

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

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

"To reduce stigma we must be able to access treatment. Currently, access to mental health supports is expensive and not available to everyone. It is only available if you hit absolute crisis- there is no support for people who live long term with mental illness."

### **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?**

"I attended Orygen in Melbourne when I was first diagnosed- this system should be available to all. I cannot access the public system until I am acutely unwell and have been rejected from the private sector as too complex- I have schizo-affective disorder and live in Mildura. I also have diabetes and other auto immune disorders. The private psychiatrist would not see me, when I was on medications that can damage a baby, diabetes medicine and was pregnant. I have a history of hospitalisation and suicide attempts, and self harm. It was very difficult to get into the public system. The public psychiatrist put me on the waiting list, meanwhile my unborn baby was potentially being harmed. I was not eligible to see the psychiatrist, but she made an exception to see me anyway. As I have not been able to see a psychiatrist for many years under the public system, my medication was never reviewed for years since my old psychiatrist retired. I can't afford a private psychiatrist and they won't see me anyway. "

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

"Early access to doctors- for free, and not just if you're on a concession card. I go on and off concession cards because I have a partner who earns money but not that much, by the time I pay for all my medications and other doctor costs, there is nothing left. I take 5 medicines a month and pay private for specialist medical appointments and procedures. There is no psycho-social support groups. I did art through Orygen and a women's group it helped me make friends I was very isolated. I also learnt skills about how to interact with other people which I had lost. Being connected with friends helps you feel better about yourself and also because they are going through the same thing. We are in contact more than 10 years later. I also felt that exercise groups helped me feel better about myself because the medicines make you gain lots of weight."

### **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.**

"Living in Mildura, you can't access even a GP when you need one. What I really need is a community based exercise group as I gained heaps of weight from medicines and now have diabetes which is related to the medications for mental health. I guess I will not see a psychiatrist unless I try to kill myself. No one will see you until that point. I can't manage my medicine myself. My partner does that but he is not that great at it he sometimes forgets. There is no support for me

now that I am somewhat better. I was on the dsp but because of my partners income and my income from part time work we get kicked off. But I struggle to manage everything disability is very expensive. If I have to see a specialist I have to fly to Melbourne. There is VPTAS but my husband and i have to take time off work, pay the doctors, pay for food ect. I have food allergies too so it is hard to find affordable food when you are in the city. Sometimes I don't go to Melbourne even when I need to because it is too hard. I wonder if I will die from one of my illnesses because I don't follow up. "

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

"No psychiatrists or specialists in Mildura, can't even see a GP- there is often a 2 week wait or the phone just rings out and they dont have any appointments. You have to go to emergency. I have been to emergency just to get some medication because I relapse within 24 hours if i miss my medicine and I can't manage it myself and my partner tries to help but sometimes forgets- he gets burnt out caring for me and he also struggles with mental illness he has Aspergers and anxiety. Its also incredibly expensive to see specialists and psychologists. When you have lots of conditions, you can't afford to see doctors for all of them. I am very overweight but there is no help for that. I would like to join a womens exercise group or community exercise group at the gym because I need support to exercise. The community gym is too expensive and there isn't a community exercise group for people who aren't old. I also work part time, so it needs to fit in in my life."

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

"If you have lots of medicine or mental health medicine they should put it into those packs for you so your partner doesn't have to because we get confused about it, but it costs and its just another expense we can't afford. People forget that sometimes your partner has a condition too, mine has Aspergers and anxiety. Just being able to get someone to drive you to appointments and go with you would be hugely beneficial. I can't remember all the information the specialists give you."

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

"The pay is too low. As the system only works at crisis level, it is frustrating to workers. Here in Mildura there is not much higher education available, we struggle to attract professionals with degrees. We really need doctors."

### **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?**

"I want to keep my dsp card even if we earn too much because i go into and out of the workforce as i get sick and get better. I don't mean give me money, but let me keep the card and go back on the dsp if my situation changes. At the moment if you earn too much you are kicked off forever- my partner earns so i am getting kicked off. My relationships have not always been really stable because of my mental health. Let me keep the card so i can get cheaper medicine and cheaper doctor appointments. It also helps me feel more secure because it takes years of being extremely sick to get on dsp. - exercise class for free at the gym with community people, criteria something like chronic illness so its not stigmatising, I wouldn't go if it were labelled as for mentally ill people - free psychologist -free doctors -cheap medicine- put into packs for you so its not confusing, for

free So you get help when you need it to stay well "

**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?**

"Access to doctors- psychiatrist, psychologist, GP, social worker, other specialist dr, even in mildura Psycho-social like community exercise or arts and crafts to prevent illness promote wellness Removing the high costs of care as we are poor and have high costs Case workers you can 'tap' into as you need them before you are acutely unwell Seeing the complexity of multiple illnesses and disabilities- there is no coordination"

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

N/A

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

"I should have the same level of support in Mildura as in Melbourne. Currently, we are the poor cousin."