

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

Organisation Name

Public Libraries Victoria

Name

Mr Chris Buckingham

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

"Public Libraries are safe welcoming spaces where people can participate in community life without fear. They provide universal and free access to information through wifi, personal computers, books, magazine and guides. Many public libraries provide free or low cost access to workshops, seminars and presentations that inform people about how to embrace healthier lifestyles. This includes specific activities focused on improving community understanding about 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?

"Public libraries are welcoming places in the heart of the community. No other institution is able to offer safe and inclusive public spaces at the same scale. Public libraries reduce social isolation and exclusion, connecting communities through 47 public library services, 272 individual branches, 336 mobile library stops and 72 other library outlets across Victoria. Today's libraries are vibrant neighbourhood hubs offering social interaction and shared cultural experiences. They help build strong and engaged communities, where everyone belongs, and offer a platform for state-wide community development. Victorian public libraries receive more than 30 million visitors per annum. We are widely recognised as one of the last free open doors in our society: They are places of safety and understanding for people with mental health issues who seek respite from the pressures of school, college, work and home. They encourage interaction through group activities and have quiet spaces for individual reflection. They provide information for people who are looking for information and answers about ways of managing mental health issues. They offer events and health promotion initiatives which raise awareness of mental health issues in the local community. They run programs and services to help improve people's quality of life. Public libraries across Victoria provide and facilitate invaluable, community-focused workshops and programs for people with, or at risk of developing, mental ill-health. We provide information, raise awareness and aim to help remove any stigma from mental health issues. Reading plays an important role in maintaining good mental health, by allowing people to explore other places, times, people, situations, and look for meaning in their own lives, the role that libraries in providing free access to books cannot be undervalued. As public libraries are safe, air-conditioned public spaces, they are often used as drop in spaces by people experiencing homelessness. Public Libraries Victoria are proud of the work our members do support social inclusion, resilience and well-being in our community. We believe that with increased resources and support from State Government we can do so much more."

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

"Public Libraries Victoria believe there is an opportunity to position public libraries as the safe place for people maintain good mental health, recover from mental illness and indeed find a form

of free and accessible respite. Public libraries are seeing visitation and engagement with our services increase. Our work is becoming increasingly complex as we help people navigate their way not just through the library, but life in general. The people who work in public libraries have a keen understanding of their role encouraging a sense of inclusion and well-being. They play a critical role assisting people as they seek quality information and support. Library staff do not often come from a social work background, but there are shared values and principles at play. Public Libraries Victoria believe it is worth exploring a model of service delivery that would see social workers embedded in public libraries as a readily available and highly accessible resource for people seeking help. "

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.

"Victorian Public Libraries receive more than 30 million visits per annum. We are an accessible and open front line community service with an incredible catchment. As public libraries are safe, airconditioned public spaces, they are often used as drop in spaces by people experiencing homelessness. We believe there is an opportunity to leverage our infrastructure and services to make mental health services more accessible to the broader population - particularly on the prevention and recovery side. We are a trusted source of information and a safe space where everyone is welcome. This means that with adequate resources we can make an even bigger contribution to community health and wellbeing. "

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

"Public libraries can provide a highly efficient way of engaging community in the solutions to our Mental Health crisis. We have proven models of collocation with ancillary health services, the creative sector, education providers and community services. While Victorias network of public libraries is significant, there are increasing infrastructure gaps. Many new communities do not have easy access to a public library. Many rural and regional libraries are in need of refurbishment and repair. Our recurrent funding from State Government is declining in real terms on a per capita basis we need additional operational funding to support the vital work we do in the community. "

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

Public Libraries Victoria offer safe welcoming places where people can gain free respite from the challenges of day to day life. Many of the services we provide people suffering from mental illness are accessed by family members and carers. (Please see our response to section titled '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?')

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

"It is really important that the mental health workforce feels valued and appreciated by the broader community. As libraries provide support for library patrons it often falls on individual libraries to train their staff in mental health first aid, conflict resolution and prevention. Public Libraries Victoria would welcome increased support for training of library staff that better equips us to

address the needs of people impacted by poor mental health. "

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?

"Public Libraries are the welcoming front door for people seeking a sense of belonging and participation in community life. There is no stigma attached to visiting a library. People from all walks of life visit public libraries in the knowledge that they are less likely to be judged, that if they want to engage with people (particularly library staff) they will be treated with warmth and respect. Public libraries across Victoria provide and facilitate invaluable, community-focused workshops and programs for people with, or at risk of developing, mental ill-health. We provide information, raise awareness and aim to help remove any stigma from mental health issues. Libraries Work! A recent report produced by SGS Economics showed that every dollar invested in Victorias public libraries generated a \$4.34 return. They also found that if funding was increased the return would continue at comparable levels. Increased investment in public libraries represents an increased investment in vital social infrastructure that will help address the Mental Health crisis in Victoria. "

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?

"Public Libraries Victoria would like the Royal Commission to reflect on the importance of safe, welcoming spaces for people impacted by poor mental health. Public libraries are well placed to support a whole of government approach to addressing Mental Health issues in our community. It is vitally important that the full potential of public libraries as critical social infrastructure is recognised and celebrated. Public Libraries Victoria recommends that there be more formal support and funding for public libraries to facilitate literacy, universal access to information, lifelong learning and social inclusion. "

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

Public libraries have a strong track record of working collaboratively with our partners to deliver good outcomes for our community. We like many other sectors working in the community recognise the need for a united approach to overcoming one of society's biggest and most pressing challenges.

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

"Public Libraries Victoria's submission is unashamedly focused on the public libraries play supporting social inclusion, literacy, lifelong learning and well-being in our community. In many respects we are the quiet achievers who by virtue of our commitment to a universal and free service find ourselves in a position to make a more meaningful contribution. Public Libraries Victoria believe that with increased investment public library infrastructure and services across Victoria we can help solve the wicked problem being addressed through the Royal Commission. "