



WITNESS STATEMENT OF JENNIFER ROWAN

I, Jennifer Rowan, say as follows:

Background

- 1 I am from a very rural town in southwest Victoria called Camperdown. We have a population of about 3,000 people.
- 2 I'm currently studying a Bachelor of Social Work online through Deakin University. Prior to that I completed a Diploma of Youth Work and work as a Youth Engagement Officer.
- 3 I co-designed and facilitated community consultations for Youth Affairs Council Victoria on its submission to the Royal Commission. I am passionate about eliminating mental health stigma in small towns and have spoken about this publicly.¹
- 4 Living in a rural town, we have very limited health services and we experience long wait times for services. With a small number of psychologists in our area, they are inundated with work.
- 5 It can also be difficult for us to use online services like eheadspace because of issues with internet access and connectivity. Having grown up in the area, I have seen how the gaps in the mental health system affect rural and regional communities.
- 6 We have a lot of young people out here who are quite passionate about mental health and who want to become mental health professionals and work in the area, whether that be as a psychologist or social worker. However they find that after their studies if they want to return to the area there is unfortunately no funding for jobs.
- 7 I have a passion project called Wiribunda Wellness. It started off as a 'back of the napkin' idea late one evening after cosying up with my animals at home. My property where I live is called Wiribunda and we currently house two humans, two dogs, a cat, three chickens, a dozen sheep and hopefully a few ponies soon. I hope to grow Wiribunda Wellness into a nice mix of Animal Assisted Therapy, Social Work and Mental Health First Aid.
- 8 I completed my accreditation in October 2019 to become a Mental Health First Aid Instructor with Mental Health First Aid Australia. I would like to be trained in the Mental

¹ The Courier Mail published an article about this titled 'Smashing the mental health stigma in our small towns' on 19 July 2019, available at <https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/6282765/smashing-the-mental-health-stigma-in-our-small-towns/>.

Health First Aid courses that are specialised for young people and older people in the future. I have also completed Animal Assisted Intervention Training with Pawfect Communities in 2019. This is where my journey has started and I hope to add services in the near future.

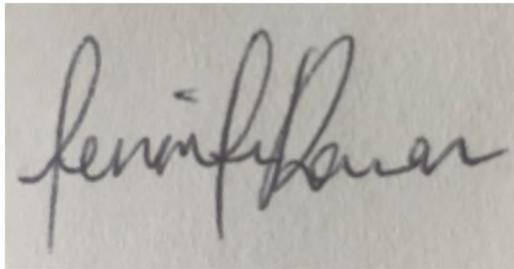
Early intervention for young people in rural settings

- 9 There is a great need for education and awareness on mental health and resilience in my area, mainly because of the limited services that are available. Lots of people don't know what language to use and how to be sensitive about things. The more education and awareness raising we can do, the better.
- 10 I would like to see every person in Australia trained in Mental Health First Aid, particularly in rural and regional communities. We have such a high percentage of young people experiencing poor mental health before the age of 25 so I think that would really help.
- 11 The need for youth mental health services in schools is massive. Education about mental health should be embedded in school curriculums. It may not need to be something that the teachers provide as they are already trying to fit so much into their curriculums, but outside facilitators could be brought in. We also need to make sure we capture young people that are home schooled.
- 12 Kids who live rurally are really switched on. They know that when milk prices are tough that their family is struggling. There is a need for one on one therapy and counselling services for young people in the area and if that can't happen there needs to be more education and awareness on mental health.
- 13 If children and young people are educated on these issues in school and at a young age, they can also pass on that knowledge to their parents. The stigma associated with mental ill-health in rural towns is a massive barrier holding communities back. Young people and in particular men can find it challenging to go to their GP, let alone a mental health professional.
- 14 Programs for young people have to be relatable. For example, the standard Mental Health First Aid Program that I teach is very relevant to adults but I would not feel comfortable teaching a young person the course because it is not tailored enough to their needs. It would be ideal if young people aged between 18 and 25 who are studying or trained in psychology or social work were incentivised to become trained in providing the Youth Mental Health First Aid course. It would make it more relatable for the young people doing the course. In working as a Youth Engagement Officer over the last couple of months, I've spoken to a lot of young people in our area. The feedback I've received

is that it's really refreshing to hear a young person talking about local government issues.

- 15 I used to work as a Disability Support Worker and what I often found in that role was that people with disabilities unfortunately miss out on a lot of services. I experienced people with disabilities having difficulty accessing mental health services and being bounced back and forth between mental health services and the NDIS. We need a holistic approach where people with disabilities can receive mental health care and care for their disability.
- 16 I want our communities to get to a point where it is normal to talk about mental health and where we are all comfortable with it.

sign here ►

A photograph of a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored surface. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Jennifer Rowan'.

print name Jennifer Rowan

Date 22 April 2020