Public Health Association of Australia submission on a new South Australian mental health strategic plan

Contact for recipient:
South Australian Mental Health Commission
A: GPO Box 189, Rundle Mall SA 5000
E: samhc@sa.gov.au

Contact for PHAA:
Michael Moore – Chief Executive Officer
A: 20 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600
E: phaa@phaa.net.au T: (02) 6285 2373
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Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia. The PHAA works to ensure that the public’s health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.

Preamble

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the consultation on a new South Australian mental health strategic plan. The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. The Australian Government, in collaboration with the States/Territories, should outline a comprehensive national cross-government framework on reducing health inequities. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.
PHAA Response to the consultation questions

What’s helping? What can we build on?

South’s Australia’s Health in All Policies principle is world-leading. It has a positive relationship with local government through public health planning and health protection has been well maintained. The recent linking with the South Australian Council of Social Services and other non-government organisations (NGOs) to develop a statewide strategy to engage NGOs in public health planning is a good example of the benefits of the principle. The PHAA notes that this would be an important opportunity to include mental health strategies.

What’s doing harm? Where can we prevent harm and reduce risks?

A new strategic plan provides an opportunity to address areas of concern in the current service provision. Over the past few years, there has been a reduction in health promotion, preventive and community health services generally, including mental health. This lack of support flows through to service provision. Currently, mental health services are disjointed, with a lack of community support, integration and cross referral between services, resulting in people not receiving the services and support they need.

This issue was raised in the Contributing lives, thriving communities report from the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services which noted that increasing funding to community-based services is essential. The report nominated intensive home-based support and crisis respite as examples of the types of services with the highest priority for increased investment.

People in Australia with mental health issues have experienced discrimination and difficulty accessing health insurance coverage and making claims. While the PHAA understand that the South Australian Government is not in a position to determine health insurance processes and procedures, the Strategic Plan does provide an opportunity to contribute to ongoing efforts to ensure discriminatory practices do not continue. The Strategic Plan should reaffirm the principles of raising awareness of mental health issues to reduce stigma, and reflect the culture of social equity, tolerance, cultural diversity and inclusion of contemporary Australia.

How do we support our communities to be mentally healthier?

PHAA recommends a number of elements to be included in a new strategic plan:

- A holistic definition of mental health and wellbeing, such as that of the World Health Organization.
- In keeping with the Health in All Policies principle, work with mental health networks and key NGOs on a collaborative and multi-sectoral approach to improving the mental health and well-being of the South Australian community.
- Improve consistency of funding towards mental health promotion, mental illness prevention and early intervention services, including housing and other community based supports.
• Targeted strategies for high risk and vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, adolescents and young adults, males, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, asylum seeker and refugee communities, socially isolated, homeless, those who have experienced domestic violence and those involved in the criminal justice system.

• Strategies specifically targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are required to address their high levels of mental illness and suicide. These strategies or interventions for mental health must engage directly with the communities and be developed with and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

• A social determinants approach to mental health services, with consideration given to employment, housing, social opportunities, isolation, increased risk of physical illness and substance misuse.

• Recognition of the inter-related nature of mental illness, suicide, domestic violence and alcohol and other drug use, with services provided to address these co-morbidities. The complex needs of these highly vulnerable populations should be a catalyst for service delivery rather than an exclusion point or barrier to accessing appropriate services.

• Including a focus on all three elements of improving the mental health and wellbeing of the community over the full lifespan:
  o Promotion – to maximise mental health and well-being among populations and individuals
  o Prevention – to reduce the incidence, prevalence, and recurrence of mental illness, the time spent with symptoms or risk conditions for mental illness, preventing or delaying recurrences and decreasing the impact of illness for the affected person, their families and the community

• Strategies to improve the life expectancy of people living with a mental health condition and a co-existing physical health condition, in recognition of the higher rates of premature mortality in people with serious mental illness.

• In line with the Contributing lives, thriving communities report, the plan should include measures designed to reduce the burden of disease caused by mental illness.

• Programs to target those populations at increased risk of suicide, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, males, rural residents including farmers, youth and the LGBTIQ community, in recognition of Australia’s suicide rates being higher than the world average.

• Support and resources should be increased particularly for people who have attempted suicide (and their families), since a previous attempt is one of the most important risk factors for suicide.

• The Plan should include consideration of equity of access to services, noting that for highly vulnerable populations, factors such as cost, distance, transport, language, literacy (including health literacy) and system navigation inhibit access.
The Plan should include strategies designed to reduce stigma and discrimination against people with mental health conditions (particularly in relation to employment and housing).

Strategies to reduce the social isolation of people with low prevalence disorders (e.g. schizophrenia) in the community.

There should be input from services, the community, consumers are carers into the design of mental health programs and services, and in treatment planning.

Coordination of services e.g. housing, community based support and mental health services; mental health and intellectual disability services; substance abuse and mental health services; mental health and domestic violence services.

Effective strategies to address the poor physical health of people with mental illness leading to psychiatric disabilities.

Conclusion

PHAA supports the development of a South Australian Mental Health Strategic Plan and are pleased to work with SA Health throughout this process. We are particularly keen that the following points are highlighted:

- A focus on promotion, prevention and recovery
- Recognition of the inter-related nature of mental illness, suicide and self-harm, and alcohol and other drug use, with services provided to address these co-morbidities
- Coordination of community based services
- Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in targeted strategies
- Social determinants approach to mental health services, with consideration given to employment, housing, social opportunities, isolation, increased risk of physical illness and substance misuse and promoting strategies to reduce stigma and discrimination and intersectoral collaboration.

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and the opportunity to contribute to the development of the South Australian Mental Health Strategic Plan.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

David Templeman
President
PHAA

Kate Kameniar
Branch President
PHAA SA Branch

Samantha Battams
Michael Smith
Co-Convenors, PHAA Mental Health SIG

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References