

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

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

"Needs to be greater awareness and understanding of the impact of early childhood trauma on the mental health of children, adolescents and when those children grow into adults. The Child Protection system including those working in it and those overseeing it (i.e. government) need to recognise the cost to individuals mental health and the broader community of failing to provide early intervention and appropriate services to children who experience abuse and neglect in their homes and who then have that trauma compounded by the out of home care system."

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?

There is some useful research and some practitioners who engage with it around complex trauma and developmental trauma. There is a need for more research on complex trauma and in particular the impact of it on kids in the child protection system. There needs to be more mental health practitioners who are trained to work with children who have experienced complex trauma.

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

No comment

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.

"Children in the child protection system are the most vulnerable children in Victoria. Thousands of children are or have been involved in the child protection system - the statistics are available on the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing website. These children have generally experienced significant abuse and neglect - this can include physical, sexual and psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, being born drug dependant, not having their health and emotional needs met and in some instances all of these combined. Many of these children need mental health support. The vast majority of them don't get it. The out of home care system in Victoria will struggle to find them a placement if they are removed from their families. That means they will be lucky if they get a stable place to stay and attend school. Very many of these children instead will be shipped from one placement to another - some having 30 placements in less than a year. While the department will insist they get their hearing testing every 12 months (even when there is nothing wrong with their hearing) they will not get any mental or psychological support from professionals trained to respond to their complex trauma. To add to this situation many of these kids experience further trauma in the out of home care system - it actually frequently impacts detrimentally on their mental health issues. Many adults who have serious mental health issues and/or are in prison have been in the child protection system as children. Failure to provide the needed early intervention - appropriate mental health supports for children - is costing the

community an enormous amount of resources down the track i.e. crime, prison, suicide, adult mental health services etc I am a foster carer (and now permanent carer) for an 8 year old boy. He came into my care at 2 years and 10 months of age. He was in desperate need of mental health support. He had experienced every kind of abuse and neglect. He was and still is profoundly impacted by that. It has been very difficult to get adequate mental health support for him. The child protection system workers are ultimately uninterested in the fact that your child has complex trauma because 'they all do'. While CAMS agreed to see us regarding his sexualised behaviour when he was 3 they later refused to see us about his angry, distressed and challenging behaviour and self-loathing as a 5 year old. They spent half an hour on the phone trying to convince me they didn't need to see him because it was all a normal response to trauma. We tried private practitioners including the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] but no one is really equipped to work with really young children. They tried but it was a waste of time. We only have access to services in a regional town but I am not sure it would be much better in Melbourne. The failure of the child protection system and mental health system to work effectively with young children has resulted in our foster child continuing to have no direct support for his mental health issues and on top of that has led to the development of an anxiety disorder in my 11 year old son, who has for 5 years lived with the stress and anxiety of the challenging behaviour of his foster brother. Not to mention the impact on mine and my partners mental health also. We have possibly been saved by a family therapist (social worker) who has worked with us as carers to give us strategies to support and assist our foster child. She has been great but is in such high demand that we can only get to see her 4 or 5 times a year which is really not enough. I went to see a psychologist to get some support for my own emotional challenges in coping with our foster child's torment. In that one session she told me 3 times that I had made a mistake in taking on a foster child. She said she never would have done that to her only child but that she had worked in the child protection system so she understood these things. I didn't go back and don't feel confident that I can find anyone else in the limited pool of available practitioners in our area that have a clue about child trauma and what kids in out of home care have really been through and how it impacts on the carers who love them. "

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

This is covered in previous question - the failure of the child protection system. The system needs to invest much more into assisting families to keep kids safe from harm - this means investing in their parents and in early intervention. But when kids are removed the system needs to do so much more to help them to cope with the impact of complex trauma and to stop adding to that trauma. The bigger picture is the failure to ensure families have what they need to raise children safely and happily - i.e. poverty and other forms of disadvantage - so that the kids don't experience abuse and neglect in the first place.

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

Foster carers and kinship carers get very little support. They need support to be able to support the children in their care. So many carers are suffering silently in the system. Carers need access to professionals who are trained to understand the impact of complex trauma on kids and how that impacts on their carers. [REDACTED] from the UK is an expert on this topic.

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce,

including peer support workers?

N/A

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?

N/A

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?

There needs to be research and program development for providing mental health support to young and very young children and about complex trauma and developmental trauma specifically. Need better collaboration between child protection and mental health services. Child protection workers and allied family support services need to have better understanding of impact of complex trauma on kids and what to do about it and then have services available to refer kids and their families to. Abuse and neglect doesn't just impact on kids learning abilities and speech etc it impacts profoundly on their mental health and their psychological development which is the foundation laid for the rest of their lives.

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?

N/A