity issue."

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?

"Policy and well-funded programming that addresses the ample and ever-growing evidence-base about the role of nature in preventing and treating health issues, including mental health and wellbeing. This is working particularly well in Scotland, Finland, Japan, South Korea and across the United States, and is acknowledged very clearly in the Victorian government's joint ministerial memo on Health and Nature - but it is not supported programmatically yet by the Victorian government. Programs that promote and provide access to nature spaces are internationally proven to work across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery. Victoria needs to back its own memo on Health and Nature, and enable the delivery of these 'green prescriptions' programs across the state."

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

Regular mental health first aid training at school and at work.

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.

"Just like all living creatures, humans need 'healthy human habits' to survive and thrive. We need to re-educate ourselves - learning from Traditional Owner wisdom - what a healthy human habitat is. It is not a manufactured environment with manufactured food and virtual relationships. As humans have urbanised, we have effectively civilised ourselves (and our habitat) sick. It is very hard for individuals living in our current system/cities - especially if they're poor and with less choice - to create healthy habitats for good mental health. We need to collectively understand and

prioritise creating healthy human habitats, for all. We need to demand access to healthy human habitats as a health equity issue. If our governments and businesses are supporting the creation of unhealthy human habitats, it's hardly fair to ask individuals living in these unhealthy habitats to 'better look after themselves'. Our current medical model pathologises individuals' health responses to an unhealthy habitat. Better funding of prevention - including honest information about the systemic causes of individual ill-health - will significantly reduce ever-increasing health costs treating symptoms. People need to be able to find, access and experience nature first - this will reduce the need to find, access and experience treatment."

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

"There is ample and growing evidence in Victoria and internationally about the link between health and wellbeing, socio-economic status, and access to nature (eg tree canopy). It is not a coincidence that the healthier and wealthier people live in the 'leafy green suburbs'. Access to a healthy human habitat, which includes access to sufficient nature spaces, is a recognised internationally as a health equity issue. There is a movement within the United Nations to promote access to nature as a human right. To address this evidence-based health equity issue, we need to define and legislate for Healthy Human Habitat Standards and regulate them."

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

We need to better address prevention so there is less mental ill-health having less impact on families and carers. For anyone to function well - and especially so for those under stress and pressure - access to healthy human habitats is crucial. Time spent in nature is proven to have a restorative impact. Carers need access - time and proximity - to nature to support their own health and wellbeing.

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

"We need to better address prevention so there is less mental ill-health having less impact on an over-stretched workforce. For anyone to function well - and especially so for those under stress and pressure - access to healthy human habitats is crucial, including at work. Time spent in nature is proven to have a restorative impact. Mental health workers need access - time and proximity - to nature to support their own health and wellbeing."

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?

"Greater access to formal and informal activities in nature is proven to increase social connectedness. More jobs with flexible conditions that involve creating and caring for nature (eg. planting, tending, harvesting, weeding) will not only improve people's health and wellbeing, and economic participation, it will improve the health of the community's habitat. Council supported (whole of government funded) jobs in community gardens, local parks and reserves will improve social and economic participation. Funding will realise these opportunities."

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?

"Prevention. Prevention. Prevention. What does the evidence show us that we humans need to maintain mental wellbeing? Is this evidence reflected in our policies and budgets? Is this evidence reflected in our current medical models and institutions? Do our cultural attitudes reflect this knowledge? Is access an issue? I would like the Royal Commission to prioritise ensuring the evidence of what enables mental wellbeing to be reflected in cross-departmental policies and budgets (health, mental health, education, urban planning, justice, employment and training, environment, etc), and actually put into practice. To improve prevention (and treatment) ensure access to nature spaces for all people, patients and mental health workers."

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

"Decision makers and influencers make themselves aware of the most credible evidence available of what constitutes a healthy human habitat. Work with organisations with expertise in this area to define the optimal 'nature dose' we need to stay healthy, and to recover when we're unwell. Do the economic analysis of the cost benefit of investing in prevention, then invest these significant cost savings in prevention."

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

"The People and Parks Foundation has run and evaluated an award-winning Green Referrals program in Victoria. We have re-developed this program based on the latest evidence and best practice exemplars from around the world to produce a new place-based program called Live Nature Wise, which includes a referral component called Nature Scripts. As part of this we have developed an evidence-based 'nature dose' which comprises exposure/access to multi-sensory nature references, nature samples, cultivated nature and natural nature - with frequency and duration varying according to the level of 'nature intensity' (which is typically associated with geographic proximity). We believe access to a healthy 'nature dose' is a health equity issue and a human right. We acknowledge the Traditional Owner wisdom that when we care for Country, Country cares for us."