

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

## Organisation Name

Red Files Inc.

## Name

Miss Estelle Lucas

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

"We believe in having active and targeted conversations about mental health across all levels (schools, community centers, workplaces, the internet), will encourage greater participation, self-advocacy and acceptance of mental illness. We believe sex workers and sex work should be the subject of these targeted conversations and that they should be led only by sex workers with the assistance of a mental health professional to ensure the accuracy of the information shared. As sex workers we often face stigma and discrimination in our daily and working lives. We find that change to negative attitudes towards sex workers starts from the top, at a legislative and political level, and follow through to the ground where sex workers are engaging in services, duties and with other people. For this reason we advocate that to recognise mental illness as a crisis at a national level is imperative and must include all population groups affected. We would suggest that sex work organisations are funded to train their staff to recognise, support and understand mental illness that may present in sex workers. We also suggest that sex worker organisations, such as our own, be funded to train mental health professional and other support services on how to engage and understand sex workers when they reveal their occupation, and the role that this plays in their mental health. Sex work can pose mental health challenges especially when one is isolated and unable to reveal themselves as a sex worker, which in of itself poses a great mental health risk. We understand sex work and mental health are not two topics that automatically come to mind adjoined, but in reality many sex workers are subject to mental health challenges because of their job, and because both topics face great stigma and discrimination as stand alone topics, the consequences of living as a sex worker with mental illness is greater pronounced. Interestingly, those that suffer from mental illness often turn to sex work because it is one of the few things that can empower them to afford care and access work suited to their hours. "

### **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?**

"It would helpful for sex worker organisations (that are sex worker led) who do outreach and make contact with everyday sex workers to receive funding and support to spot and help sex workers who are having mental health issues. It would be helpful if we were able to safely refer sex workers to mental health organisations and services where they receive anonymous care that does not judge, stigmatise or discriminate them on their sex working status. At the moment, the status quo is that sex workers are treated well by the luck of the draw. Mental health professionals can hold their own prejudice, per-concieved ideas and judgement about sex work that taint their ability to correctly asses a patient and treat them as a patient. Negative experiences with mental health professionals often encourage sex workers to lead lives of isolation and their mental illness can fester when untreated."

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

"We do not know of any program, facility or organisation working actively to prevent suicide among sex workers. We are aware of sex workers who have taken their lives due to mental illness and we would be speculating to say they didn't receive adequate care due to their sex working status, but in our experience the sex work factor always plays some part in how one receives care. Perhaps one reason why sex workers are not perceived as a key population group is because there is no demonstrable link between sex worker and suicide. However, many sex workers do not reveal their occupation to others due to the stigma, prejudice and discrimination that comes with that. Sex workers can intersect with other population groups that are at risk and vulnerable. We believe that if sex work is treated as any other profession, this will encourage workers to be more forthcoming with some of the elements factoring into their mental health. We believe that being unable to share your occupation and living in fear is detrimental to mental health."

**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.**

"As above, sex workers experience unique barriers to mental health services. This is especially true when their working status intersects with other factors such as illegal working status, their background, their education level, their cultural upbringing and so forth. Should sex work be regarded more respectfully, then sex workers can be treated more professionally. Further, if sex worker organisations and mental health organisations, programs and services, were funded to network and build relations with each other, we believe there will be better health outcomes. At the moment groups of sex workers lack the resources to make this happen as most groups are unfunded and work on a volunteer basis. "

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

"Stigma, discrimination, shame, prejudice, legalities, policy, resources, communication, trust and networks, to name a few. To address these we believe that sex worker led organisations need to be better funded and trained to bridge and repair these gaps in services. We strongly believe, if given the opportunity, sex workers will secure better mental health outcomes for their community. This has previously been demonstrated when sex work collectives have been given public funding to reduce STI rates and in Australia STI rates are equal to the rest of the population. "

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

"Sex workers often are unable to lean on their families for support if they are not able to reveal their sex working status. To be able to safely reveal their sex working status, workers would need to be able to have their families and carers access resources and support to better understand sex work. Sex workers are best equipped to create these resources but a lack of funding is preventing them from doing so. Sex workers are also capable of creating support groups in their local area but again, funding is an issue. It would be of great importance and help if a mental health professional is able to assist in these programs as we find most loved ones aversion to sex work stems from personal insecurity. "

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

"Members of sex worker organisations often take on the role of peer support workers. Sometimes

they too suffer from mental health and relay their experiences to other sex workers to help support them. It would be helpful if members of sex worker organisations were better equipped to provide professional mental health care, rather than just anecdotal. There should also be some support for sex worker organisation workers who work with sex workers as they are exposed vicariously to traumas and sufferance workers face and this can negatively impact their own mental health. We find this often occurs within our own organisations but we lack the resources, funding and means to adequately address this. "

**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?**

"At the moment, not every sex worker is aware that they have a local sex worker organisation there to support them. As a national organisation, Red Files aims to help connect sex workers with their relevant sex worker organisation and any other service that they need. However, we are restricted by our volunteer hours and lack of funding."

**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?**

"We believe that sex workers should be regarded as a target population to address mental health and be made a priority. The Royal Commission must give regard to the sex worker led organisations currently attempting to meet the mental health needs of sex workers and the limitations we face. We believe better acknowledgement, funding and active participation with our organisation will help create a positive reform in the area."

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

"Training for mental health professionals, services, programs and groups to understand the needs of sex workers as facilitated by sex workers. Training for sex work organisations on how to connect to sex worker friendly mental health professionals, services, programs and groups. "

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

N/A