

Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health Service

My son is 26 years old and suffers from mental health issues and drug addiction he started using drugs in his late teens. While at school he was a popular student with teachers and peers.

His drug use became apparent after entering the workforce being engaged in a plumbing apprenticeship and experiencing workplace bullying and harassment, which subsequently had a paramount affect on his mental and emotional well being. He managed to get through school with an unrecognised and not formally diagnosed dyslexia but the workplace was a completely different scenario as a coping mechanism he self medicated by using drugs (ice) to escape the effects of the relentless bullying and the feelings of low self esteem and worthlessness.

He chose to not disclose any of this to us (his family) at the time and became increasingly more dependent on drugs to try to deal with the overwhelming emotions. He chose to terminate his apprenticeship because of not being able to cope with everything he was depressed and suicidal.

He has suffered greatly from the years of drug use and all the underlying mental issues that ensue with addiction....unable to sustain employment for any longevity which all compounds to even greater emotional mental and financial stresses which keep the drug use and abuse cycle going.

He has spent time in and out of jail which hasn't been the answer we have been searching for either.

He has seen many professionals police GPs members of the judicial system etc yet the system hasn't helped him it has failed him.

As a caring and loving mother I have found the mental health system incredibly difficult to navigate. At times it has actively excluded me despite the fact that in the end I am the person responsible for ensuring my son doesn't harm himself or others. I'm not involved in his care merely a back stop to the system being able to do their job and relinquish him to me and close their case.

We have had our son bailed to our home on many occasions and have been asked to take an oath that we will advise authorities of any bail breaches but we aren't privy to any of the reasons or behaviours that have landed him in that position.

Given the challenges with managing his behaviour and drug use, we are placed in an unenviable position of trying to ensure he stays out of jail, while being unable to get the treatment and support services we all need to assist him on getting his life back on track.

The impacts on my family and I have been profound. We have been threatened, extorted and harassed by people because of our sons behaviour and drug use. We have sold our business, moved house and all suffer from a range of issues...anxiety depression PTSD.

We no longer have a landline phone, mobile phones are either silent or vibrate only, (the ringing triggers fear in us all), we have installed security cameras, padlocks on all external gates, windows and doors are locked at all times, let alone the slow domino affect it has when the family unit starts to break down...these are just a few.

As a family, trying to care for our son and brother, has cost us everything.

I have felt the stigma in the community and now we are socially isolated we have lost friends and extended family have too stepped away from the wrath of being associated with a family dealing and living the roller coaster of drug addiction....everyone suffers.

It is my view that the system has failed us. One of the main issues that I have seen with the mental health system is that it only offers support when you reach a crisis....my son was unable to achieve a diagnosis for dyslexia or support for that while at school or even in the workplace, it is only now when he is a long way down the road of addiction that we are able to get acknowledgement and support in place and even then the waiting times etc are extraordinary!

Where the system has failed:

- Everyone who goes to jail needs to have a full mental health assessment. Not just physical but mental and emotional and also be assessed for levels of literacy and numeracy. A lot of what they need to do on release

requires these skills yet so many are lacking and unable to comply with requirements hence fall off the well intended wagon because it's just too hard.

My son would have fared much better if this was available instead of us discovering this the hard way after so much damage has been done. I can't help but think some of it was avoidable.

- We need to review the Privacy Act. Families need the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of treatment for their loved one in order for it to be effective....if professionals gave families the privilege of contributing their versions of events whether it be chronological timelines or just merely a short history professionals could collaborate and make clearer concise educated decisions about the future care plans of their patients and parents etc feel they are helping their child constructively. Too many times I have been told that I cannot know important information or that the Privacy Act means that I have no input into treatment!

-Proper publicly funded rehabilitation centres and services. We have such a lack of beds and services available to those who have mental health issues and drug and alcohol issues. Detox times if a bed is attainable need to be for appropriate times. 10 days isn't long enough to detox from crystal methamphetamine these times need to be adjusted properly times need to match the addiction.

These services need to have a non-voluntary option for placement.

Recommendations for change:

- Families need to be able to take their loved one somewhere that they will be safe and get the care they need. These facilities need to have an adequate amount of trained staff who are dedicated and have a genuine understanding of mental health and drug issues and a level of compassion and empathy for those they are treating...more public rehabs to be part of public hospitals not more jails!

- Families need to be involved in important decisions. Families are responsible and in some situations made to feel responsible for so much of the on going care they need to be treated with importance and made relevant too!

- There must be more support, funding and advertising for groups like ACSO and their peer support groups, they need acknowledging, I have personally found them invaluable

- There needs to be greater focus on rehabilitation in jails. There is so much investment in new prisons but we need investment to be made in rehabilitation while incarcerated.

What has worked:

ACSO and their support SAS Group, where family members or friends of loved ones who are battling addiction issues can come together and chat in a completely safe non-judgemental environment to share experiences and receive support....this has been tremendously and overwhelmingly my life-line for a long time now....I would hate to think where myself and my family would be without the guidance and unconditional support and love from the wonderful staff and SAS members at ACSO.