

# ISSUES PAPER

## MENTAL HEALTH



Around 4.8 million Australians (20%) reported having a mental or behavioural condition in 2017-18.<sup>1</sup>

Mental health is already a major issue in our region. Recent natural disasters including bushfires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic have added considerably to community stress levels. A large percentage of people who access community services organisations are living with, or caring for, someone living with mental illness.

Our members report an urgent need for increased crisis mental health support services and more Community Mental Health workers in the region. Disaster related services have been provided in some areas but these are short-term and may not be around when the biggest demand hits. There is an ongoing need for services that can deal with co-morbidity for clients who are experiencing both mental illness and substance abuse issues.

Mental health support services must also be linked to housing, employment, and community welfare in order to assist people with mental illness stay well and connected to community life. A system that only focuses on providing beds and services when someone is suffering an acute mental health crisis is inadequate. The region also needs more mental health rehabilitation professionals and other mental health specialists.

### LOCAL SNAPSHOT

- 13.9% of persons over 16 in the South Eastern NSW Primary Health Network survey reported high or very high psychological distress.<sup>2</sup>
- Suicide rates in SE NSW remain higher than average. Latest data reports 13.1 per 100,000 in the Illawarra region and 16.1 per 100,000 in Southern NSW in 2017.<sup>3</sup>
- High rates of self-harm reported amongst 15-24 year olds, especially among Aboriginal young people. Self-harm is particularly high in Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, Goulburn Mulwaree areas.<sup>4</sup>
- Limited access to culturally appropriate mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- There is an inequitable distribution of services across the region – service availability does not match population needs, particularly in rural areas.

1 2019 ABS

2 2019 HealthStats NSW

3 2019 HealthStats NSW

4 Coordinare; South Eastern NSW Regional Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan 2018-2023



The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has had mixed results for people with mental illness. There appears to be little consistency about the approvals and, if accepted, levels and types of support. There is concern that services for consumers who are not under the NDIS will become increasingly limited over time.

The Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative has introduced a pilot program, LifeSpan Suicide Prevention. LifeSpan combines nine strategies that have strong evidence for suicide prevention into one community-led approach incorporating health, education, frontline services, business and the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The region urgently needs investment in:

- Specialist Mental Health Crisis services, able to respond to emergency situations involving psychotic episodes instead of relying on Police and Ambulance.
- Clear and easy access to information on all mental health services for people and families experiencing ill mental health.
- Culturally appropriate mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Rehabilitation services.
- Wellness support services.
- Community-based support services that focus on assisting people to participate in community life, thereby preventing or reducing the need to use mental health crisis services.
- Early intervention programs focusing on mental health, particularly for young people.

