

Everybody Counts



The Need for Mental Health Reform

Whilst we debate across the country and indeed locally about what is our most precious resource, it may be time to think differently. Think for a minute about our health and in particular our mental health. Could this be our most precious resource?

If we have good mental health we live longer, achieve more, have a better family life, more friends, and contribute to a safer and more productive Australia.

Yet in the 21st century in this country, services and supports particularly in the community are limited and generally only focussed on periods where people are acutely unwell with their mental illness. The system is archaic with both state based and community based services woefully underfunded.

Mental health services are allocated just 6% of the health budget, which is half as much as New Zealand.

This means the focus is on people with acute symptoms and at significant risk to themselves or others. The 'treatment' is focused on stabilizing the person and reducing the risk to an acceptable level.

To their credit Hunter New England Mental Health Services do an amazing job in this regard but due to a lack of these resources and funding are only scraping the surface.

We need a new approach!

- ☞ We need a new approach because members of our community are being turned away without receiving care due to a lack of resources.
- ☞ We need a new approach because members of our community suffer in silence hidden from sight.
- ☞ We need a new approach because members of our community are unable to find employment.
- ☞ We need a new approach because the collateral damage to families in our community often results in family dysfunction and breakdown.
- ☞ We need a new approach because members of our community with mental illness disconnect from the community and often experience additional traumas such as discrimination and stigma.
- ☞ We need a new approach because some members of our community with mental illness will even end up in gaol because there are no other options and

they have not received the mental health care they needed, when they needed it.

- ☞ Most of us know someone with a mental illness. We should ask ourselves what it is like for them and their families. Do they have access to support services that can assist them on the road to recovery? How has their mental illness impacted upon other members of the family or their relationships? Has it had an impact on their ability to work?
- ☞ We do need significant mental health reform in Australia! The service sector knows this, the families know it and most of all people with mental illness know it!

Joanne Sinclair, the Regional Manager for the Association of Relatives and Friends of People with Mental Illness (ARAFMI), says reform will not be effective unless we provide programs and supports that strengthen family resilience and build their overall capacity to cope with the sometimes episodic nature of the illness. Ms Sinclair also identifies that stigma continues to be a struggle for individuals and families and that building community awareness about mental illness and mental health is an essential element of effective reform.

We also need more services that are focussed on early intervention and support. Headspace, an early intervention service for young people with emerging or early stage mental illness is an example of this and the government can be applauded in this regard. But we still need more headspace and new early psychosis prevention services.

We need to provide the opportunity for people with mental illness to gain access to stable and affordable housing where they can find sanctuary and begin their journey towards recovery.

We need the government, community and corporate sectors to think more creatively about how people with mental illness can access employment pathways and engage in meaningful and rewarding work.

We need to ensure that services are responsive and people can get what they need when they need it!

There is much to be done. With an election on the 21st August, now is a good time to ask our election candidates to spell out their commitment to improve mental health services across our region.

The \$1.5 billion commitment from the coalition to mental health and the counter offer \$276 million suicide prevention front line services promised from labour would be a good start, but we do need a more comprehensive integrated solution to the growing mental health needs across the nation.