



Latrobe Health
Advocate

SUBMISSION TO
Royal Commission into Victoria's
Mental Health System

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The Latrobe Health Advocate respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Original Custodians of the land we walk on today – the land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation and pass on respect to their Elders past and present.

A note from the Latrobe Health Advocate

TO:

Penny Armytage, Chair and Commissioner
Professor Allan Fels AO, Commissioner
Dr Alex Cockram, Commissioner
Professor Bernadette McSherry, Commissioner



I was appointed by the Victorian Minister for Health in May 2018, to offer independent advice on behalf of Latrobe communities to improve health and wellbeing service systems.

I am pleased to provide this submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The Latrobe Health Innovation Zone was designated by the Victorian Government to support communities in Latrobe to improve their health and wellbeing. It is a place where the community is being empowered to lead and influence change. Mental health has been the main issue that the community has raised with me, they have illustrated their understanding of the matters that impact their mental health and are seeking to improve their circumstances and health.

Many of the health and social issues affecting people in Latrobe are documented from an international and national perspective. This submission goes some way to articulating, from the voice of communities how the issues manifest and how communities describe the problems they face in their own words.

I acknowledge the people who have contributed to this submission through putting forward ideas on how services can be delivered differently.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Royal Commission and to sharing the stories of the people whose voices are included here.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Anderson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Jane Anderson
Latrobe Health Advocate



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

Community voice

People in Latrobe have expressed their desire to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness through awareness campaigns and community events. They have described circumstances where they have felt judged by health services and how this, in itself, can add to the stigma associated with mental illness.

They have shared their aspirations for people to be kind to each other and want to see more respect within the community. People have noted the important role that employers have in promoting good mental health and wellbeing. Workplaces have been identified as a place where stigma about mental ill health can be challenged.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

It is important to identify and understand the underlying causes of stigma and consider these in the context of regional communities. In communities like Latrobe it is not uncommon for there to be a single service provider responsible for the delivery of services to an entire Local Government Area or beyond. The staff that work within these services also form part of the community that they are there to support. They can play an important role in influencing the stigma associated with mental illness at a local level. Local services and staff are well positioned to create an environment, and way of working that demonstrates a non-judgemental approach and builds understanding and acceptance of the symptoms of mental illness.

There are a number of national and state-wide campaigns and initiatives that could be localised to increase their relevance and impact at a local community level. In order for this to be effective, it is necessary to consider the distribution of campaign resources and implementation tactics from governments and peak bodies, taking into account the specific needs of a regional community.

Alternatively, consideration could be given to enabling communities to design and establish their own campaigns and initiatives. In the example below, the *Hello* campaign has been co-designed by communities and organisations in Latrobe. Campaigns like *Hello* could be considered for other communities or scaled across Victoria.

Innovations and examples to consider

Hello Campaign – Latrobe Valley, Victoria

It all starts with hello... So say hello, have a chat, get to know each other and pass it on. The Hello Campaign is raising mental health awareness by highlighting the importance of social connections in the Latrobe Valley.

https://wearelatrobe.com.au/our_projects/hello/

HeadsTogether–UnitedKingdom

Too often, people feel afraid to admit that they are struggling with their mental health. This fear of prejudice and judgement stops people from getting help and can destroy families and end lives. Heads Together wants to help people feel much more comfortable with their everyday mental wellbeing and have the practical tools to support their friends and family.

<https://www.headstogether.org.uk/>



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?

Community voice

People in Latrobe have shared a common concern for the mental health and wellbeing of younger people and they recognise the importance of the home and school environment.

People have talked about the relationship between physical and mental health and have described the mental health benefits of yoga, walking and other recreational activities. They want to see more community gardens and more accessible sporting clubs. They have shared their own experiences of taking small steps to improve their physical health through exercise and diet and how this has improved their own self-belief and mental health.

People have spoken of the importance of family, friends, neighbours and communities being able to come together. They aspire for more community events and activities designed for specific age groups and communities. They want to see more supports for people with a disability, young parents and new arrivals.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

Participation in community events and activities enables people to build and maintain social connections. They can establish trusted relationships with each other and with local organisations and clubs. When they have positive experiences engaging in local activities they are more likely to have the confidence to participate in other activities which could, over time, build resilience and improved mental health.

Activities such as walking groups, community gardens and organised sports can have both physical and mental health benefits. The mental health benefits of physical activity are well researched. It is worth considering what the opportunities are to better integrate preventative and social activities into the heavily medicalised model of health services.

The examples listed below are but a small sample of the activities available in many communities across Victoria. The concept of social prescription is currently being considered within the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone and may have some relevance for other communities in Victoria.

Innovations and examples to consider

Health and Wellness Classes – Yinnar, Latrobe Valley, Victoria

A free, weekly, one-hour exercise class is proving an invaluable tool for local elderly residents with the session specially designed to meet their varying levels of mobility. The classes, which take place every Wednesday morning, have proved popular over the past twelve months and additional grant funding means that they will continue for the next two years.

https://www.frrr.org.au/cb_pages/news/yinnar_district_memorial_hall.php

Parkrun – Churchill, Newborough, Traralgon and Worldwide

The impact of parkrun on mental health extends far beyond physical activity and has the potential to support people outside of traditional mental health services, according to new research conducted by Staffordshire University. People with mental health difficulties are among the most socially excluded people, and social exclusion is associated with poorer physical and psychological health.

<https://blog.parkrun.com/au/2018/10/10/research-reveals-benefit-of-parkrun-on-mental-health/>

Social Prescribing - NHS Health Scotland

Social prescribing connects people to community groups and services, often through the support of a link worker. These connector schemes employ individuals (link workers) who take referrals from local agencies (including GPs), and work with people to produce a tailored plan to meet the person's wellbeing needs. They help people to overcome feelings of loneliness by connecting people to activities and support within their local area. This can include a range of activities from arts participation, befriending and sport or exercise, as well as debt, housing or employment advice.

<http://www.healthscotland.scot/publications/social-prescribing-resources>



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

Community voice

Latrobe communities have said that people may experience social isolation or exclusion for a range of reasons which may include physical or geographical separation, inability to access social events and activities, a lack of events and activities on offer to suit their interests or needs, or an inability to interact with others due to physical or mental ill health.

People have described a cycle of hopelessness and related this to unemployment and the negative impacts it can have on mental health. They have also said, that in some instances work can have a negative impact on mental health, when employees feel frustrated or undervalued.

People have talked about the impacts of self-harm and suicide, and expressed a desire for action to happen at a community level to address this. Some people have said that there is nowhere to go beyond the hospital and that there needs to be more supports at a community level.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

Suicide prevention efforts and research may be further enhanced with consideration of ways to reach people at a grassroots community level. Within Latrobe, there are several neighbourhood houses, men's sheds, sporting clubs and community groups that enable people to connect and participate in society. Greater investment and support for these settings may assist them to increase their reach and to provide more frequent opportunities for people to connect. Strategies that build the capacity of these settings to better identify and support people at risk may also be of benefit.

One of the challenges in Latrobe is reaching those who are socially isolated. Consideration of ways to enable these people to access services and local activities more easily could also be of benefit. It may be that the solutions involve improved access to public transports or greater use of technology, or decentralised models of health and social services.

The two international examples listed below demonstrate the scale of work and investment required to accelerate suicide prevention efforts.

Innovations and examples to consider

Boolarra Men's Shed – Boolarra, Latrobe Valley, Victoria

Boolarra Men's Shed aims to increase the health and wellbeing of members by providing a place for men to meet and work on projects that contribute to the wider community. New members and visitors always welcome, join us for a project, a yarn or cuppa!

Our Future Foyle – Derry / Londonderry, Northern Ireland

Our Future Foyle is a transformative, innovative cultural and health intervention focused on the River Foyle in Derry/Londonderry. The project originated through extensive community and stakeholder engagement under the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design and Public Health Northern Ireland. It aims to improve the health and social wellbeing of everyone using the riverfront of the River Foyle, through rejuvenation and animation of the banks and bridges as a shared positive space.

<http://www.futurefoyle.org/>

National Loneliness Strategy – United Kingdom

A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness. This strategy sets out the approach to tackling loneliness in England. It marks a shift in the way we see and act on loneliness, both within government and in society more broadly.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness>



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.

Community voice

People in Latrobe have talked about the importance of having mental health support services that are approachable, professional and sympathetic. People have described their struggles to understand health services, how they interact with each other and the language that they use. They want health services to be more approachable and communicate in a language that is easy to understand. There is a common view that health services and health professionals are not familiar with each other and therefore, their ability to work together to benefit communities is limited.

When people talk about access to services, they share their frustrations about how long it takes to see a doctor and their concerns about not being able to build a longer term and trusted relationship with their doctor. People have talked about referrals and waiting lists to access a GP and develop a mental health plan. They have said that sometimes there is a long wait between the GP and a psychologist and that on occasion, the cycle needs to begin again.

People have specifically mentioned that they are looking for improved access to doctors, child psychologists and clinical psychiatrists. People have said that the long wait time and process for aged care assessments directly impacts their ability to access services which may result in their physical or mental health deteriorating while they wait.

People have said that when they need to travel to Melbourne for specialist appointments, there is no consideration for the costs and time associated with regional travel and the difficulties of early morning appointments.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

There is no doubt that people in the community experience a range of barriers in trying to access supports and services and that this can have an impact on their mental health. Some of these barriers are physical and others are intangible. Often it is the barriers that cannot be seen or measured that have the greatest impact. It is likely that in many instances there is a mis-match between the way a service has been funded, the way a service perceives itself and the experience of communities in accessing a service.

There is an increasing expectation at a community level that services will engage with each other and with communities. Communities in Latrobe have demonstrated that they want to be involved in the design of services available to them and that they want services to take a more holistic approach.

There is a relationship between the physical environment of a health service, the approach or demeanour of staff and the experience that communities have in accessing and benefiting from the service. The three examples below all demonstrate alternate approaches to providing services and supports to communities in ways and places that can positively impact their mental health and wellbeing.

Innovations and examples to consider

The Living Room – Skokie Illinois, United States of America

Free of charge to guests and accessible on a walk-in basis, The Living Room provides a comfortable environment and an alternative to hospital emergency rooms for adults experiencing psychiatric crises. The Living Room's talented team, which includes therapists and trained Recovery Support Specialists, works to help each guest resolve their crisis with a supportive and compassionate approach. The Living Room offers a number of services including support, assistance with problem solving, referrals for shelter, healthcare, and nearby pantries, all within a safe space in which to rest and relax.

<https://www.tpoint.org/the-living-room>

Safe Haven Cafe – Aldershot, United Kingdom

A café in a North East Hampshire 'Vanguard' has helped reduce mental health hospital admissions by a third in seven months by providing an alternative solution for patients. The 'Safe Haven' café in Aldershot, on the Surrey and Hampshire border, has been open all year round since 2014 and is an evening drop in where people can go if they need support. NHS workers and third sector partners are on site to provide mental health crisis support which has helped some people avoid the need for NHS care including A&E altogether.

The Friendship Bench – Zimbabwe

The Friendship Bench project is an evidence-based intervention developed in Zimbabwe to bridge the mental health treatment gap. Our mission is to enhance mental well-being and improve quality of life through the use of problem-solving therapy delivered by trained lay health workers.

<https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/>



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

Community voice

Issues that affect mental health and wellbeing have been the most common topic of conversation with the Latrobe Health Advocate. Most of the time, when concerns about mental health are raised they are associated with other factors such as social isolation, alcohol and drugs or broader determinants of health such as employment and education. There is a general desire for services to provide a more holistic and person-centred approach that considers the entire context of an individual and their support network, rather than treating individual symptoms or issues from a singular perspective.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

The drivers of health and wellbeing outcomes in Latrobe are well researched and documented. The Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry Report 2015/16 Volume III – Health Improvement, articulates this well and whilst the context is specific to Latrobe it is likely that there are parallels with other Victorian communities.

Mobilising and supporting communities themselves to be part of the solution is likely to yield stronger and more sustainable results. This requires governments and health services to function in different ways which can be challenging for large institutions that have long standing ways of operating.

The examples below emphasise the value of placed-based approaches. Many of these communities, including Latrobe, are communities in transition. It is important to note that in enabling communities to have greater influence over service design and delivery, there is still a vital role for governments and services to play. This role is more relational and less transactional. It requires strong leadership and a commitment to evolving ways of working to support communities as they transition.

Innovations and examples to consider

Latrobe Health Innovation Zone – Latrobe Valley, Victoria.

The Latrobe Health Innovation Zone - the first of its kind in Australia! The Latrobe Valley has been designated a Health Innovation Zone as recommended by the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. It gives voice to community aspirations in the planning and delivering of better health and wellbeing outcomes, and where a process of co-design with individuals and organisations is actively encouraged.

<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/latrobe-health-innovation-zone>

The Southern Initiative – Auckland, New Zealand

The Southern Initiative (TSI) champions, stimulates and enables social and community innovation in south Auckland. TSI is a major place-based regeneration programme established in the Auckland Plan. It covers the local board areas of Māngere-Ōtāhuhu, Ōtara-Papatoetoe, Manurewa and Papakura. TSI is attracting a high level of interest and investment from central government, community, business and philanthropy groups. TSI has become Auckland's go-to community and social innovation centre, developing a practice that empowers the community to thrive.

<https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/plans-projects-policies-reports-bylaws/our-plans-strategies/place-based-plans/Pages/southern-initiative.aspx>

**The California Endowment – California, United States of America**

The California Endowment's mission is to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians. We don't focus on prescriptions. We focus on fixing broken systems and outdated policies, ensuring the balance of power is with the people. We don't focus on the individual, we focus on the larger community as an ecosystem of health. We work with citizens and elected leaders to find lasting solutions to impact the most people we possibly can.

<https://www.calendow.org/>

Our Town (Fay Fuller Foundation) – South Australia

The goal of Our Town is to build on the strengths, skills and talents of people in the participating towns to collectively move towards mentally healthy futures. The actual amount of funding will depend on what the towns decide to do, however, the final two towns could receive several million dollars each in funding over the 10 years. The Fay Fuller Foundation is seeking towns that are already mobilised – or partially mobilised – around a mental health challenge but need extra help to bring their initiatives to life. Our Town is not about flying in a replacement or additional service but activating and strengthening what's already in communities for the long-term.

<https://www.fayfullerfoundation.com.au/our-funding-grants/our-town/>



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?

Community voice

People in Latrobe have talked about the connection between employment and good mental health. People have talked about how important it is to have a sense of purpose, and recognise that education, training and employment are good for health. A number of people have expressed the view that they want to work and contribute to their family and society. There is a general desire to see more education and employment opportunities afforded to young people, new arrivals and other job seekers.

People have noted the important role that employers have in promoting good mental health and wellbeing. They have said that workplaces and training programs can bring people together and they can talk and feel comfortable with each other, which is good for their mental health.

People have shared their frustrations about looking for work and expressed a desire for employers to be more inclusive of younger people, people with a disability and people from a multicultural background. People discussed the need for more job opportunities and the importance of gaining qualifications and work-related licences. People have noted the impacts that the job seeking process itself can have on a person's mental health and wellbeing.

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

Further to the submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health [attached], two local examples are listed below that aim to improve the pathways for people seeking employment.

Innovations and examples to consider

Ladder Step Up – Latrobe Valley, Victoria

The Ladder Step Up Latrobe Valley program helps young people build on their strengths and explore different jobs and industries. In the six-week program, young people will learn from those in the AFL industry about how to get the best out of themselves and secure a job that they aspire to. Young people will participate in individual and group development sessions, group camps, community projects and have work experience opportunities. In addition to the support young people will receive from a Ladder Development Coach, they will also have the option to be mentored by someone who is a leader in their field.

<https://www.ladder.org.au/ladderstepup/lv>

Grow Gippsland - Gippsland, Victoria

GROW (Growing Regional Opportunities for Work) Gippsland is an innovative and collaborative approach to local economic development and jobs growth in the region, achieved through local and social procurement and inclusive employment. If we all work collectively to make small changes in the way we do business we can create a significant positive impact on the region.

<https://growgippsland.com.au/>



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

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

Consideration should first be given to the context in which people live their lives. This would enable a shift from a medicalised model of health towards a social model of health – a reorientation of the mental health system. Priority areas for reform include;

- Development of **place-based approaches**, where communities, services and governments have effective working relationships built on trust. Where there is recognition of the expertise that each can bring. Government and health services offering policy and technical expertise and communities bringing context expertise and lived experience;
- A greater emphasis on **prevention**, with grassroots and community settings recognised and supported for the contribution that they make;
- Strategies to address **social isolation** and better enable people to participate in society;
- The complexities associated with **State and Commonwealth** policies and funded programs. This is most felt in the GP setting where doctors are already under significant demand and where mental health supports are limited, and
- The **physical design** and **locations** of health services, aiming to improve access and create physical environments that can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

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

View of the Latrobe Health Advocate

Government institutions and health services will need time to adjust. Work could be done now to better understand the working relationship between governments as funders and health services as service providers and to identify where there is opportunity for reciprocal learning and shared responsibility.

It may be of benefit to assess the readiness of governments and health services to respond to large scale system reform and to demonstrate ongoing responsiveness to community feedback.

Strategies could be implemented immediately to better enable governments and health services to address existing internal challenges that might limit their ability to engage and respond effectively.





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